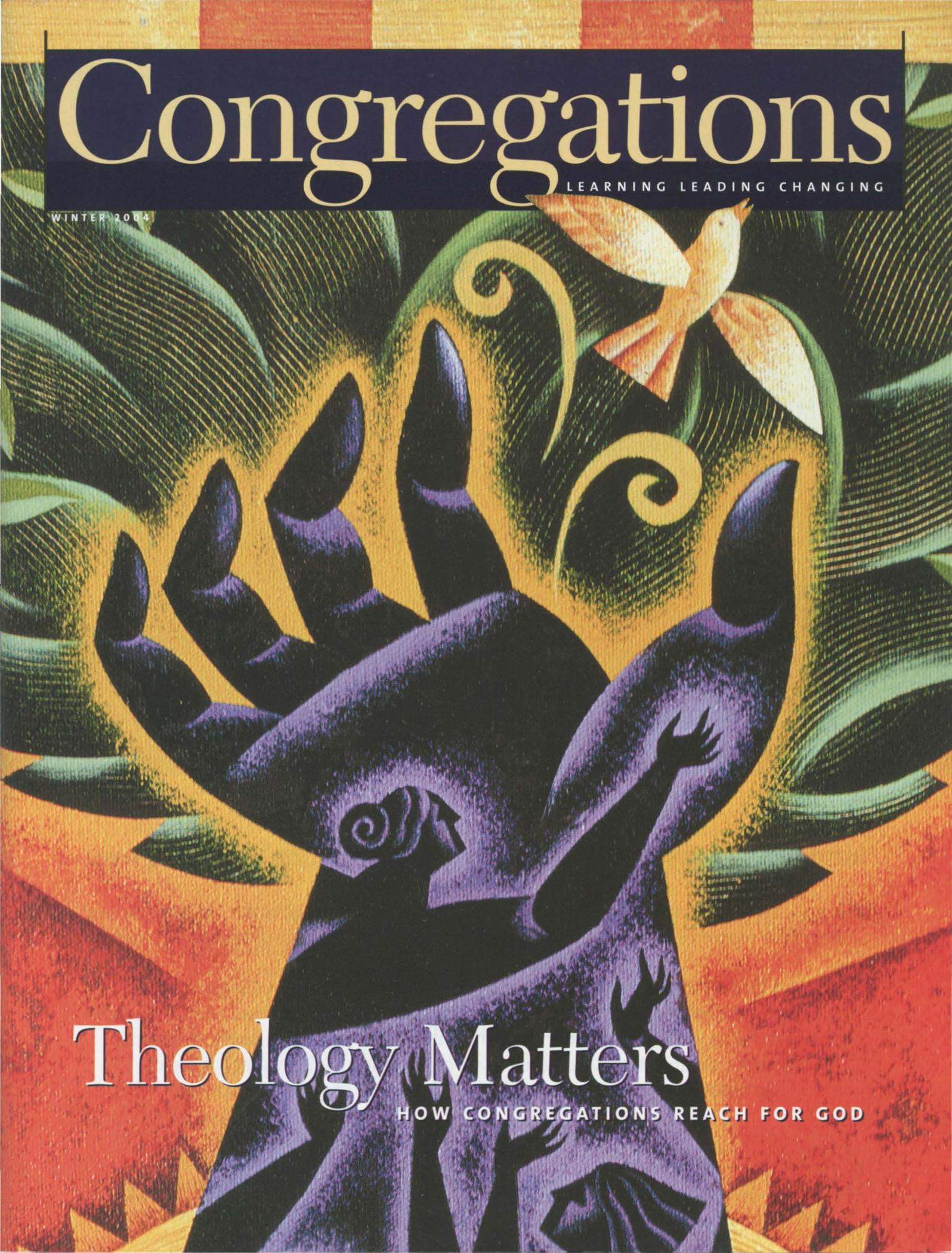


Congregations

LEARNING LEADING CHANGING

WINTER 2004



Theology Matters

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ILLUSTRATION BY MICHAEL LOPEZ

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Volume 30, Number 1. CONGREGATIONS is sent quarterly to all members of the Alban Institute. CONGREGATIONS is the successor to ACTION INFORMATION, published since 1975. Copyright © 2004 by The Alban Institute, Inc.



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Rev. Dr. Robert C. Barger holds four degrees, including an M.Div from Trinity Lutheran Seminary in Columbus, Ohio and a D.Min from San Francisco Theological Seminary. He is entering his 11th year as the senior pastor of Abiding Hope Lutheran Church in Littleton, Colorado, where he resides with his wife, Harriet. **Page 14**



Dorothy C. Bass

Dr. Dorothy C. Bass is director of the Valparaiso Project on the Education and Formation of People in Faith (www.practicingourfaith.org), a Lilly Endowment project based at Valparaiso University. Her books include *Receiving the Day: Christian Practices for Opening the Gift of Time* (Jossey-Bass, 1999) and *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life* (Eerdmans, 2001), co-edited with Miroslav Volf. Dr. Bass, her husband, and their two teenaged children are members of Christ Lutheran Church in Valparaiso, Indiana. **Page 22**



R. Scott Colglazier

Dr. R. Scott Colglazier has been the senior minister of University Christian Church in Fort Worth, Texas since 1996. In addition to preaching each week, he has written several books that explore spirituality and contemporary culture. His most recent work (co-authored with Fritz S. Ridenour) is *A Larger Hope: Opening the Heart to God* (Chalice Press, 2002). Dr. Colglazier also writes a monthly religion column for the Fort Worth Star-Telegram. **Page 10**

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Greg Cootsona

Marlis McCollum is a freelance writer from Reston, Virginia, who has published articles in *Congregations*, *The National Gallery of Art Bulletin*, *The Potomac Almanac*, *The New Prince George's Post*, *The Prince George's Journal*, *Scrip Magazine*, and *Humanities*, the magazine of the National Endowment for the Humanities. **Page 6**

Jennifer McKenzie is a cradle Episcopalian who has served in both volunteer and full-time paid lay ministries in dioceses and parishes in Florida, Alabama, California, and Virginia. She spent 15 years in ministry to youth and families by developing a baptism ministry and volunteer-leadership development program. She is currently serving St. David's Parish in Washington, D.C. as a seminarian and expects to graduate from Virginia Theological Seminary this spring. Ms. McKenzie and her husband, Ken, are the proud parents of eight-year-old twin boys and a four-year-old girl. **Page 31**



Jennifer McKenzie

Rev. Tim Shapiro is the president of the Indianapolis Center for Congregations, a supporting organization of the Alban Institute funded by the Lilly Endowment. In the past, he has served the Bethlehem Presbyterian Church of Logansport, Indiana and the Westminster Presbyterian Church of Xenia, Ohio. **Page 27**

Everyday Mysteries



Congregations

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I have been working with a Shalem Institute-trained spiritual director for the past year and a half. We meet once a month, usually during my lunch hour, in the sunlit back room of her northwest Washington, D.C. home. Sitting among the plants and stacks of books, with the wind chimes softly swinging outside the door, we pray and we seek together to uncover the workings of Spirit in my life. It is a time and a practice for which I am profoundly grateful.

Early on, she asked me an interesting question: "Have you ever considered monastic life?" After answering "yes," I wondered how she knew. I suppose many of us who lead busy, complicated lives that make us feel removed from Spirit have, at one time or another, fantasized about the supposed simplicity and singleness of purpose that such a life would offer. One can conjure up the image of Brother Lawrence in the kitchen among the pots and pans and quite easily see that even the lowly task of cleaning dishes could be exalted in such a setting.

And yet the truth, as we know, is that monastic life has its own complexities and struggles, as is the case when any group of people try to live in community together, whether every day or just for an hour on Sundays. **And we also know, deep in our hearts, that we can serve God well in our own sphere of activity if we but remember that we are doing so.**

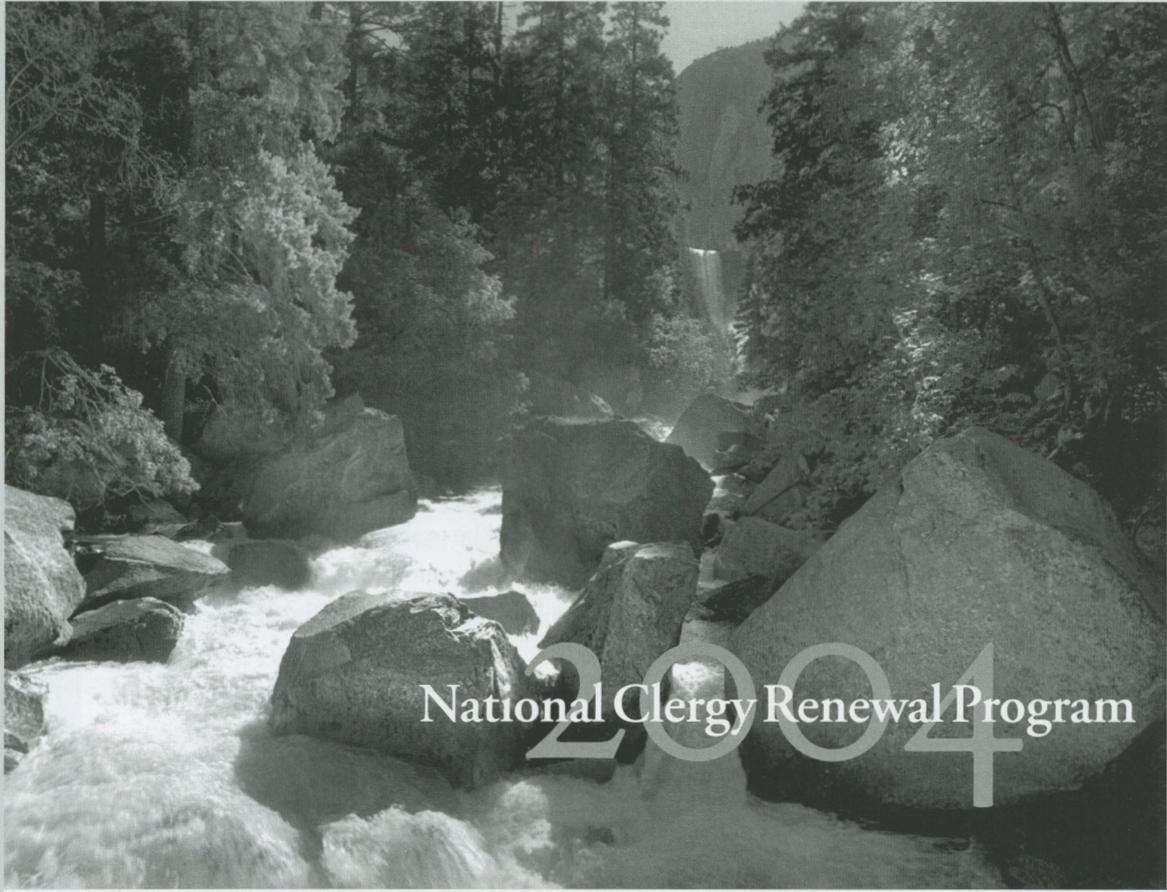
In "Homegrown Theology" (page 27) Tim Shapiro, president of the Indianapolis Center for Congregations, describes how we understand God in everyday life. He opens with the example of Frank, a parishioner who loves gardening as well as sharing the fruits of his labor. Rev. Shapiro says, **"When people leave worship on the Lord's Day, they take away not only a sense of God's Word but also homegrown food for their table."** Rev. Shapiro also describes a method for theological reflection that was effective in the congregation he served.

Addressing the attractions of monastic life, seminary student Jennifer McKenzie describes a program of Benedictine retreats that she implemented at a Northern Virginia church ("Benedictine Spirituality and Congregational Life," page 31). She also provides a list of helpful resources for those considering similar programs, including steps to begin such a program. And, following in the vein of a more disciplined approach to spiritual life, educator Greg Cootsona describes how to build an adult discipleship program in "Renewing Minds" (page 19).

Other authors in this issue, including "In Focus" author Dorothy Bass ("Practicing Theology in the Congregation," page 22), describe vibrant communities of faith who are making their implicit theologies explicit in fresh and inspiring ways. May we all see our work, no matter what it is, as service in the glory of God. Because it is.

In faith,

Lisa Kinney Colburn
kinney@alban.org



"As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God." — Psalm 42:1

At the center of the congregation is the pastor. Spiritual guide, scholar, counselor, preacher, administrator, confidant, teacher, pastoral visitor, and friend, a pastor has a privileged position and performs many roles. In season and out, a pastor is called upon to lead communities to the life-giving waters of God.

The National Clergy Renewal Program, offered by Lilly Endowment Inc., is intended to strengthen Christian congregations by providing an opportunity for pastors to step away briefly from the demands of daily parish life and to engage in a period of renewal and reflection. The Endowment will provide approximately 100 grants of up to \$45,000 each directly to congregations for support of a renewal program for their pastor.

Applications are now being accepted. Applications must be postmarked by June 25, 2004, and the award announcement will be made by October 2004.



For information: Send an e-mail to clergyrenewal@yahoo.com; contact the program's Web site: www.clergyrenewal.org; call 317/916-7302; or write Lilly Endowment Inc., Religion Division, 2801 North Meridian Street, Post Office Box 88068, Indianapolis, Indiana 46208. (Indiana clergy should apply only to the Lilly Endowment Clergy Renewal Program for Indiana Congregations.)

Left Out of the Picture

According to Richard Florida of Carnegie Mellon University, a new social class is emerging in America, one he calls the “creative class.” Florida, a professor of regional economic development, has tracked work and workers across the country. He argues in *The Rise of the Creative Class* (New York: Basic Books, 2002) that work, leisure, community, and everyday life are being transformed by the emergence of this elite.

Who’s in it? This social class consists of 38 million members, “more than 30 percent of the nation’s workforce.” It includes scientists, engineers, architects, designers, writers, artists, musicians, entertainers, and those who regularly use their creativity in business, education, health care, law, and other professions.

The emergence of this class is, Florida says, one of the three big stories in recent American social and economic history. First came the rise and decline of the working class. Next, in the mid-20th century, we saw the rise of the service class. Now comes the creative class, consisting of those who “create new ideas, new technology and/or new creative content” or engage in “complex problem solving that involves a great deal of independent judgment and requires high levels of education or human capital” (p. 8).

Questions for Congregations

While developing his detailed argument, Florida raises provocative questions for those concerned about religion, congregations, and the health of communities. For example, he notes that the creative class is characterized by “weak ties”—that is, class members have more personal relationships but fewer deep and lasting ones than people in previous generations. He observes that this class has tended to be self-centered and not particularly interested in traditional patterns of community building. Members of the class, he adds, tend to structure their lives around experiential qualities of life; they gather in regions that offer the kinds of attractions they value. They use time differently, resistant to old nine-to-five patterns of work but always “on” and cramming every moment with activity. Often class members turn the tables on old career

patterns, frontloading their work lives with intense experiences at the outset, then easing off into less demanding work as they age. Marriage and childbearing come later in life for these folk than for previous generations. They value diversity and tolerance and place a high value on autonomy and freedom in building personal lives.

These creative-class “traits” pose major challenges for congregations and leaders. Congregations have traditionally nurtured “strong ties” and placed high value on group cohesion. They have been accustomed to seeing nuclear families as the normative social unit, but must reckon with the fact that this norm now fits only 23.5 percent of all Americans.

How Shall We Respond?

I want to focus on another challenge posed by Florida. Stunningly absent from his analysis is any mention of congregations. Traditional religious communities are simply not part of the emerging picture he sketches. The question posed by his model is not only how congregations can adapt to the new realities he describes. Will congregations be a part of the future at all? Deeper still is the question of the relation of congregations to creativity. Are local religious communities nurturers of creativity? Or do they stifle it and exclude those who seek to express this fundamental human quality?

It is tempting to set Florida’s book aside as

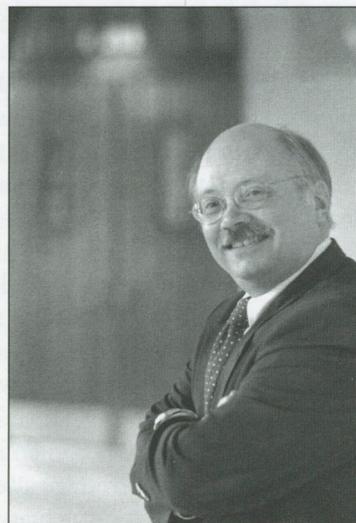
another ivory-tower product describing a world that will not come to be. Florida’s book appeared not long after the “irrationally exuberant” stock market tanked and 9/11 challenged the halcyon days of the techno-bubble. Yet I believe that much of what he describes is part of the future. Weak ties and the premium on creative work seem to be here to stay.

Welcoming the Creative Spirit

One may be tempted to see Florida’s book as one more piece of evidence that congregations are obsolescent. Instead, I think it’s time to ask some basic questions: Do our congregations welcome the creative spirit and creative people? Or will they stifle, exclude, and miss the opportunity to shape a new era? In the faith traditions that live at the heart of congregations are two sets of answers. First are the powerful messages that the divine creative spirit moved among God’s gathered people in such ways that the world was changed. But these traditions also carry painful memories of suppression and oppression, of resistance to the Creator Spirit’s movements. The contemporary record is equally mixed. I know congregations where creativity is alive and well, where it is welcomed and nurtured. They invent new ministries, welcome new people, form new communities of faith and energy. They heal the world. I also know congregations where it’s the “same old, same old,” and seemingly nothing new happens. Our challenge is to take a hard look at ourselves

and see how creativity is faring in our midst—and then to make room for creativity to happen.

Rev. Dr. James P. Wind is the president of the Alban Institute. Prior to joining the Institute in 1995, he served as program director at the Lilly Endowment’s religion division. Dr. Wind is the author of three books and numerous articles, including the Alban Institute special report on leadership.





The 80 Percent Rule: Fact or Fiction?

MARLIS MCCOLLUM

Church growth consultants are fond of noting that when average church attendance exceeds 80 percent of sanctuary capacity, crowding begins to limit a congregation's growth. This rule of thumb, often called the "80 percent rule" has been so commonly cited by consultants that it is now invoked by many a minister or lay leader as a reason for a congregation's failure to grow or as proof of the need for a second service or a new facility. Lately, though, more and more people are asking how and where the 80 percent rule originated and what research supports its validity.

Despite its familiarity, the 80 percent rule is far more complex than most might imagine. "There are misconceptions about the rule," says Jim Moss, a church growth consultant with 26 years of experience. For instance, Moss points out, "It isn't about a particular Sunday attendance reaching 80 percent of the sanctuary seating capacity. It refers to the annual average attendance compared to the comfortable capacity of the sanctuary."

And, though some have attempted to apply it to parking capacity (see box on page 9), consultants say its applicability is to seating capacity—and primarily pew seating, at that.

The exact origin of the 80 percent rule is unclear and it seems likely to have been experience based. However, there is now both research and anecdotal evidence to support it. Initially, the rule may have been based on the simple observation that churches never reached the occupancy capacity cited on the building's architectural plans and submitted to the local building code authority. For many years, sanctuary seating capacity in churches with pew seating typically has been based on 18 inches of space per person (with some variation by state), which would require even individuals of average size and weight to sit shoulder to shoulder in the pews. This measurement is an inch less of space than is allotted to coach class passengers on airplanes, and considerably less space than research shows people reserve for themselves in a pew if left to their own devices.

For instance, architect Roger Patterson, who has designed hundreds of churches in his 52-year career, uses 20 inches to calculate capacity. "A pew seating 12 people at 20 inches per

person will average 9 persons in the pew," he says, "but if you place 12 chairs behind this same pew such that each chair affords 20 inches of space, 12 people will be seated comfortably. That's 75 percent of capacity right there." According to building code standards, 13 people could be accommodated by the pew in this example, with room to spare. But, as architect Jerry Cripps of InterDesign points out, state building code capacity standards have nothing to do with comfort or personal space preferences. "Under the building code, the 'occupant load' or capacity relates to getting people safely out of the building in the event of an emergency, such as a fire," he says. "What we've seen is that, in reality, people don't crowd in that close."

The Rise of "Comfortable Capacity"

It is for this reason that architects, church planners, pew designers, and consultants have begun to consider "comfortable capacity" as the designation of a full church rather than the maximum capacity specified by building codes. When drawing up the plans for a church, InterDesign allows between 22 and 24 inches per person for pew seating, as do many other architects, but there are those who say even that amount isn't sufficient for most people—at least not in pews.

For instance, Moss suggests 25 inches per person is needed for comfort. This figure is based on findings from a survey of 711 churches from seven Presbyterian denominations that Moss conducted in the mid-1980s, as well as ongoing research since then.

Kenn Sanders, a church planner and designer who has worked with more than 1,000 churches, says the attendance and pew length data he has obtained from many of these churches indicate that "26 ½ inches is the amount of space everybody wants when they sit in a pew these days."

Others believe the figure is even higher. "When your main worship service reaches 80 percent of comfortable capacity (measured at 30 to 36 inches per person), you may be pretty certain that you are discouraging frequent attendance by current members and presenting a 'no vacancy' sign to newcomers," says Alban Institute senior consultant Alice Mann in her book *Raising the Roof*.¹

According to Mann, this notion of providing a welcoming environment for newcomers is one of the core issues from which the 80 percent rule emerged. Another is the question of how a church can take responsibility for factors that may decrease the frequency with which its current members attend. For Mann, the "hassle factor" is a caption for both these issues. "If I am brand new to a church and the only available seat is way up front, I may leave," she says. "If I am a member who is on the fence about coming to church on a particular day, my expectation of crowding may tip the balance in favor of staying home. Until people begin to consider these questions of human motivation more carefully, they often don't 'get' the 80 percent rule. Instead, they hold onto the premise that nothing has to be done because the church isn't full yet."

Identifying Unwelcoming Space

When church members perceive there to be vacant seating, resistance to believing capacity is an issue is common, consultants say. But they also report that much of the seating that members identify as available is not what most newcomers would consider comfortable or inviting seating, so identifying such unwelcoming seating has become part and parcel of consultants' work with the 80 percent rule.

For instance, many consultants now consider uncomfortable seating to be unavailable seating and do not count it when calculating comfortable capacity. Obvious examples are portions of pews located behind large pillars or other view-obstructing objects. And, though church members often point to empty balconies and front rows, consultants tend to agree that these are not welcoming spaces. "Few visitors would feel welcome if the only seating available was in a hard-to-access balcony littered with gum wrappers," says Mann. "Most people don't want to sit in the balcony," Moss agrees, citing less distance between pews and the difficulty of negotiating stairs as two barriers to balcony seating.

Pew design can also inhibit full use of the space, Moss says, noting that pews longer than 13 feet tend to remain empty toward the middle and that pews ending at a wall tend to remain empty in the spaces nearest the wall. Pews with a central armrest are also problematic. "You generally lose a full seat with those pews," he says.

There may be congregation-specific seating patterns to factor in, as well. For example, notes Alban Institute senior consultant Dan Hotchkiss, physically disabled parishioners often occupy the seats at either end of long pews. When that's the case members and newcomers are reluctant to disturb these individuals to gain access to the inner seats.

Many consultants now consider uncomfortable seating to be unavailable seating and do not count it when calculating comfortable capacity.

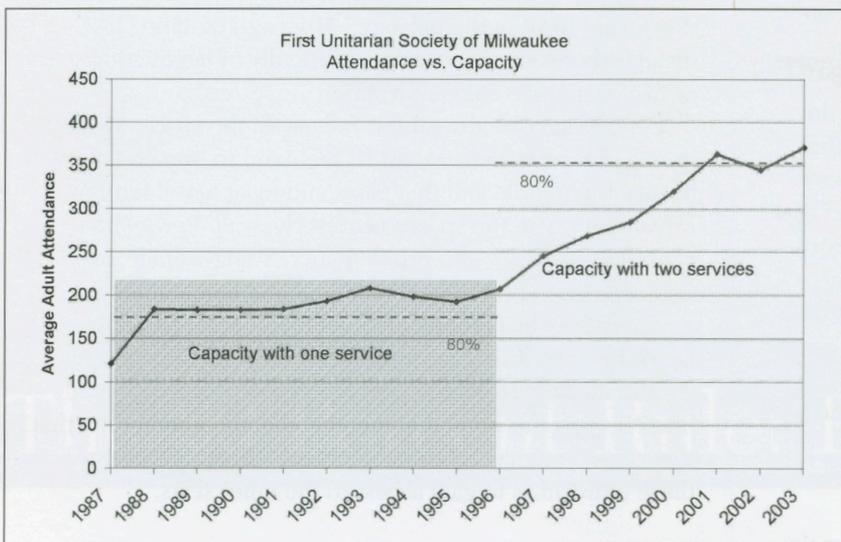
In some cases, notes Moss, "the perceived space may be more important than the actual space. I've been in several churches where the sight lines gave the impression that the space was smaller than it was, and the attendance in those churches seldom reached 80 percent of capacity."

Only after all of these and other seating considerations have been taken into account is an estimate of comfortable capacity determined. And after that, consultants believe, there still needs to be some welcoming space left over if the church is to continue to grow. They cite both experience and research to support this conclusion.

What the Research Shows

Using 25 inches per person to calculate comfortable capacity in the churches he surveyed, Moss found that average annual attendance increased until it reached 57 percent of comfortable capacity. At that point it began to decline. Consequently, Moss says, “I think resistance to growth occurs at about 57 percent of the comfortable seating capacity. After that, people have to sit closer to each other, and Americans are accustomed to space. We want to have our own turf.” It is because of evidence like this that consultants often recommend a church consider adding a second (or other additional) service once it has reached 65 to 70 percent of its comfortable capacity.

“I would prefer that a church add a second service before reaching 80 percent capacity,” says Moss, “It is a major change and in many churches there is a lot of resistance to it, so it can take a long time to accomplish.”



What many churches have found, though, is that adding a second service has been key to their continued growth. An example of such an experience can be found in First Unitarian Society of Milwaukee. Hotchkiss, who worked with the church on an 18-month strategic planning process, recently graphed the church's yearly attendance as it related to comfortable capacity, producing the startling illustration shown above.

Between 1987 and 1996, the church offered only one service. While attendance rose sharply between 1987 and 1988, it quickly leveled off after exceeding the 80 percent capacity mark (calculated based on 30 inches per person, applied to each pew separately). Although small increases were seen after that, First Unitarian did not see significant gains again until it added a second service.

“The results are quite dramatic,” Hotchkiss notes. “It was like letting a lid off.”

Since the introduction of the second service, the church's attendance has nearly doubled, but participation began to level off again after peaking just above the 80 percent capacity mark. According to many consultants, this is an indication that

a third service should be added to encourage additional growth, and the church is considering doing just that.

Exceptions to the “Rule”?

Despite case studies like this one, doubt remains about the validity of the 80 percent rule. Alban consultant Patricia Hayes says many congregations believe the 80 percent rule doesn't apply to them. “They say things like ‘We don't mind sitting close together’ or ‘The children leave after the first ten minutes.’ In cases like that, I have them look at their visitor return rate—the number of new members versus the number of annual visitors.”

“Identifying the barriers that 80 percent capacity creates is just the beginning of a conversation,” says Mann. “A great deal of the work goes into convincing the congregation that it is a barrier. A lot of my work involves helping people to acknowledge the way they do things and to see that these ways might be

hampering the welcome they want to provide.

Sometimes I use the image of a fishbowl full of marbles; there comes a point when you can't add a new marble without taking another one out. If people begin to consider that welcoming five newcomers means displacing five existing attendees, the impact of the 80 percent factor becomes clear.”

Nevertheless, some argue that the 80 percent rule may have limited applicability. “Most new churches have adopted theater seating,” says church planner and designer Sanders. “The 80 percent factor doesn't play out there.” Others disagree, saying certain issues are eliminated with theater seating, such as the need to figure out how many seats remain empty, but that a sufficient number of empty seats in desirable locations must still be available if growth is to be facilitated.

Others believe the 80 percent rule may not be applicable in Evangelical, African American, and Catholic churches, many of which have a “push in” policy—the practice of asking members to “push in” toward the center of the pew to allow additional members or visitors to be seated.

Hotchkiss acknowledges that “the 80 percent rule may have some basis in the customary zone of privacy of white Protestants” and therefore may be a less accurate predictor in churches with other personal space customs. However, he maintains that at some point crowding will impede any church's growth. “American consumers are used to having abundant goods and services, and most potential and actual churchgoers are no different,” he says. “Crowding and uncomfortable seating will drive members away. And while a church that is in an initial

What many churches have found is that adding a second service has been key to their continued growth.

growth phase gathers momentum and its members may tolerate many discomforts and inconveniences in those early days, people will create a more comfortable space for themselves as soon as they can. All of my experiences with congregations that resist these realities indicate that their growth will eventually plateau.”

“It’s very difficult to keep a church full for more than five years without a plan to address the issue of crowding,” Moss agrees. Even when there is such a plan, he says, there must be confidence among parishioners that the plan will be implemented. He cites the example of a church that had been pushing capacity for five years, yet remained unwilling to add a second service. Although it had a plan to address the issue of crowding—and had acquired property and obtained the necessary funding to build a larger facility upon it—the church ultimately lost half its members in an 18-month period. “The younger members did not believe anything was going to happen,” Moss explains. “They just lost the vision.”

Not the Only Factor

Despite their conviction that a church that is crowded—or perceived as crowded—can inhibit a congregation’s growth, consultants and others are quick to acknowledge that this is just one factor among many that may impinge upon growth.

“Too many churches come to me regarding their building, and their facility is not the problem; ministry is their problem,” says Patterson. “The problem is that the congregation hasn’t grown into the ministry it is called to.”

“Even if a church is at 80 percent capacity, the data does not tell you your call,” adds Mann. “You have to interpret the information to determine where God calls this congregation next.” ♦

NOTES

1. Alice Mann, *Raising the Roof: The Pastoral-to-Program Size Transition* (Bethesda, Md.: Alban Institute, 2001), 20.

PARKING: DOES THE 80 PERCENT RULE APPLY?

Many consultants are convinced that church growth will be impeded when average annual participation reaches 80 percent of the sanctuary’s comfortable seating capacity, but does this same rule of thumb apply to parking? Are newcomers discouraged from joining a church that has reached 80 percent of its parking capacity? Do active members perceive the lot as full and return home when 80 percent of the spaces are taken?

Alban Institute senior consultant Dan Hotchkiss says it is not that simple. This is not to say that the availability of parking does not have an impact on attendance and growth. “I usually tell church leaders that seating is one important factor affecting growth and parking is another.” But with parking, Hotchkiss says, application of the 80 percent rule of thumb is not possible because there are so many other factors that come into play. “You not only have the number of spaces available, but other factors to consider, as well, such as distance and safety.” As an example, he cites the experience of a Wisconsin church with whom he has worked recently. “The interesting thing about First Unitarian Society of Milwaukee is that they have zero parking spaces. The church is located in a neighborhood that is urban enough that people can park in front of someone’s house without the residents feeling intruded upon, and it’s an area where people feel safe, so they feel comfortable walking a good distance from their cars to the church.”

For other churches, though, such neighborhood parking may not be available or appealing, and in these cases a full parking lot can severely affect attendance. “I serve three little country churches, and when parking is gone, attendance peaks,” notes Alban consultant Patricia Hayes.

“In many situations there is no parking other than the church parking lot,” notes church architect Roger Patterson. “For instance, new church buildings set well back from a rural road must depend on the parking they provide. My usual statement is ‘Provide a parking space for every two persons you want in the building’ similar to the sign in the dentist’s office that reads ‘Only floss the teeth you want to save.’”

Even when off-site parking is available, Patterson sees a correlation between the notion of comfortable seating capacity and comfortable parking capacity. “A person coming to the church for the first time doesn’t know there is parking behind the bank, school, or nearby store.” In some churches Patterson has worked with, members volunteer to park off-site to free up space for new worshipers and those needing to park near the building. In recognition of their contribution, these members are provided with “I am a remote parker” lapel badges. “I have suggested this to many congregations with similar situations.”

The effect of a lack of parking, says Patterson, is a serious consideration for churches planning new or expanded facilities. “I have consulted with churches that needed to expand their building facilities but could not expand their parking. I tried to convince them that it would be a waste of money to expand the building if the parking could not be expanded, because if you cannot park your car, you cannot attend.”

again, that Your people may rejoice in You?

7 Show us Your mercy, Lord, and grant us Your salvation.

8 I will hear what God the Lord will speak, for He will speak peace to His people and to His saints; but let them not turn back to folly.

9 Surely His salvation is near to those who fear Him, that glory may dwell in our land.

10 Mercy and truth have met together; righteousness and peace have kissed.

11 Truth shall spring out of the earth, and righteousness shall look down from heaven.

12 Yes, the Lord will give what is good; and our land will yield its increase.

13 Righteousness will go before Him, and shall make His footsteps our pathway.

PSALM 86

BOW down Your ear, O Lord, hear me; for I am poor and needy.

2 Preserve my life, for I am holy. You are my God; save Your servant who trusts in You!

3 Be merciful to me, O Lord, for I cry to You all day long.

4 Rejoice the soul of Your servant, for to You, O Lord, I lift up my soul.

5 For You, Lord, are

good, and ready to forgive, and abundant in mercy to all those who call upon You.

6 Give ear, O Lord, to my prayer; and attend to the voice of my supplications.

7 In the day of my trouble I will call upon You, for You will answer me.

8 Among the gods there is none like You, O Lord; nor are there any works like Your works.

9 All nations whom You have made shall come and worship before You, O Lord, and shall glorify Your name.

10 For You are great, and do wondrous things; You alone are God.

11 Teach me Your way, O Lord; I will walk in Your truth, unite my heart to fear Your name.

12 I will praise You, O Lord my God, with all my heart, and I will glorify Your name forevermore.

13 For great is Your mercy toward me, and You have delivered my soul from the depths of Sheol.

14 O God, the proud have risen against me, and a mob of violent men have sought my life, and have not set You before them.

15 But You, O Lord, are a God full of compassion, and gracious, longsuffering and abundant in mercy and truth.

16 Oh, turn to me, and have mercy on me! Give Your strength to Your servant, and save the son of Your maidservant.

17 Show me a sign for good, that those who hate me may see it and be ashamed, because You, Lord, have helped me and comforted me.

PSALM 87

HIS foundation is in the holy mountains.

2 The Lord loves the gates of Zion more than all the dwellings of Jacob.

3 Glorious things are spoken of you, O city of God!

4 "I will make mention of Rahab and Babylon to those who know Me; behold, O Philistia and Tyre, with Ethiopia: 'This one was born there.'"

5 And of Zion it will be said, "This one and that one were born in her; and the Most High Himself shall establish her."

6 The Lord will record, when He registers the peoples: "This one was born there."

7 Both the singers and the players on instruments say, "All my springs are in you."

PSALM 88

O LORD, God of my salvation, I have cried out day and night before You.

2 Let my prayer come before You; incline Your ear to my cry.

3 For my soul is full of troubles, and my life draws near to the grave.

4 I am counted with those who go down to the pit; I am like a man who has no strength.

5 Adrift among the dead, like the slain who lie in the grave, whom You remember no more, and who are cut off from Your hand.

6 You have laid me in the lowest pit, in darkness, in the depths.

7 Your wrath lies heavy upon me, and You have afflicted me with all Your waves.

8 You have put away my acquaintances far from me; You have made me an abomination to them; I am shut up, and I cannot get out.

9 My eye wastes away because of affliction. Lord, I have called daily upon You; I have stretched out my hands to You.

10 Will You work wonders for the dead? Shall the dead arise and praise You?

11 Shall Your loving-kindness be declared in the grave? Or Your faithfulness in the place of destruction?

12 Shall Your wonders be known in the dark? And Your righteousness in the land of forgetfulness?

Leading Theologically Does It Really Matter?

R. SCOTT COLGLAZIER

Juxtaposing two of the most significant religion stories of this past summer might seem as odd as combining peanut butter and tuna fish. What common element links the election of a gay bishop in the Episcopal Church and a controversial movie about the crucifixion of Jesus produced by Hollywood star Mel Gibson? Despite the odd pairing, I think these two stories reveal a third story—the presence of a deep fissure running through the landscape of American Christianity, one that is testing and reshaping the nature of Christian faith, and therefore creating a leadership challenge to ministers in congregational settings. Precisely because of this challenge, churches are desperate not only for leadership, but particularly for theological leadership from clergy.

Cultural Lightning Rod

In the case of Bishop V. Eugene Robinson, who was consecrated November 2, 2003 in the Episcopal Diocese of New Hampshire, his story has become a cultural lightning rod for the complex issue of homosexuality and the church. What one thinks about the particulars of this issue is not within the purview of this article. My concern is that the issue itself is an example of why the church needs theological leadership at the congregational level.

Armed with a literal reading of the Bible, some Christians declare, often with acrimonious enthusiasm, that homosexuality is a sin and that homosexuals are condemned by God. Behind this interpretation lies the belief that the Bible is the literal word of God and that it has come to the world without error. Others believe that the Bible is condemning exploitive behavior—not a particular sexual orientation, but behavior that is abusive and aggressive. In the centuries and cultures in which the Bible was written, people couldn't have comprehended a person's "being" homosexual in any psychological or physiological sense. In addition, if the gospel of Christ is about God's gracious welcome, then the church should be welcoming to all people—including people of different sexual orientations.

Not surprisingly, Christians on opposite sides of the issue often find themselves sitting side by side in the congregation and listening to the same sermon on Sunday morning. The first group understands God's will as an ancient standard that must be followed strictly, while others argue that God is "in process" with the church, inspiring compassion and understanding for an evolving human situation. This issue, like many others, swirls about in local churches, as well as outside organized religion. Sadly, complex theological issues often receive only superficial treatment on the six o'clock news. The focus is often on titillating controversy rather than on theological complexity. This kind of media superficiality, however, opens an opportunity for ministers as they work with congregations. The challenge is to help churches become learning communities where theological ideas can be explored in serious and respectful ways.

An Outcry over a Film

The same dynamics are at play in relation to Mel Gibson's much disputed (but not-yet-released) film on the crucifixion of Jesus. Gibson, a fundamentalist Catholic, has made a film that slavishly (and graphically) follows the biblical accounts of the crucifixion of Jesus. Although, as I write, it

has been seen by only a limited number of religious leaders, the film clearly has created an enormous theological stir within both print and electronic media because it opens an ancient theological wound in portraying the Jews as killers of the Son of God.

Gibson seems oblivious to the fact that biblical "accounts" of the crucifixion are quite unlike the reasonably accurate, contemporary blow-by-blow journalistic reports or "accounts" of a trial and execution. Often the Gospel writers differ in their recounting of details about the death of Jesus. They also emphasize differing theological motifs within their Passion narratives. For the most part, the Gospel writers were more concerned with what was happening at the end of the first century of the Christian era in their own churches than with what happened on the day Jesus was crucified. This is not to suggest that the biblical accounts of crucifixion are without historical reliability. In my estimation, that would overstate the case. At the same time, it's fair to say that the gospels are more theological documents than strict histories.

Throughout the summer, Gibson insisted that he was trying to make a movie true to the biblical accounts of the crucifixion, but what he apparently wound up doing was proliferating one of the most haunting falsehoods in Christian history—namely, the notion that the Jews killed Jesus. The church is still trying to come to terms with the damage this dimension of Christian theology has done to the world. Making villains of the Jews, primarily in the Gospel of John, reflects a strained relationship between the church and the synagogue at the end of the first century, and not a strict reflection of historical fact surrounding the death of Jesus.

Developing Communities of Growth

Mel Gibson's movie, which has received wide discussion in the national media, offers another theological opportunity for clergy to exhibit leadership within their congregations. How one feels about the

issue or what position one finally takes is not nearly as important as congregations' addressing such matters in honest and engaging ways. How can the church become a place where issues such as anti-Judaism are understood from a theological perspective? How can communities of faith grow into communities of dialogue, moving past old labels of "liberal" and "conservative" to become settings where people learn together?

Important theological dialogue can take place within local churches, but rarely does it happen without well-thought-out leadership from clergy. These two major news stories from summer 2003 suggest that two kinds of churches are slowly developing in American culture—"answer" churches and "journey" churches.¹ *Answer* churches find their beliefs neatly packaged in the Bible; therefore their approach becomes adherence to well-defined beliefs. *Journey* churches, on the other hand, understand faith as an ongoing discovery. They understand that listening to the Bible is a process (yes, the Bible is taken seriously in journey churches); but in addition to heeding the Bible, journey churches listen for God's voice in the continuing development of culture.

A Polarized Church

I'm not sure the Christian landscape has ever been more polarized than it is now, and I don't anticipate its becoming less divided in the future. Yet because the landscape is, at base, a theological one, clergy have an opportunity to initiate responsible religious dialogue within their churches. Sometimes theological issues emerge from the church itself; at other times, issues are thrust upon the church by a media blitz. Either way, the opportunity for lively, meaningful, and respectful theological conversation will present itself.

Theological leadership can be exhibited in a variety of ways. First and foremost, theological leadership is manifested not so much by anything the minister *does*, but by virtue of who he or she is. When a minister thinks theologi-

cally and follows the larger arcs of meaning that have always been a part of religious life, the congregation soon picks up on this approach and realizes that the pastor has a certain spiritual and intellectual fire burning inside his or her being. It has a luminous quality. Whether the minister is standing in the pulpit, officiating at a wedding, or engaged in casual conversation in the parking lot, the glow of theological energy is present.

To use an analogy, some chefs work in the kitchen because it is their job. Other chefs, however, are always thinking creatively about food. They talk to their customers about it and seek out conversations with other chefs and even travel to learn more. When you are around this kind of chef, it takes about five minutes to discover that food is much more than a job; it's a passion.

Theological Reflection as Passion

In much the same way, congregations notice if theological reflection is part of their pastor's passion, if it's an ongoing experience for the minister and not something that was finished back in seminary. When the minister continues to explore theologically—always curious, always pushing, probing, and reading—the congregation begins to see a fresh faith that matters to our world today. The minister is then viewed by the congregation not merely as a pastor or administrator, but as an interpreter of the Christian faith amid the people of God.

When theological reflection comes from the essential center of a minister, it radiates through the act of preaching. There is, to be sure, a place for the courageous, prophetic sermon, but the best preaching creates an invitation for the listener to think and feel, to consider how God and world are intersecting in any given issue. The invitation is not "Listen to me because I have all the answers." Rather, it is more like "Join me on the journey as I try to understand my faith in light of what is

happening in my church and world." Even when the issue is as complex as homosexuality, the minister can speak about it in a way that gives people room to struggle and grow. Edges of such theological issues have to be pushed. At the same time, the theological conclusion finally reached is not nearly so important as the theological process that has been engaged.

Beyond Preaching

The issues of homosexuality or a movie about Jesus' crucifixion gives rise to all kinds of religious questions: What is the nature of the Bible? In what way is the Bible authoritative in the life of the church? How do we understand modern psychology in light of ancient concepts about humanity? What claim does the spirit of Jesus have on the church community, particularly in relation to the acceptance of others? Not only can preaching become a model of theological exploration; it can inspire dialogue by addressing the real issues simmering in our culture.

But beyond preaching, ministers can foster theological dialogue and transformation in other ways. Perhaps a few examples from my experience at University Christian Church in Fort Worth will illustrate:

- ◆ We have created a dialogue for Jewish, Christian, and Islamic faiths. This project is not only good for our own church; it also sends out signals to the larger Fort Worth community that our congregation is a place where faith is taken seriously and inclusively.
- ◆ A few years ago, recognizing that our church's elders basically spent their meetings talking about business items nonstop, we created elder dialogue sessions devoted to nothing but a particular theological topic. In recent years, we have explored such topics as prayer, Christology, and the nature of religious authority. Interestingly enough, the elders of the church had been bored with their business

sessions for years and were glad to have a chance to learn about their faith. This year we are using an excellent book titled *How to Think Theologically*.² The goal of these sessions is not to reach total agreement on a theological topic; it is to help these lay leaders become more theologically aware.

- ◆ We have created continuing programs of theological reflection around film, literature, and art, allowing us to explore intersections of faith and culture. We have read books by Elie Wiesel, Chaim Potok, Anne Lamott and James Carroll, to name a few. We have explored such movies as *Life is Beautiful* and *As Good As It Gets* to understand faith and redemption. We also have regular outings to museums to discover religious themes in art.
- ◆ We have sponsored travel experiences ranging from a women's visit to the border areas of Mexico and Texas to study the plight of immigrant families, to intergenerational study trips to Italy, where families explored some of the great Christian art traditions in Florence and Rome. Even our service-type trips lend themselves to theological reflection.
- ◆ We have also created successful theological dialogue by using our small-group ministry of ChristCare. These small groups always study the sermon text that I will use on Sunday morning. This practice creates a dialogue—not only with the biblical text but also with the larger worship life of the church. Moreover, it creates a theological dialogue between laypeople and senior minister. Our church is greatly enhanced by the fact that people show up on Sunday already in conversation with the theme of the morning.

Teaching People to Outgrow Anti-Judaism

There are always theological needs within the church, and therefore, always

opportunities for reflection in the life of Christians. Perhaps this is my own bias, but given that so much of today's religious landscape is shaped by a more literal, fundamentalist approach to religion, mainline Protestants have a special challenge to create an alternative religious discourse, not only for their churches but also for the culture at large.

A pastor can do something as simple as leading the congregation in a study of anti-Judaism. One immensely interesting possibility would be a Lenten Bible study experience focusing on the Passion narratives, leading people through an exploration of how the Bible emerged in the life of the church. This study would offer a way of talking about the church's witness to the gospel and how that witness can be made without any implicit or explicit anti-Jewish thought. It would also serve as a reflection on the liturgy of the church during Lent and Holy Week. People can be helped to understand how a certain strand of Christian witness has been intrinsically anti-Jewish (including some of the witness found in the Bible), and how damaging such a witness has been to the Jewish people. They can also learn to appreciate the need for the church to think theologically while taking into account the implications of the Holocaust. And finally, the church has a way to think critically about a contemporary movie on the death of Jesus—a film that at one level might seem completely harmless, but at a deeper level may well betray the fundamental beauty of the Christian witness.

Answer Churches, Journey Churches

Our culture will always have "answer" churches—those communities of faith that tend to see a well-defined Christianity. But for other churches, "journey" churches, theological exploration is essential because these churches thrive not by suggesting, "It doesn't matter what you believe," but by inviting people into the adventure of theological reflection and discovery, which in the end is a process of discovering what it means to be a human being in this world.

In my experience, people in churches are hungry for theological leadership, for the opportunity to grapple with everything from a news story about a controversial new Episcopal bishop to an eyebrow-raising contemporary movie about Jesus. Clergy leadership should be measured not merely by how well the church is administered or how many new members are received or how many pastoral calls are completed. All of that is important, but if there is such a thing as a "calling" (a profoundly religious concept), then clergy leaders should be about the business of creating religious community—one of theological exploration and discourse. Such communities rarely form by accident. They emerge when pastors are willing to lead theologically—leading because they passionately believe that it matters. ♦

NOTES

1. See Scott Colglazier, *A Larger Hope: Opening the Heart to God* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2002).
2. Howard Stone and James Duke, *How to Think Theologically* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996).

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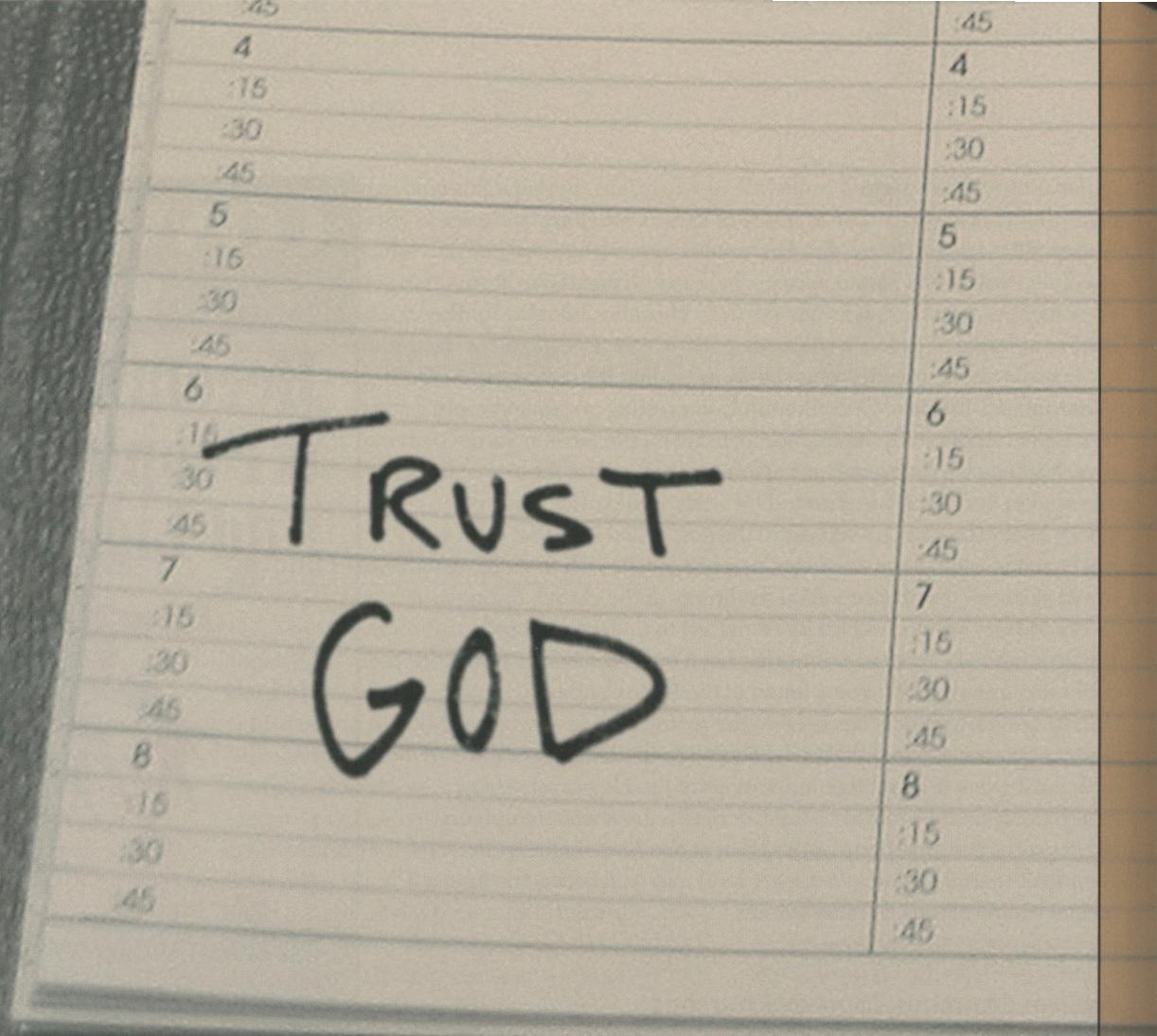
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Telling the Right Story

Why Theological Consistency is Necessary for Congregational Vitality

ROBERT C. BARGER

On an evening in April 1999, our congregation held a worship service—the kind of service that pastors and congregations hope they’ll never have to host. Under a steady drizzle on a dark night, reflecting the mood of the community, people streamed into our worship center, which sits just blocks from Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado. Kids brought their friends, clutching each other and wailing in grief. Some brought their Columbine High soccer T-shirts and hung them over our communion rail. One group brought a Columbine yearbook and placed it on the altar. When the service began with a hymn that implored God to “pour your power” on the church, to “cure our children’s warring madness,” and to “grant us wisdom . . . [and]

courage” to face the hour,¹ our worship center was already filled to capacity and overflowing.

On that night we did not have answers that could provide any meaning or explanation for the carnage and evil that had engulfed the high school the day before. We offered no quick fix for the pain and the huge, aching holes in all our hearts. All we had to offer was a story—the story of Jesus Christ, the one who himself was victimized and suffered an awful death, and yet is now raised from the dead. Why did God let this happen? *Wrong question.* Where was God when it happened? *Great question!* God in Jesus Christ took a bullet. He lay on the cold floor of the high school, in the library, and on the front steps, as the God who comes and suffers with his children. Yet this same God is risen. He refused to stay dead, because he loves us and is available to us for such a day as the one we had just suffered.

We were ready for that night because we are a vital congregation. We know who we are, and we are clear and consistent about the sacred story that shapes our life together and our mission in the world. We share the characteristics of countless vigorous local churches in North America’s age of post-Christendom. Such congregations challenge the notion that the North American church, especially the mainline, has seen its best days. Thriving congregations cannot be identified by a particular setting, size, or worship style. While some churches struggle to survive, the vibrant ones offer clues to renewing the church in North America, and signal that our postmodern, post-Christendom, secular age can be an exciting, opportune time to be the church (see box on page 17 for marks of a vital congregation).

Although diversity abounds among vital congregations in the ordering of their lives and the nature of their flagship ministries, a few statistical markers identify them. Just as blood pressure and cholesterol levels are indicators of personal health, so I believe, from my

experience of studying lively parishes and teaching church leadership, that certain measurements indicate congregational vitality:

1. An overall upward trend in average weekly worship attendance.

Although community demographics or congregational decisions may cause periodic dips in attendance, healthy systems show a general pattern of growth.

2. The percentage of members who worship weekly.

Healthy systems exert a strong gravitational pull toward life together. Vital parishes usually report that more than 40 percent of members attend weekly. In some, weekly worship attendance *exceeds* membership. This is true not only of some evangelical congregations whose bar for joining is quite high, but also of some mainline ones.

3. Average giving of each household expressed as a percentage of household income.

Because money and wealth are revered to the point of idolatry in our culture, one’s wallet is usually the last symbol of self to be converted to Christ. Vital churches show a trend of growth over time in the proportion of household income given by families or individuals.

4. The percentage of a congregation’s overall budget given for mission and ministries beyond its doors.

In robust parishes, this percentage shows an increase over time. Christian communities that believe they are caught up in God’s mission for the world give themselves to the world rather than myopically focusing inward.

Certainly other factors indicate vitality, and these four are not invariable signs. But taken together, they paint a picture of relative health.

Theological Substance in a Market-Driven World

But congregational vitality is not about numbers. Statistics serve only to confirm the living community’s substance. The parable of the sower in Mark 4:1-9 explains in Jesus’ words how the church grows and thrives. It is God who causes the growth, and although quick and unsustainable starts are planted in various soils, a harvest eventually issues forth out of good soil. This soil is one of substance, unlike the soil in the parable that “had no depth” (Mark 4:5). For vital congregations in our culture, the good soil represents a rich theological loam, a story articulated with clarity and consistency, out of which a healthy church blooms with life-giving purpose.

Giving sustained attention to theology matters. The culture and even the churches live in confusion about the church’s identity and purpose. I do not suggest that all churches and their members should conform to some narrow, specific theological doctrine—quite the opposite. The authentic story that grounds the church—the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ—is an account of immense substance, embracing the world as it is, offering hope that gathers people who come from a myriad of motivations and worldviews. The church’s story has such profound implications that it frees people to explore, question, struggle, and undergo transformation together

For vital congregations in our culture, the good soil represents a rich theological loam, a story articulated with clarity and consistency, out of which a healthy church blooms with life-giving purpose.

in a community of faith. The story does not promise a “right” answer to every human dilemma. It empowers people to flourish and serve in a state of holy uncertainty. It offers assurance of the ultimate faithfulness and triumph of God over the forces that would cheapen or fragment our common life. After all, the claim of the church is not “He was risen,” but “He *is* risen.”

In today’s culture the story is often obfuscated or compromised. Market-driven forces would reduce it to a product or program. Much has been written about the collapse of Christendom in North America; yet we still live with a Christendom hangover. One aspect of Christendom is the notion that the church and the culture share the same story and agenda. Why else would the United States have IN GOD WE TRUST engraved on its currency? During much of the 20th century the question of how the church should relate to the culture was a topic of theological debate. But my experience as a pastor trying to work through the Christendom hangover persuades me that the culture’s grasp of the church is limited to the notion that it exists primarily to serve the culture’s needs—or at least *people’s* needs. At the huge Barnes & Noble bookstore in my community, the “spirituality and religion” section is adjacent to the “self-help” section. This juxtaposition should tell us much about the culture’s perception of the church.

It is not surprising then, in this market-driven culture, that people relate to the church as consumers. If we think as consumers, we will likely separate God and the church from the rest of life. That is to say, God and the church may

These consumer Christians are generally unaware that the church has a story about God, life, and the world that is in tension with their market-driven lifestyles.

be construed as one component of a multifaceted lifestyle. People have their families, their careers, their health clubs, and, perhaps after enough church-shopping, they have their congregations. Using compartmentalized thinking, one affiliates with a church to get one’s spiritual needs met, as though spiritual needs could be distinguished from other needs. Through the programs and services the church offers, God and the church are subjugated to the role of serving the consumer.

In the congregation I serve, people who come to worship for the first time, or after a long absence, often confess that “something is missing” from their lives. They hope the church can fill that void. One couple referred to the search for a congregation as the “icing on the cake” of their otherwise wonderful lives. These consumer Christians are generally unaware that the church has a story about God, life, and the world that is in tension with their market-driven lifestyles. Expecting perhaps a feel-good experience, they don’t anticipate the profound solidity of the story and its demand for a reordering of one’s life—that is, one’s hopes and dreams, and what captures one’s passions and allegiances. People receive more than they expected, and often receive it as astonishingly good news. It is rare that folk

find the story so threatening that they leave the church, though that *does* happen. Last February before the invasion of Iraq, one of our lay deacons, leading the congregation in prayer, said, “Lord, as you commanded us to pray for our enemies, we pray for the salvation of Saddam Hussein.” A newer member was troubled by that prayer. From his perspective, patriotism had to weigh more heavily in this case than the Scriptures. God clearly had to be on America’s side, and the church had to support the destruction of Saddam. Since expressing these views to me, this man has rarely returned to worship.

A Tale of Two Stories

From the primitive days of the church, the community that organized itself around the exclamation, “He is risen!” lived in tension with the story of its culture. Though the two stories shared some common ground, their distinctions were more pronounced than their similarities. It is the same today in congregations where the church’s story is told and animated against the backdrop of the cultural narrative.

My family and I lived in Iran during the revolution that eventually led to the overthrow of Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi. On Christmas Eve 1978, we were gathered around the Christmas tree in our home in Tehran. We were under a mandatory curfew; otherwise we would have worshiped in a local German church. On this night we would “do church” in our home. As nighttime fell, we heard the accustom sounds of every night. Voices shouted in Farsi from the rooftops:

The world organizes itself around the story of unresolved human conflict, power struggles, greed, and violence. The church organizes itself around the story of God.

“God is great!” and “Death to the Shah!” and “Death to America!” Just outside our door, a deafening rumble of armored military transports rolled by, taking soldiers to their positions in the city. Machine-gun fire and other eruptions of violence shook the neighborhood. Inside, my wife, a friend from the United States, and I were singing Christmas carols as loud as we could, to keep our small children, whom we held in our arms, from hearing the mayhem outside.

Two stories were being told that night. Told in the streets was a version of one of the oldest of stories, of Cain killing his brother Abel. That story has been re-enacted in every age—a tale of the quest for power and the use of force to seize it—and has never been resolved. The second story was disclosed in the words of our carols:

Hark! The herald angels sing,
“Glory to the newborn King;
peace on earth and mercy mild,
God and sinners reconciled!”²

Silent night, holy night, all is
calm, all is bright round yon
virgin mother and child.³

Only one of these stories will have the last word. The world organizes itself around the story of unresolved human conflict, power struggles, greed, and violence. The church organizes itself around the story of God, who comes to dwell with us, beginning as a defenseless baby, declaring peace and amnesty; being crucified, raised from the dead, and available to the church as the Living One. The distinction between the two is a question: do sin and death hold the last word, or does God? Being grasped by one story necessarily requires being in tension with the other.

Today our teenagers hear the culture saying that their value depends upon looks, the “right clothes,” sex appeal, popularity, and accomplishments. The church’s story tells them that they are inherently valuable just as they are. The world tells us to take

control of our lives and to eliminate uncertainty. The church calls us to trust in the God who raised Jesus from the dead, and to accept that living in ambiguity is not only healthy—it’s unavoidable. The world’s story tells us that personal failure is greatly to be feared. The church’s story lifts up Jesus Christ crucified as one rejected by all. The world tells us we have only limited resources. The church, declaring there is enough for all, calls us to reorder our lives so that others might live. The church’s story will always be in tension with the world’s.

Practicing Focused Theological Consistency

At Abiding Hope Lutheran Church in Littleton, Colorado, we are clear about our practices as a congregation and the theology that informs them. We do not claim that ours is the only way of “doing church” today, but we do follow a way that seems authentic and that exhibits wonderful signs of vitality. We operate with the axiom “Less is more.” For a congregation of our size—2,000 members, with 1,000

in worship weekly—we do not have a plethora of ministries. We do a few essential ministries and try to do them with excellence. The prime focus is our worship life. The guiding statements of our congregation—mission, vision, and values—name worship as our essential expression of being the church. Though we follow the church’s ancient liturgical pattern and hold fast to some early church traditions, we also write pieces of our own liturgy—calls to worship, hymns, rites of confession and forgiveness, and prayers. As we write, we are mindful of grounding everything in the death and resurrection of Jesus and expressing the tension between our story and that of today’s world. We think of ourselves as being simultaneously traditional and contemporary. Some liturgical traditions unique to our congregation express our own understanding of the church and its gospel. For example, our calls to worship always end with these words:

Leader: O Jesus, thank you for
this place,

Congregation: *That is always
filled with your grace.*

NINE CHARACTERISTICS OF CONGREGATIONAL VITALITY

The marks of a vital congregation include:

1. A positive, healthy spirit that can be sensed by first-time worshipers.
2. A clear sense that the gathered people are caught up in a movement that matters, and that this vocation has found traction in their lives.
3. Authenticity—a sense of “realness” rather than pretense; an unashamed immersion in the church’s ancient story.
4. Courage to address the depths of the human condition and to enter the darkest corridors of pain and suffering.
5. A visibly unshakable hopefulness, gratitude, and joy about life and the future.
6. The ability to cry together and laugh together.
7. An atmosphere of creative conflict, with passions running deep about the life of the community and its purpose.
8. A gift for serving as a grace-filled place of healing.
9. A spirit of resilience, accompanied by enormous capacities to weather adversity.

The world tells us we have only limited resources. The church, declaring there is enough for all, calls us to reorder our lives so that others might live.

When we celebrate communion, the celebrant ties the themes of the day into an invitation to the table. We practice completely open communion. We believe that we come to the table not by our own merit. We come because God is good and freely gives the gifts of the Son to us. We do not care if one is a Lutheran, an adherent of another Christian tradition, a Buddhist, or an atheist. It doesn't matter whether one is 100 years old or one day old. All are invited. Therefore, the invitation ends with a cue from the celebrant and the congregation's acclamation, "The gifts of God are free!" These local traditions serve to underscore our insistence that the church is a safe place for people to allow God to "work on them" through the community.

Worship is of such prime importance to us that we do not have a competing Sunday school hour. We do not have Sunday school at all. Instead, we have discipleship training on selected Sunday afternoons for all ages. These discipleship training activities are not information based; they are built on multigenerational and creative experiences that seek to transform individuals through movement from the world's story to the church's story. Believing that the secondary arena for faith development is the home, we also create daily home-study materials for people to engage in God-talk in their homes.

We are adamant that full participation in worship is so important that we pray for the day when our average worship attendance exceeds our membership. We prepare people for worship by placing the scriptural texts for the coming weekend, along with questions to stimulate discussion, on

our Web site and sending them by e-mail to all households of the congregation. Any church group that meets during the week uses these materials in its devotional time. Every group—whether it is a ministry team, a musical group, or a small-group discussion—spends its first 30 to 45 minutes together reflecting on the materials. In a suburban culture of overcommitted and fragmented lifestyles, this practice has taken hold of our people, thus disclosing its transformational power. It is amazing what delightful surprises can happen in a planned agenda when significant time is first spent in theological reflection.

Thirty minutes before each service we have a centering activity. People gather in small multigenerational groups to share personal concerns and to focus on a question that more fully prepares them to experience worship. The preaching and children's sermons consistently take the gospel revealed in the texts for the day and use its richness to reframe our world and experience. The music ensembles that lead worship also meet before the service for their own centering. We work hard to use powerful music that is indigenous to our

culture, while preserving the church's ancient traditions. We take care in our song and hymn selection. With some contemporary music, we may take the liberty to rewrite or edit the words, with appropriate permission, so that they accurately express our theology. We are Lutherans and not fundamentalists.

We believe that if our worship is authentic to the story and relevant to our lives and our world, and if it is executed with excellence and care, then every other part of our life together, from the stewardship of our gifts and resources to the giving of ourselves in service to the world, will disclose passion and rich vitality. ♦

NOTES

1. "God of Grace and God of Glory," by Harry Emerson Fosdick (1878-1969).
2. "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing," by Charles Wesley (1707-1788).
3. "Silent Night, Holy Night," by Joseph Mohr (1792-1848), trans. John F. Young.

And behold, one came up to him, saying,

"Teacher..." Matthew 19:16 RSV



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Renewing Minds

Calling and Educating Disciples

GREG COOTSONA

I've been thinking about Søren Kierkegaard lately, especially his beer parable: SK describes a vendor who buys his beer wholesale at five cents and proceeds to sell it to his customers for *four*. The vendor is elated with his excellent sales: "Isn't it great? Look at all the people who are buying my beer!"

We might laugh at the vendor's foolishness, but Christian educators make a similar mistake. We can think we're succeeding because we attract a large following, when all the time we're cheapening the product. In fact, we forget that our product is priceless. Nonetheless, we sell it short and bubble with enthusiasm, "Isn't it great how I'm using this Christian bestseller for my curriculum? Everyone's coming to the church! Who cares if it's Christianity Lite? We've got boatloads of people coming in our doors!"

I returned to my Kierkegaard texts when I began my work last December in a new call at Bidwell Memorial Presbyterian Church in Chico, California. (A university town, Chico is nestled in the upper Sacramento Valley about 90 miles north of the state capital.) As I organized the books on my office shelves, unpacked my bags, and learned members' names through a daily devotional with our pictorial directory, I set my mind toward creating a durable, transformational adult education program. To accomplish that task, I pulled together three strands:

1. Some classical sources for Christian education, with particular attention to the New Testament
2. My experience with the Center for Christian Studies at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City (my previous pastoral call)
3. An exegesis of the culture of Chico and Bidwell Presbyterian

Jesus' Ministry of Education

To become a better educator, I needed to become a learner. But frankly, the process started in discouragement. I began by reading the latest literature in Christian education. It was fluff—management manuals wrapped in paper-thin theology. So I kept going back in time, reading more and more classics from the greats like Augustine, Luther, and Calvin. The closest I could find to a respectable contemporary was Dietrich Bonhoeffer—eminently respectable, but hardly contemporary. (One pertinent vignette here: A colleague recently taught a master of divinity course at a well-known seminary. When he sought to include Bonhoeffer's *Life Together* on the book list, the powers-that-be replied, "No, that book is too difficult for our students." If pastors never learn to read more thoughtfully, how can they lead their congregations into deeper waters?)

I finally arrived at Jesus.

Is it an exaggeration to assert that Jesus' whole ministry was about education? Consider this: In the famous final command to his first followers in Matthew 28:18-20—the Great Commission—he charged them first that, by going into all the world, they were to *make disciples*, then baptizing them and teaching them. Grammatically, the way the Greek functions in this sentence, it has only one primary verb with a series of derivative verbal participles. That one verb is therefore the *key to focus on*: "to disciple." The participles are "going," "baptizing," "teaching." (This latter word is more specific and serves as a way of intensifying the main verb). Secondly, "to make disciples" literally means *to make learners or followers*. It has an active, personal connotation. So in a word, one of Jesus' final recorded statements is a call for the church to educate.

Yes, it's a bit of an exaggeration to claim that this was his *whole* life's work. Jesus also concerned himself deeply with saving lives, with proclaiming social righteousness, with healing, to name just a few of his deeds. But let's not forget that Jesus' final proclamation focuses on discipleship or learning. Education therefore represents a

central component of Jesus' mission for himself and for us.

In fact, education *is* mission. The "missional church" is a pretty hot concept today. Its basis is the *missio deo*, the "mission of God"—that God is always sending us into the world. Karl Barth, for example, emphasized that this missional nature is the very definition of the church. In his *Church Dogmatics* IV/3, for example, he described "The Sending of the Community of the Holy Spirit." In other words, the very nature of the church is to be sent into the world. In a world that is moving away from Christendom (the linking of social-political structures with the church), we can no longer expect our congregations to grasp basic narratives of the Bible or church teachings. Here's one statistic I learned from George Gallup: 80 percent of Americans say they're Christians, but 4 in 10 don't know who delivered the Sermon on the Mount. Our specific role as educators, then, is to teach the basic content of our faith and to assist our congregations in seeing their lives as Christians who enter into the mission of God. Our education work resides in training our congregations to grasp that their lives are missional.

Paul's words in Romans 12:1-2 further define the church's educational mission and underline the mind's role in this process: "I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, *which is your reasonable worship*. Do not be conformed to this world, but be *transformed by the renewing of your minds*, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect." Naturally faith does not equal knowledge. Nonetheless, I italicized two key phrases to demonstrate that the mind is important to God. "Reasonable worship" (which could also be translated "rational worship") and "renewing your minds" point to the call for our entire being to engage the gospel. When the church sacrifices the mind, it loses integrity. Not everyone in the church is called to a life of the mind, but *some* of the church certainly is.

In addition, I realize with Paul that our call to education is a constant process of

transformation, which can be accomplished only by the Holy Spirit. Otherwise we have no reply to Kierkegaard's haunting question, "Can Christianity be taught?" So a caveat: True Christian faith cannot be taught merely by programs. Unless we're involved in the Spirit's work of changing lives, all programs are worthless. For that reason, we are constantly called back to worship and prayer.

An Openness to Substantive Theology

Pastoral ministry in Manhattan might fit a paraphrase of St. Sinatra, "If you can save 'em there, you can save 'em anywhere!" Working as a Christian educator in Manhattan took all my available energy, creativity, and collaboration. That realization ought to be a central lesson for all Christian educators.

In the heart of the Big City, I realized that basic doctrines still have appeal. One day in 1999 I got a call from *New York* magazine. Out of the 95 classes the church's Center for Christian Studies presented that program year, which one do you suspect the writer chose? It was an inquiry into the Apostles' Creed, "Theology Through the Creed: Bringing Belief to Life." (Incidentally, one of the worst-attended classes I ever put together was on the church and homosexuality. Since it has been a hot potato in our denomination for decades, I prepared myself for crowds and controversy. Judged solely by the response, it was a flop.) Our creeds are not boring! Remember that many died to confess the theology we often hold casually. I believe that same power can communicate today.

In Manhattan, I learned we do well to engage the media in "getting the word out." *New York* magazine later named our center "one of the great bargains in continuing adult education"—an invaluable endorsement for sure. I carried this lesson to Chico, where breaking through the static is considerably easier. As I prepared to teach a class called "Creation and Science: Perfect Together?" I decided to call Chico's *Enterprise Record*. The paper ran a favorable full-page story. The first night, I found myself suddenly swamped not with the 30 participants I had anticipated, but some-

thing like 175. They came excitedly to hear how Big Bang cosmology relates to the doctrine of “creation from nothing”! The whole experience simply confirms that people are fascinated by faith that engages substantive issues.

It helps to break programs into comprehensible units. At Fifth Avenue Presbyterian I discovered that we needed to make our vast education offerings understandable. So we broke them into various disciplines (following, and extending, the classical four in theological education): the Bible, theology, church history, practical theology/Christian living, and the arts/literature/music/drama. We also created four levels (100, 200, etc.) to offer a progression that the students could work through.

Building an Adult Discipleship Program

Bryant Kirkland, the former pastor of Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, had the habit of walking the streets of Manhattan and pondering the people who passed by. As the busy tourists and shoppers of Fifth Avenue hurried past, he watched and reflected. What were they thinking? What worried them at night? How would the gospel reach their lives? I find myself now doing the same thing on Chico’s West First Street as I watch the undergrads sauntering by our sanctuary and entering the campus at Cal State Chico. Why is that guy wearing blue hair? What books are they carrying? Why all the tattoos? Does our church offer any hope of spiritual fulfillment?

This practice has led me to an obvious and basic conclusion about our congregation: it is populated by teachers, administrators, and professors who do not need to be convinced of the need for education. Seventy percent hold college or graduate degrees. We are also quite literally next door to a 15,000-student public university. I have realized that we have not only an embedded commitment to education, but also a wealth of potential teachers.

Finally, Bidwell Presbyterian has also compiled a recent history of small-group ministry, which is extremely important. I see this component of adult discipleship as critical to creating authentic community. Small

groups certainly “help the church grow smaller as it grows larger.” But one of the weaknesses of small-group ministry alone is pooled ignorance. So I’ve learned to build on the strength of small groups with adult classes. They are indeed the two legs of our adult discipleship ministry.

Digging More Deeply: A Goal for Pastors

In closing, I add one component: we as educators too must desire deeper waters. Consider call for pastoral depth by the esteemed New Testament scholar N. T. Wright in *The Challenge of Jesus*:

If church leaders themselves spent more time studying and teaching Jesus and the Gospels, a good many of the other things we worry about in day-to-day church life would be seen in their proper light. It has far too often been assumed that church leaders stand above the nitty-gritty of biblical and theology study; they have done all that, we implicitly suppose, before they come to office, and now they simply have to work out the “implications.” They then find themselves spending countless hours at their desk running the

church as a business, raising money or working at dozens of other tasks, rather than poring over their foundation documents and enquiring ever more closely about the Jesus whom they are supposed to be following and teaching others to follow. (p. 31)

Statistics bear out Wright’s assertion. As I prepared this article, I considered the results of a survey of pastors’ reading lists that appeared in the August 23, 2003 issue of *The Christian Century*. Having carefully described the results—for example, the top 10 books that liberal Protestants, Catholics, and evangelicals read—Jackson Carroll offered this analysis: Most of the books church leaders study are highly pragmatic. His conclusion? “Although one hesitates to pass judgment on pastors with their busy lives and constant interruptions, the overall impression is that clergy do not read very deeply” (p. 33). If you, as a pastor or Christian educator, want to take your congregation further into the riches of our tradition, there’s no replacement for personal experience. I know one thing: I’m going to make it a mission to help my colleagues in education read more deeply—or I might start selling beer. ♦

EIGHT How-To’s

1. **Pray!** And cultivate others who will pray for your education program.
2. Read at least one thick book a year in theology or biblical studies.
3. Assemble a working team of laypeople and church staff in creating your educational offerings—the sum is greater than the parts!
4. Recruit local teachers, professors, business leaders, and various other professionals to teach classes in their respective disciplines.
5. Structure the classes so that they’re understandable: Create from three to five disciplines (currently we use Bible, theology, church history) and from two to three levels of study.
6. Think strategically: What does *our* church have to offer in *this* city that’s unique?
7. Make use of the media: If you have money to buy ads in magazines or newspapers, do it. Otherwise, try cultivating interest through news stories or radio public-service announcements or e-mail announcements.
8. Integrate small groups and adult classes into a unified whole of adult discipleship.



Practicing Theology in the Congregation

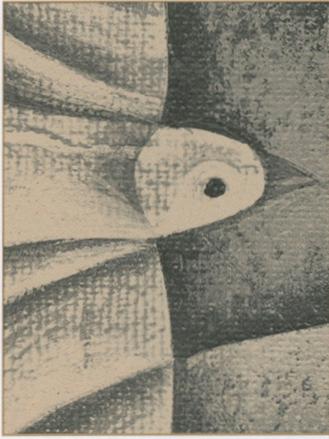
It was an exciting time in the life of Center Church, a small congregation in a vital downtown area in the Northeast. Because of a shared sense that new opportunities for ministry were emerging, a “Millennial Committee” had been charged with developing a structure for the 21st century that would enable the congregation to respond faithfully to its call to be a Christian community in its distinctive context. Committee members took their assignment seriously and worked for months gathering information and suggestions from the neighbors and other members of the congregation. The result was a long and ambitious list of visionary projects. “Looking at it,” one member recalls, “one could not help feeling that a church capable of doing all these things must be thriving, full of energy, and enlivened by the Spirit.”¹

Author Dorothy C. Bass
reflects on how church
members’ theology
shapes the mission of
the congregation

As the time to implement these ministries approached, however, energy waned. People came to meetings with long, weary faces, if they came at all. Finally, the convener turned to one of the senior members and asked what she thought about the plans. “I’m sorry,” the member responded. “I don’t mean to be negative, but when I look at this list, I feel . . . so tired.”

Her admission released a flood of similar confessions, as others chimed in with their own sense of being overwhelmed and exhausted, not only by their church commitments but also by the daily stress of life at home and at work. One by one, they acknowledged that they could not really muster enthusiasm for the congregation’s future plans. And they confessed that this made them feel guilty. At this point, one of the newer members of the congregation asked the question that turned a potential gripe session into an opportunity for theological reflection. “Is this what it means to be church?” he asked. “Believing you should do all these things and then feeling worn out and guilty because you can’t? Is this the Good News we celebrate?”

Fortunately, the committee did not just forge ahead with its institutional agenda. Instead the members decided to put their ambitious list of projects on hold to spend time getting their bearings straight with respect to the “Good News” that had drawn them together in the first place. They resolved to take time to think deliberately and explicitly about their own lives and their congregation’s life in relation to God.



Even when they are not using words, much of what congregants do—bringing an offering, visiting a homebound friend—embraces specific notions of who God is and who we are in relation to God.

Examining Our Lives Theologically

Beliefs about God permeate the life of every congregation. In worship we hear stories of God's dealings with our forebears, sing songs of praise to God, and experience the blessing of God. Nearly all congregations teach children and other newcomers the central tenets of their faith, and many repeat a historic creed in unison at every weekly service. Members make congregational decisions and relate to one another with the name of God on their lips and ideas about what God intends on their minds. And even when they are not using words, much of what congregants do—bringing an offering, visiting a homebound friend—embraces specific notions of who God is and who we are in relation to God. Moreover, most congregations would agree that their beliefs are crucial if they are to keep their bearings.

Yet sometimes these beliefs—articulated in various denominations in specific doctrines, creeds, or biblical interpretations—recede into the background like familiar wallpaper, taken for granted but unexamined. Reflecting on them at greater depth would take time—and we Americans usually prefer to use our time getting things done, especially when our activities are intended as acts of service to others. Moreover, we sense that exploring our lives theologically would be no easy matter. The creeds and doctrines that summarize central tenets in the Christian theological tradition set forth complicated concepts in words that are not part of the everyday vocabulary. Many theological books seem difficult and abstract. And in

our pluralistic context, some congregants surely suspect that getting too deep into these concepts might well expose theological differences within and beyond the congregation that they would rather avoid.

Why is it important to think theologically within and about the congregation? We know it's time consuming. It might even be dangerous. Why not just go out and do good?

Theology—Critical and Constructive

First Church of the Brethren, a congregation on Chicago's West Side, learned the importance of theological reflection in the midst of going out and doing good. Gilbert Bond, then a member of the congregation and now a theology professor, tells the story in an essay he wrote for *Practicing Theology*.² Bond's account provides an excellent example of how theological reflection can become an arena for self-criticism when congregational mission goes awry—and also a source of constructive renewal for mission.

Bond's story begins with the good intentions of this congregation, which had shrunk to a fraction of its former size and glory after the exodus to the suburbs of most white members. Hoping to serve its neighborhood, the congregation enrolled with the government as a food-distribution point for welfare recipients. But "something kept subverting our best intentions," Bond recalls. Shielded from close contact with the recipients by heavy tables, church members carefully checked

ID cards to make sure that their supplicants really were poor before handing over chunks of surplus processed cheese that they would have been reluctant to eat themselves. Eventually some began to notice "a seething underbelly of resentment" on the part of those they intended to help—a resentment that finally erupted in a violent collision between an angry young man from the neighborhood and a

pious older woman from the congregation. Fortunately, no one was injured physically. But this congregation's sense of itself was seriously wounded, as members sadly concluded that they had become partners in society's dehumanization of those who are most in need.

"After tears angry and sorrowful, prayers halting and hurting, we closed the food distribution ministry down," Bond writes. "With painful discernment and honest conversation and confrontation, the members of the ministry realized that in spite of our best efforts, our ministry was inherently violent." This outcome went against one of the most distinctive and dearly held convictions of their Anabaptist heritage: "dedication to nonviolence as the fruit of loving obedience to Jesus Christ." The confrontation challenged them to take a critical look at their relationship as a covenant community to "the world" around them, and thus to revisit and rethink their self-understanding as a community gathered by grace and sent into the world as a suffering servant.

"That violent Saturday called us to ourselves," Bond writes. His story, which begins with tables where the members of the congregation sat while checking ID cards, ends with the relocation of these tables to the fellowship hall, where they were set with food and encircled with chairs so that members of the congregation and people from the neighborhood could eat together. In between came theological reflection, a process of deliberate and explicit inquiry into the congregation's understanding of its relation to God and, in the light of God, to others.

The Congregation's Knowledge of God

Thinking about God and about our world in relation to God is an ever-present dimension of the life of faith. To be sure, such thinking is not always explicit and articulate. Sometimes it is far more apparent in a person's ability to take the next faithful step than in her ability to explain coherently why she took it. Every congregation I have known has included someone who seemed to "know" God like this, as if an understanding of God's grace were knit into her bones. Asking such members about their theology, we are likely to receive phrases from childhood hymns or brief testimonies to the goodness of God. But who can know the quality of reflection undergirding them, after years of silent pondering, inner dialogues with a preacher, and early-morning devotions?

The practices in which entire congregations engage together—prayer and governance and hospitality and stewardship and more—can be theologically rich in a similarly inarticulate way. These practices bear genuine knowledge of God and our relation to God; theology is knit into their patterns and proclaimed in their every move. Practicing hospitality, we live out answers to questions about who we are in relation to God and one another. Practicing Sabbath, we embody specific beliefs about who created the world and set the captives free. Participating in such practices, we respond to and seek to reflect God's grace. Yet we also fall short, or come upon new situations that make it difficult to see what the next moves are, or allow the practice to become corrupt.

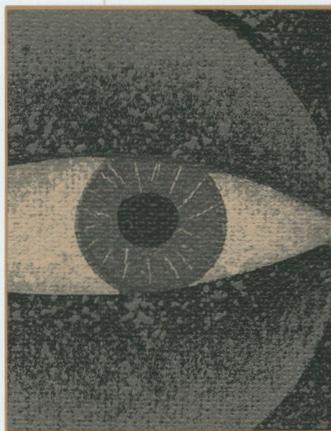
"Theological reflection arises within the ordinary workings of Christian lives to meet pressing practical needs," the theologian Kathryn Tanner notes.³ Much of this reflection takes place in an unorganized fashion, as ordinary people figure out how to take the next steps in complex, historically situated practices that are inherently ambiguous, inconsis-

tent, and open ended. Yet ultimately, as in Gilbert Bond's Chicago congregation, "hard cases make a church attend to what it means by what it is doing." Tanner observes, "Being witnesses and disciples means establishing through effort-filled deliberative processes what Christianity stands for in our own lives for our own time and circumstances."

Remembering Who We Are and Where We Live

Let's return to the moment when theology erupted during the meeting of the Millennial Committee. The new member's question—"Is this the Good

highlights two themes that profoundly shifted the way the committee came to understand its call to restructure the congregation's life and the exhaustion everyone felt in the wake of this call—the doctrines of justification and sanctification. Jones notes in an essay that this United Church of Christ congregation had been powerfully influenced by the Reformed tradition's understanding of the twofold character of grace, an understanding that was new to some members of the committee and familiar to others. Surfacing these basic convictions at this crucial juncture in their work was liberating and empowering. If they were justified by God's grace, they remembered, they were set free by pure gift rather



The practices in which entire congregations engage together—prayer and governance and hospitality and stewardship and more—can be theologically rich in a similarly inarticulate way.

News we celebrate?"—called this group to be explicit about the substance of their faith and to remember the rock on which their lives were founded. Led by the pastor and two lay members, they studied Scripture, traditional Christian texts, and contemporary theology. And again and again, they found themselves pondering a word they had often used but had seldom stopped to consider: *grace*. What did it mean for them to say that salvation comes "by grace through faith"? What might the "grace-filled benefits of faith" be for them as people who confess the saving power of Christ? And how might these benefits relate to "the practical patterns of living" that structured their daily lives together?

Serene Jones, a professor at Yale Divinity School who happened to be a member of the Millennial Committee (but not a leader of the study process),

than by anything they might do or not do (including the visionary projects on their list). Yet God's grace also "sanctifies" those whom it embraces, forming in them what Jones calls "a pattern of living that reflects the structure of that freeing love." The freedom granted by God's grace has a shape to it. Eventually "the committee as a whole discovered in its renewed engagement with justification and sanctification that these concepts define—at least at an ideal level—our most basic disposition toward all we do."⁴

"When we began to truly grasp the depth of God's love for the world and the freedom that is given to us in that love, we not only felt the burden of our list lifted from our shoulders; we simultaneously came to see our list as a joyous response to the love that so freed us," Jones writes. "We came to see our plans for the future of the church as plans that



When pastors take up their vocation as “resident theologians” within the congregation, they do theology in the same spirit with which they lead members in theological reflection for the sake of the integrity and faithfulness of their way of life.

bore witness to the gracious embrace with which God holds us. As such, our plans shifted from being a list of how we might save the world to a list of the ways we were witnessing to and celebrating the reality that God saves the world. Our relativized practices were subsequently reinvigorated by the very grace that rendered them unnecessary.” Another member of the committee put it this way: “When we begin to see that what we do as a church doesn’t matter ultimately, we are freed to see how very much our practices do matter.”⁵

Jones notes that doctrines—such as justification and sanctification—serve as the “territory within which Christians stand to get their conceptual bearings on the world and the reality of God therein.”⁶ Remembering these doctrines changed the “lived imaginative landscape” upon which this committee would continue its work. Remembering God’s grace, the participants came to see themselves differently. And taking time for theological reflection, they remembered that their world, their city, and their congregation belong to God.

Theology for a Way of Life

In the final chapter of *Practicing Theology*, the theologian Miroslav Volf calls on academic theologians to do theology “to serve a way of life.”⁷ When pastors take up their vocation as “resident theologians” within the congregation, they do theology in the same spirit with

which they lead members in theological reflection for the sake of the integrity and faithfulness of their way of life. Theology, however, is not limited to these high-profile leaders. Rather, it is a necessary dimension of every Christian’s life of faith—a dimension that flourishes in community, within the context of honesty about our failings and shared hope for the world, nourished by the reading of Scripture and the wisdom of those who have formed this community graced by freedom over the centuries. We practice theology best, that is, in congregations that deliberately make room for theological reflection. ♦

NOTES

1. The story of the Millennial Committee is told in the chapter by Serene Jones, “Graced Practices: Excellence and Freedom in the Christian Life,” in *Practicing Theology*, 51–77.
2. Gilbert I. Bond, “Liturgy, Ministry, and the Stranger: The Practice of Encountering the Other in Two Christian Communities,” in *Practicing Theology*, 137–156.
3. Kathryn Tanner, “Theological Reflection and Christian Practices,” in *Practicing Theology*, 228–242.
4. Jones, “Graced Practices,” in *Practicing Theology*, 54.
5. Jones and an unnamed member of the committee, 66.
6. Jones also explores doctrines as “dramatic scripts” which Christians perform and by which they are performed, 74–75.
7. Miroslav Volf, “Theology for a Way of Life,” in *Practicing Theology*, 245–263.

This article draws on insights from the book Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life, Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass, eds. (Eerdmans, 2002). The book’s development was sponsored by the Valparaiso Project on the Education and Formation of People in Faith. For more material on congregations and theological reflection on Christian practices, see the project Web site, www.practicingourfaith.org.



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Homegrown Theology

Understanding God in Everyday Life

TIM SHAPIRO

Several parishioners wait for Frank by the back door of the sanctuary. Frank steps out of his car and opens the trunk. Tucking his Bible between his side and upper arm, he reaches in with both hands and lifts out a large box. Frank sets the box down just inside the door, and people pull out ripe tomatoes, green peppers, zucchini, and heads of cabbage larger than soccer balls.

Frank offers homegrown vegetables to the faith community. He is not a professional gardener but rather a retired high-school counselor who loves to grow vegetables. Frank knows precisely what brand of seeds he wants to plant each year. He takes care of the soil to ensure that it doesn't wear out. His produce could win ribbons at the county fair.

Sharing is a large part of Frank's gardening experience. When people leave worship on the Lord's Day, they take away not only a sense of God's Word but also homegrown food for their table.

Homegrown theology involves laity and clergy participating in thoughtful consideration of how God and the things of God are understood in light of everyday life.

Homegrown Theological Reflection

Frank is also a homegrown theologian. He has not read Karl Barth's *Dogmatics*, but he knows how to think theologically. He is a lay theologian in a congregation that sustains homegrown theology. What is "homegrown theological reflection"? What foundations support such a spiritual discipline? Are there models for congregations interested in enhancing reflection on faith? How does such reflection add value to congregational life?

Homegrown theology involves laity and clergy participating in thoughtful consideration of how God and the things of God are understood in light of everyday life. Leading such a discipline is not the same as equipping congregants to function as professional theologians, though the work of scholarly theologians can be extremely helpful to congregations. Homegrown theology is reflection about God rooted in a particular community.

During a Bible study on Mark's little apocalypse, the group discusses the "end of the world." Frank comments, "The question is whether we see the end as a good thing or a bad thing." Asked about his life's work, Frank says, "Well, 'high school counselor' is never mentioned in the Bible, but 'vocation' is alluded to on every other page." When the congregation is stuck on whether to increase mission giving, Frank gives the governing board an exercise. He says, "Maybe we should each write down what we are most afraid of if this goes through. We'll pass the sheets around and read them as if we were reading to God."

These are moments of theological

reflection. When others in the faith community participate in similar conversations, a culture of theological reflection grows in the congregation. Homegrown theological reflection is not the same as studying the Apostle's Creed or learning the essentials of the Reformed faith. Homegrown theology is brought forth from the lives and questions of those who make up the faith community. It is rooted in issues unique to the local context. Theological texts are one means, but they are not the end of homegrown reflection.

Congregations and Theology

One foundation upon which homegrown theology is supported in the congregation is the belief that people can know as much about God and the practices of faith as they know about whatever else most stirs their enthusiasm. I am familiar with one congregation whose members include scientists, factory workers, high-school students, musicians, computer programmers, and educators. All are sophisticated at thinking through everyday issues in relation to God. People enthusiastic about *something*—a hobby, a relationship, a place—are capable of thinking about life in terms of faith.

One of the best theologians in this congregation is Jane, a middle-aged woman who works on an assembly line. She lives in a humble apartment and drives an aging Saturn. When she talks about life, this homegrown theologian connects it to the living tradition of her faith. Concerning friendship, she says, "My best friends are means of grace sent to me by God. They are like daily sacraments."

Another foundation that sustains homegrown theology is its relative lack of concern with the categories or systems of academic theology, along with its vital interest in the stuff of everyday life. Homegrown theology has a practice of juxtaposing two subjects—faith and life. This pairing is like mixing seed with soil and watching what grows. One congregation designed an adult study that planted faith and vocation together. Members of the group spoke about ways in which their faith shaped their work and ways in which they *wished* their faith shaped their work.

A Method for Theological Reflection

This process of juxtaposing two subjects to reflect on theologically is not done haphazardly. Methods can shape such conversations. The method can become as much a part of the congregation's life as setting up for fellowship hour.

When Frank started gardening 25 years ago, he took out pencil and paper and made a checklist. He sketched a diagram. The tomatoes would be planted in the northwest corner. The beans would start from the southeast edge. From year to year he made minor adjustments to his checklist and diagram. He rotated the designated bed for the tomatoes. He added different combinations of nutrients. After four years Frank no longer made a checklist or a diagram. The garden plan was in his head.

Pastors are responsible for instilling a method for theological reflection in the heads of parishioners. A congregation as a whole will be no more engaged in thinking theologically than its pastor. The pastoral position makes the pastor the sower of the seeds of theological capacity for the congregation. As a pastor encourages the congregation to think theologically, the expertise and insight of laypeople will emerge.

Several methods of theological reflection can be used.¹ In the parish, I adapted theologian and religious educator Thomas Groome's "shared

praxis" method, a model described thoroughly in *Christian Religious Education*.² Shared praxis is a thoughtful group dialogue in which participants reflect on their faith experience, taking into account the experience of their faith community's living tradition. Groome's method was easy to learn and to keep in one's head, as Frank's gardening was in his head. I found that, over time, other study groups and committees began to employ Groome's method without even knowing what method they were using.

The Five Steps

Our adapted model of Groome's work encourages people to juxtapose issues of everyday life to thinking about God. Groome's outline of theological reflection contains five steps. In the adapted model, the first step is to ask, "What's going on?" A team assessing the need for a building project first describes how the building is now used. The team notes how the facility supports the congregation's mission. Hints of problems or frustrations may receive passing mention, but no more than that. The conversation includes comments such as, "We have a beautiful sanctuary, and visitors comment on the stained-glass windows." Or: "The fellowship hall is where you find the soul of this congregation, even though it is on the second floor."

The second step is to ask, "What's positive or problematic about what's going on?" This question asks people to dig deeper. What lies behind the answers they just offered? Someone might respond, "If the heart of our congregation is found at fellowship hour, what does it mean that Annie Smith stays down in the sanctuary by herself because she can't climb the stairs?" When two concerns are laid side by side, the value of fellowship and the disability of a beloved person, the tensions voiced create a meaningful conversation.

The third step invites congregations to draw on the best of their own faith tradition. This step is what differenti-

ates theological reflection from other kinds of conversation. We can use several ways to ask questions that encourage reflection.

- ◆ Does our situation bring to mind particular stories from Scripture?
- ◆ How does our situation fit with what you've learned from people of faith in your life?
- ◆ Have you read any books or other literature or seen any movies about faith that address this situation?

People are often quiet after these questions. At first it seems that the silence means they do not know what to say, or they do not have the knowledge to respond. Rather, I believe that people are quiet because they are sorting through an abundance of possibilities. To encourage this conversation, it is important to allow sufficient time for silence.

The building team sits quietly for an uncomfortable span of time. Then Frank speaks: "I can think of two stories from Scripture that apply to our situation. I'm thinking of the way the people carried the paralyzed man to see Jesus, cutting a hole in the roof. I'm also thinking of the gospel stories of Jesus rebuking the disciples for keeping the children away. I've seen young parents, their arms full, almost tripping on the stairs carrying supplies to the fellowship hall."

Jane, the woman of modest means,

asks, "Isn't there a sense that a congregation should be available to all people? I mean something like 'hospitality.' It just seems weird that my factory is more accessible than my church."

The preceding remarks may not fit into a particular theological system. These observations do not appear in Calvin's *Institutes*. However, Frank's and Jane's comments are theologically laden. They grow out of homegrown experiences of faith in a community that has encouraged members to think about everyday issues, even mundane issues, in light of their relationship with God.

The fourth step in this process of theological reflection is to ask, "What tensions or similarities exist between our present situation and our overall faith story?"

Jane speaks up quickly. "Well, as I said, factories follow Scripture better than congregations. Only the local AME [African Methodist Episcopal] church is fully accessible."

Frank asks, "Don't you think it is harder to raise money for an elevator than for a shiny new sanctuary? Our goal would be to show the congregation how an elevator can make us more effective in carrying out the mission God has given us."

In this step the group places its understandings of an issue over against what they understand to be a faithful expression of that issue. What affirmations can be stated?

FIVE QUESTIONS FOR THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

These five questions for congregational groups to use in practicing homegrown theology are adapted from *Christian Religious Education* by Thomas Groome.

1. What's going on?
2. What's positive or problematic about what's going on?
3. Does the situation (issue) bring to mind particular stories from Scripture or coincide with what you've learned from other faith experiences in your life?
4. What tensions or similarities exist between our present situation and our overall faith story?
5. What are we going to do?

In what ways is current practice in conflict with the faith story and the community's best faith experiences?

The fifth step is to ask, "What are we going to do?" Sometimes the decision is to pray. Sometimes it is to do nothing. Perhaps more study is warranted. In the case of the building conversation, Frank, Jane, and the building team decide to include a summary of their conversation in the parish newsletter and to ask members of the congregation to join the work of reflection by talking informally with the pastor and the chairperson of the building team. The team also decides to print, at the beginning of the newsletter article, the Scripture passage in which Jesus welcomes the children.

Applying the Method

The discussion above is a summary of a conversation that took place in a midsize mainline congregation near the start of a two-year project to make its church building more accessible. As the congregation moved through the process, congregants used several resources, including a local builder, an experienced architect, literature on accessibility versus aesthetics, and information on fundraising.

This five-step method of reflection (see box on page 29) can be applied to many situations. A governing board working on a strategic plan can use these areas of reflection. A pastor can make the questions the basis for spiritual direction in counseling a parishioner who is trying to make a family decision. An educator can employ the five movements of reflection to address topics studied in a class.

I have used this five-step form of homegrown theological reflection with sermon roundtable groups. Such a group gathers to brainstorm ideas about a sermon that will be preached by the pastor.³ A group of 8 to 12 people meet on a Sunday evening to discuss the sermon for the next week. This time, the sermon roundtable group focuses on a particular Christian practice (friendship, prayer, hospitality, etc.). During the conversation, that practice and particular

passages from Scripture are juxtaposed. The discussion follows the five questions noted above.

The sermon roundtable group, discussing the practice of friendship, wonders how strangers become friends. Group members examine whether they themselves are outgoing or reserved. They note that they are more apt to come across strangers in public rather than private places. Asked what might be problematic about meeting strangers, Helen observes that it is not possible to make a friend of everyone. Moreover, the risks of befriending strangers should not be discounted.

Bruce, sensing that the time is right to consider one's faith tradition, offers to read from Luke 24, the Emmaus road story. The group wonders why Jesus isn't recognized. He is a stranger. Then Cynthia Ann carries the conversation forward with a homegrown interpretation of the passage: "You never know where Jesus is walking. Jesus is always the stranger in our midst. God is as much stranger as friend. Think if we had a song, 'What a Stranger We Have in Jesus.'"

As often happens when a congregation begins to construct a homegrown theology, healthy tensions surface. Jane, whom we met earlier, says, "I don't mean to be provocative or to refute what I've heard, but a part of me resists this notion of God as stranger. I need God to be my friend. My life is tough enough without having to fight with God to get to know God better. Making God a stranger somehow reduces what my relationship with God is about."

The conversation continues, recognizing various viewpoints. The group members do not resolve their differences, but they come to terms with conflicting interpretations. They are able to hear varying opinions and not be bowled over by them. In response to "What should we do?" the group resolves not to force friendships on strangers, but to go through the week looking upon meetings between strangers as encounters with people who are known by God. In this case, homegrown theological reflection leads to a shift in point of view.

Value Added to Congregational Life

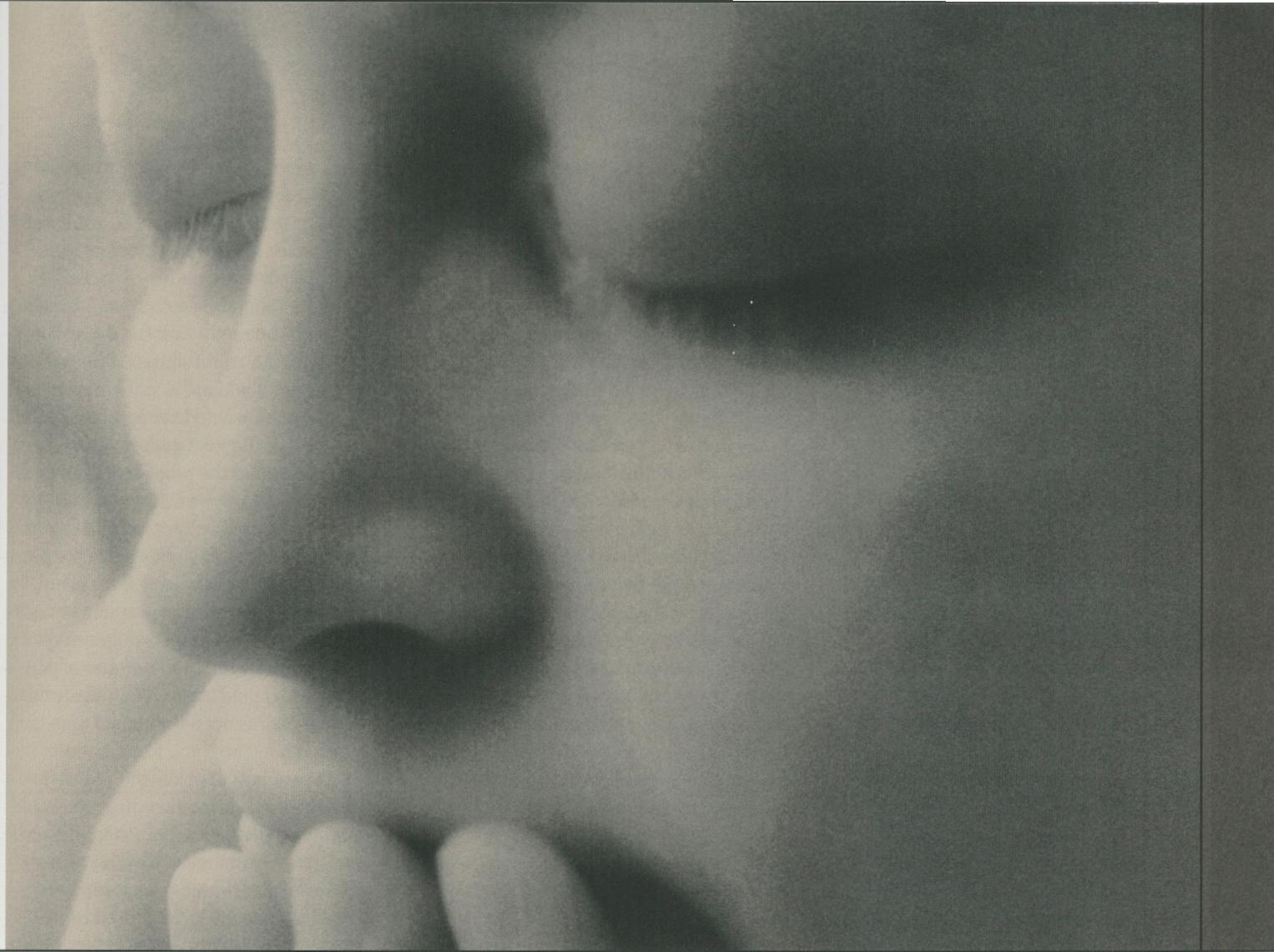
People have a profound interest in God. Much has been written about the current renewed interest in spirituality. Methods of theological reflection provide tools with which people can pursue their natural curiosity.

Theological reflection grounded in the lives of parishioners adds value to congregational life. The faith community is given freedom to talk about what matters most. Congregations get closer to the essence of what inspired them in the first place. Theological reflection creates congregations that are three-dimensional, well rounded in their personality. Life together contains vast possibilities intuitively felt by visitors.

Conversations that contain theological reflection take place during Bible studies and religious education focused on particular issues. Conversations about the budget and care of the facility are also theological, even if the participants do not immediately recognize them as such. Theological reflection allows people to draw from deep within themselves and from broadly beyond themselves when they think about God. When given permission to think and talk about God, people say and do beautiful things. These beautiful things attract, as a well-tended garden draws neighbors for conversation about local news that matters. ♦

NOTES

1. Some of the best books on theological reflection in congregations include James D. Whitehead and Evelyn Eaton Whitehead, *Method in Ministry: Theological Reflection and Christian Ministry* (Franklin, Wis.: Sheed & Ward, 1995); Patrick O'Connell Killen and John de Beer, *The Art of Theological Reflection* (New York: Crossroads, 1994); and Celia Allison Hahn, *Uncovering Your Church's Hidden Spirit* (Bethesda, Md.: Alban Institute, 2001).
2. Thomas Groome, *Christian Religious Education* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999).
3. John McClure, *The Roundtable Pulpit: Where Leadership and Preaching Meet* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995).



Benedictine Spirituality and Congregational Life

Living Out St. Benedict's Rule in the Parish

JENNIFER MCKENZIE

My acquaintance with St. Benedict began in seminary courses in which the contemplative monk was introduced in the context of Scripture. But Benedict seemed to keep popping up in my life. He showed up in pastoral theology courses, in contemplative reading, and, oddly enough, in clinical pastoral education (CPE). But reading about Benedict's Rule of life was a completely different experience from living that Rule. In CPE, my supervisor, the Rev. Ruth Walsh, helped me to apprehend more deeply the practical theology that forms the basis of St. Benedict's Rule. The experience in CPE of grounding our pastoral care work and learning in the Christian practices of prayer, study, fellowship, and rest whetted my appetite for more Benedictine spirituality. Furthermore, I was one of a handful of seminarians who actually enjoyed their CPE experience. Ruth Walsh's supervisory leadership, modeled on the Rule of St. Benedict, provided an ethical approach to an oft-maligned part of the seminary curriculum. Why should learning about

oneself in the context of providing pastoral care to the aging and dying be harsh and often painful? Rather than erecting defensive barriers, I found myself becoming more and more open to both the theoretical and practical learning, and to reflection with others on the experience. I told Ruth Walsh that I would like to learn more about the Rule of St. Benedict. She suggested that I participate in an immersion experience.

The Sound of Silence

Attending the Benedictine immersion served to deepen further my sense that this vein of spirituality was an opportunity waiting to happen. If a Benedictine model could be so effective in a CPE program, how might it work on a personal level? Could it be applied in a parish? Or in my own home? Those questions were in my mind as I made arrangements to attend the Benedictine Experience at Kanuga Conference Center, an Episcopal institution near Hendersonville, in the Blue Ridge mountains of western North Carolina.

Each day at Kanuga, we awoke to silence and maintained that silence throughout matins (a sung morning prayer service) and breakfast, and into our morning study. Our “abbot,” the Rev. O. C. Edwards, former dean and president of Seabury-Western Theological Seminary in Evanston, Illinois, broke the silence with a reading and teaching on the Rule of St. Benedict. We were encouraged to ask questions and to share our own experiences of living the Rule. But the spirit of quiet contemplation and listening that had been shaped by the silence remained throughout the day. After study we shared Eucharist in the chapel, followed by lunch (during which the abbot read selections of Annie Dillard’s *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*), work, rest, evening prayer, supper, and finally a community meeting. At this, the day’s final gathering, we read compline (a prayer service for the end of day), and then went to bed.

The beauty of a weeklong program like the one in which I participated is that one is living and breathing the Rule of St. Benedict “24/7.” One doesn’t cease prac-

ticating it—compartmentalize it—when it’s time to go home. Rather, the balance and flow of the day become palpable and clear. Instead of trying to manage time and overcome the limits of daylight and our own energy, we are taught by Benedictine spirituality to work within the framework of expectation that time is a gift, and that available daylight and human energy are limited. Benedictine spirituality respects the created order and finds a way to “fall in line” with that order. For the Benedictine, the day is ordered and balanced. Through living this way, even for a week, I learned that much of my anxiety and stress comes from living my daily life and practicing my faith in a disordered way. On reaching that conclusion, I resolved to be open to ways in which God might use my experience of Benedictine spirituality to lead and teach others about the hope that this ancient Christian practice offers the church today. Then the time for my summer internship arrived.

St. Benedict in the Parish

The Episcopal Diocese of Virginia requires its seminarians to participate in an eight-week full-time parish internship during the summer between the middler and senior years. Before I began my internship, I spent some time meeting with the Rev. Rob Merola, rector of St. Matthew’s Church in Sterling, Virginia, learning about the parish and its vision and needs. Father Merola had briefed me on the parish’s ability to welcome new people and on members’ openness to positive change. He also gave me free rein in choosing and designing my internship project. He simply encouraged me to work from my strengths and to find a way to involve some parishioners in whatever I did. The idea was to match the church’s needs (building and grounds upkeep, involvement of new members in the life of the church, a summer adult faith-formation program) with my own areas of strength and interest (teaching, discerning gifts, gardening, encouraging others). I began to discern how a Benedictine program might work in a parish setting.

I decided to go for leading a series of

mini-retreats. I produced informational flyers to send to parishioners in advance. The next step was to set dates, times, and study topics, and to get a list of potential work projects from parish leadership. I designed a children’s activity/study program to run concurrently with the day’s adult study portion. And I prayed. I prayed that God would guide me in my leadership of this program, would lead people to participate, and would take us deeper into community and the practices of our faith so that together we might put down deeper roots of love for God and one another. Even with all this prayerful preparation, I knew that I faced some challenges. I suspected that planning to hold the series of mini-retreats in midweek would severely limit the number of parishioners who could attend. I also realized that summer is not a traditional time to launch a new program. Furthermore, I wasn’t sure how appealing a “monastic-oriented” faith-formation program would seem to an evangelical parish in the hectic suburbs of Washington, D.C. My suspicions were confirmed. But at the same time, I was pleasantly surprised by outcomes I hadn’t expected.

An Emerging Vision

The retreat participants and I met on Tuesdays and Thursdays in July from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Our time was structured as a compact version of the Benedictine day. We began with worship, followed by a brief teaching of the Rule, then work, table fellowship (a brown-bag lunch), and study. Each time we met, we had a small but earnest group of five or six participants. Their ages ranged from 7 to 70. We attempted to work in silence but often found silence difficult to maintain when children or a newcomer would join our group. I introduced the Benedictine theology of work, prayer, humility, conversion of life, stability, and obedience to the group, as well as the practice of *lectio divina*. (*Lectio divina* is a four-stage process of reading, meditating, praying, and contemplating on a single passage of Holy Scripture.) Each time we met we would reflect on what we had learned so far and

consider ways that our learning might carry over into our parish and home life. After the first couple of retreats we had parish volunteers join us for portions of our day. The couple who came in to fold the bulletins, the recent widow who volunteered in the church office, and the mothers of young children preparing for the vacation Bible school—all joined us for the worship and teaching. As we went off to do our gardening, they would begin their own work. Sometimes they would join us for lunch and fellowship. As the volunteers became involved, a vision emerged of how this practice of spirituality might function in a parish setting. I saw how basic the Benedictine spirituality could be to parish life, providing a theological structure for the congregation's many practices and programs.

Gains for Participants

The other payoff that surprised me was the participants' experience of deep theological learning. Anne confessed that she had only recently returned to the church after decades away from it. For her, she said, the Benedictine practices had the components of real life—"the flow of the day and most especially the work and the fellowship parts." Anne learned that God could be present to her in her daily life as well as in corporate worship.

Judy, a practicing evangelical Christian for most of her life, was glad to have found a new way of thinking about time and the flow and balance of the day. Her desire for quiet, contemplative time was fulfilled, and she was challenged in the way she thought about her relationships with other people.

"This Benedictine spirituality was one of the most important and different approaches to the spiritual life that I have experienced," Judy said. "There was a real sense of God's peace, and I felt more a part of the greater whole in terms of my daily direction with the Lord." Judy also found some of her closely held theological positions transformed. She explained that learning about the balance of the Benedictine vows of stability, conversion of life, and obedience helped her to see change in a more positive light. "At the same time

it felt both comfortable and inspiring," Judy observed.

Althea, a deeply committed Christian who has a great love for Holy Scripture and prayer, acknowledged moving to a whole new level of faith. She had learned that her deeply held convictions about how she used Scripture in her life needed to be held lightly. Althea said that through our Benedictine "experiment," God had worked on her to broaden her understandings about God and about other people. "Benedict took me closer to the living side of the Word. For me what we did was real life. It had all the basic components of the day—it was all of a piece."

Since then, Althea has told me that Benedictine spirituality has taken an important place in her life. It is providing a new way for her to be with her family and to wonder at God at work in the world. She has been teaching her husband, children, and grandchildren what she has learned—introducing, she declared, a new level of peace into their lives. Althea added, "Benedictine spirituality is a form of discipline that really has its life in both doing and being. It's as simple or as complex as you make it." In other words, it can work for anyone at any point on the faith journey.

Learning How to Be a Christian

From our relatively brief experiment I have become convinced that Benedictine spirituality can open up wonderful ways of "doing theology" in a parish setting. Robert K. Martin of the Saint Paul School of Theology in Kansas City, Missouri, writing about Christian formation, said, "As people participate in the forms of Christian life, they are engaged pedagogically; that is, they learn how to be a Christian by participating communally in Christian practices."¹ The Rule of St. Benedict offers both a format and a theology for praxis (action and reflection) in the Christian life that is eminently "doable" in a parish setting.

However, Martin says also that it is the "primary responsibility of church leadership [to] cultivate"² the various dimensions

of ecclesial life. And therein lies the Benedictine rub. The abbot plays a key role in the life of Benedictine spirituality. While one may feel a sense of discomfort at hearing that the leadership is "superior," the fact of the matter is that the leadership must be in place. The abbot is a distinct and necessary figure. And with that role vacant, the people at St. Matthew's who participated in the mini-retreats are struggling with how to continue.

For me, this experience resulted in many promises, challenges, and possibilities. The promises come in the integrity of the practices with daily life and learning for both the participants and the leader. The challenges are embodied in the way the Benedictine Rule goes against the flow of our modern society and lifestyle. Following the Rule requires a high level of continuing commitment on the part of both leader and participants. But the possibilities are the most compelling—strong and deeply held theological connections forged between the participants; transformation in the way they relate to God and each other, both communally and personally; and how simply the Rule of St. Benedict can become the Rule of parish life. Nothing needs to be added. Simply put, Benedictine spirituality, because it is grounded in worship and reflects the flow of daily life, can become the theological framework and connecting force for all the otherwise disjointed activities of congregational life. ♦

NOTES

1. Robert K. Martin, "Education and the Liturgical Life of the Church," *Religious Education*, Vol. 98, No.1 (Winter 2003): 46.
2. *Ibid.*, 47.

For Further Contemplation

For resources and steps for implementing a Benedictine program in your parish, go to the "Magazine" section of www.alban.org and click on "Current Issue."



Staying Put

A Look at the First 10 Years of Ministry

ISRAEL GALINDO

During my years in parish ministry I offered spiritual direction for clergy in the area. In the span of two years, four pastors came to me with what seemed to be the same symptoms. Each felt a sense of restlessness, malaise, and vague anxiety about the future of his or her current congregational ministry. Puzzled that their struggles seemed so similar, I looked for a common factor in these pastors' lives and their widely differing church contexts.

The only common element all four shared was the length of time they had served their current parishes. Each was in either the seventh or eighth year with one congregation. Moreover, none of these pastors had previously stayed with one parish for more than five years. Could this common thread of short pastoral tenure be the source of their restlessness?

After informal surveys, as well as conversations with pastors and denominational staff, I'm convinced that important dynamics are at work in a pastor's tenure at one church. In my view, a particular pattern marks the pastor's first 10 years in one parish. The pattern is shaped by several elements. First, the dynamics of the corporate relationship inform how a pastor is called or appointed to a church, begins his or her ministry there, and moves into the role of pastoral leadership. Second, the pastor's unique relationship with a congregation manifests itself in a predictable ministerial life cycle. The existence of such a cycle suggests that a pastor's experience in the parish can be anticipated and managed.

First Year: "Which Door Does This Key Open?"

For most clergy, the first year at a new church is filled with excitement and challenge. You work to get to know the members (who's who, who does what and, if it's a small congregation, maybe even who's related to whom). This "getting to know you" phase is accomplished by providing basic pastoral care, visiting with members, and meeting with as many church groups as possible. You blunder through discovering the "turf" that people think belongs to them, and you manage to put out a few fires—mostly issues neglected during the interim between "settled" pastors.

During the honeymoon, you work at understanding the church's history, listening for stories that define the congregation's personality and identity. The early months offer the perfect opportunity to "get dumb" and ask questions that you won't be able to get away with later. Taking an "observer" stance in the first year of ministry at a new call or appointment allows you to discover the church's rhythms, habits, and practices.

In the first year, ministry management consists of giving attention to basic pastoral and leadership functions—fixing failed administrative practices, for example. These often are simple inconveniences for which no one has taken responsibility. During the first weeks at my first executive position, I was puzzled that one of the secretaries would occasionally peek into my office and say, "Dr. Galindo, a box was just delivered. Where do you want it?"

My immediate thought was, "It's just a box. Put it anywhere!"

But I realized that what the secretary really wanted was an administrative decision. The question had less to do with where to put the box than it did with the system's relief that someone was on board whose job it was to make decisions.

During your first year you may tinker with the worship service—but don't tamper with it! Most churches will allow the "new" minister some leeway in tweaking the worship service. After all, they know you went to seminary, and they assume you know a little about worship and liturgy. But most ministers seem too eager to make major overhauls of worship—usually, regrettably, informed more by personal preference than by theology. Making too many changes in the worship service threatens a primary source of corporate identity, and the wise pastor will patiently take time to observe which worship practices are important to the congregation's identity before tampering with the liturgy.

During your first year in a parish, three other ministry management details are critical. First, negotiate a fair salary package with the church, and open a retirement account. Second, get into the habit of reading all those books you didn't finish in seminary. It's amazing how many clergy stop reading after seminary—and it shows in their sermons! Third, find a support group; it may make the difference between thriving in ministry and suffering early burnout.

Second Year: Extend the Honeymoon

In your second year, the honeymoon is about over, so enjoy it and try to extend the goodwill. With one year's routines under your wing, you know what's coming next as the year rolls on. Now you can anticipate what's around the corner in the life of the church; you can plan ahead and make wise changes.

Now you can anticipate problems and make changes to address them. Realize, however, that most of these changes will be administrative—fixing procedures already in place that are broken, streamlining current practices for efficiency and effectiveness, shoring up existing structures, and promoting better communication and integration in church ministries and organization. Basically you'll be addressing people's points of anxiety and solving difficulties and inconveniences. But if you try to make essential changes, you'll likely run into quick resistance and sabotage.

The truth is that organizations and people don't like to be changed—regardless of what they may say or ask for. Some parishioners are beginning to get to know you, and most members will take your lead with caution. Remember, they've seen pastors and staff come and go. At this stage, they don't expect anything different from you. One pastor told of this experience:

I instituted a major program during my first two years at the church, and I'll never forget what one good deacon said to me: "I hope this is the right thing for us to do because, remember, I was here long before you got here, and I'll be here long after you're gone." Meaning: "Don't leave us with something that's going to mess us up, or that we'll have to live with." Guess what? He was right! I'm gone and he's still there.

During your second year at the church, people aren't ready to make changes that challenge the ways they relate, think, or function. Remember, some of them have learned that all they need to do is wait you out! They've seen staff come and go, and they're not yet willing to invest emotionally in you or your ideas—no matter how logical, rational, or appropriate they may be. The wise pastor who is restless for "change" will find ways to make high-profile, low-risk changes.

Ministry management in your second year should involve writing a case study of your church. By now you know enough about the church and its people to begin to understand the congregation. Categorize the church in terms of its congregational size, stance, and style. Size is an important indicator—but not because bigger is better, or because a larger church is "more real" than a small one.¹ Size, while having no theological significance for the congregation's effectiveness, is a determinative factor in faith formation. The nature of group formation and the way people relate to one another help "shape" the faith of those who are part of the group. The congregation's size gives "shape" to its members. Understanding that dynamic will help you know what pastoral leadership to provide.

Determine your church's stance—how it views its mission and ministry. Often a congregation's stance is determined by its immediate context, as with the urban ministry church, the university church, the country club church, or the community church.

Sometimes a church's stance is determined by theology, as with the mission church, the pillar church, the shepherd church, or the outreach church. Understanding the congregation's stance will put you in touch with its values, myths, self-identity, vision, and practices.

Determine your church's style. By style, I mean the kind of corporate spirituality your church embraces. Basic congregational spirituality styles include the head, heart, pilgrim, mystic, servant, and crusader spiritualities.

Writing such a case study will help you begin to shape and articulate a vision for your ministry tenure in this congregation. Note that the vision to be worked on at this stage concerns your ministry. The vision you will develop for the congregation comes later. Get clear about yourself first, before you attempt to shape a vision for your congregation.

Third Year: Hitting Your Stride

During your third year of ministry you're feeling comfortable with your role. You know what needs to be done, and you know how to do it. You've gotten to know some of the people in your congregation, and you have some "fans" among them.

By your third year you have a clear enough idea of the parish and have gathered enough information to begin pondering what needs to be addressed in the life of the church. But heed this caution: The more clearly you make known the direction in which you want to lead the church, the more creative the resistance and sabotage will become. The wise pastor knows not to take such resistance personally, understanding that change is hard for churches.

If you are a new pastor, and have survived your first pastorate so far, you will have learned more about yourself and about church than you learned in seminary—or than you are likely to learn for most of your remaining ministry years. Why? The learning curve is steep in these first three years. And since what you need to learn is directly correlated with your survival, the learning is meaningful and powerful. Authors Michael and Deborah Jinkins point out that the quantity of new demands placed on beginning pastors correlates positively with their level of competence. Most pastors will not reach a “comfort zone” where ministry demands and competence meet until well into their third year.²

During your third year at a church, ministry management involves decisions about your stewardship of ministry. To organize the leadership functions that you will provide from now on, decide how you will invest your time and talents—on what and in whom. The demands on your time and attention seem endless, and they come from a myriad of sources. You can spend your ministry attending to problems, peccadilloes, the art of keeping people happy, the management of conflict (or the perpetual avoidance of it), and any number of other tasks that, in the end, will never yield lasting results or encourage maturity and growth in your congregation. Or you can realize that you are human and have limited personal resources—and can decide to invest yourself only in those people and ministries that will make a difference in the long run.

Fourth Year: The Year of Discontent

Something happens to most of us during our fourth year at a church. We get restless. Not uncommonly, we find ourselves sitting in the office, looking out the window, and wondering what other ministry opportunities may lie ahead of us. The fourth year is often a time of low energy. Problems at the church that were previously a challenge have become merely a nuisance; we suspect that we may be solving the same problems over and over. During this year of malaise and ennui, you may, “just in case,” update your résumé and keep it on your personal computer’s hard drive.

One hazard faced by many pastors at this point: they may start paying the price for their lack of study and purposeful work in personal growth and professional development. If all you have is a bag of tricks, you may start running out of surprises to pull out of the bag (and believe me, some parishioners will notice). This malaise and lack of purpose may explain, at least in part, the phenomenon of pervasive turnover of parish pastors before the five-year mark.

Ministry management during “the winter of our discontent” involves recapturing the passion of your calling amid the details and drudgeries of ministry’s administrative side. Now is the time to recommit yourself to reading books and journals, learning new ministry skills, and retooling for the next stages of pastoral leadership. For beginning clergy, it’s a good time to consider formal continuing education—perhaps entering a good doctor of ministry program. Seminaries require three years of ministry experience for applicants to their D.Min. programs, and for

good reason—by that time new clergy are ready to learn things they were not ready to hear during their seminary tenure.

Fifth Year: The Latency Year

For most pastors the fifth year of ministry seems to be a latency year. People begin to trust you; some even like you. By now, a core group of members has come to love you. You begin to make your mark as the neighborhood pastor and find your niche in your local professional network. Having handled most administrative problems and basking in the renewed good will of a less anxious congregation, you coast a bit. You initiate creative programs or ministries and institute challenging changes. Because you enjoy by now a certain level of congregational trust, these are accepted with little resistance.

Ministry management in the fifth year includes renegotiating your salary, if you haven’t already. Many clergy are so eager to be called to a church that they are unrealistic in assessing the financial impact of a move. By now you have a more realistic idea of your personal or family financial needs. Don’t do the church a disservice by neglecting to help the board or finance committee understand the realistic financial costs of calling and keeping a good staff.

If your church does not have a sabbatical leave policy, now is the time to begin educating the congregation as to its value. Take the initiative in making possible a dialogue that will create a sabbatical leave policy.³ At the same time, inventory your personal ministry skills so that you can sharpen the competencies you’ll need for the next stage of ministry.

Sixth Year: Ministry Redirection

As several elements converge in the sixth year of ministry, it may become a time of ministry redirection. If you are a staff member in your sixth year at a church, the senior pastor has probably left by now. The new demands on you to function at higher levels of leadership make ministry challenging, exciting—and scary. Your job may include “breaking in” the interim pastor and, eventually, the new senior pastor.

During this year it’s not uncommon for both pastor and staff members to rework their résumés. Some begin considering serious inquiries from other churches, perhaps even paying a visit or two at the invitation of a search committee. This temptation to accept a new call may signal that the ministry groove you’ve created is becoming a ministry rut. It’s time to begin asking yourself questions about essential changes in your ministry leadership roles and professional goals. Will you stay in the parish ministry for the rest of your working years? Do you want to go into teaching? Will you specialize, perhaps in pastoral care and counseling? If you are an associate or assistant minister, will you seek a sole or senior pastor position? If you are a sole pastor, will you take on the challenges of leading a multiple staff? Is it time to move on to a bigger church?

Ministry management in the sixth year can include an episode of housecleaning. Start throwing out clutter—the dated stuff that has accumulated on your desk, in your files, in your library, in the church organizational structures, and in the church buildings. By now you know whether you can throw out that ugly blue flower vase in the sanctuary without incurring the wrath of a member whose great-aunt Alice donated it. Since you know enough about “personal” and “public” territories in your church, you can safely start throwing out junk that has accumulated around the church buildings over the years. But perhaps the most important ministry management you’ll do in the sixth year is to explore seriously your sabbatical options. Be mindful, however, that as you begin to plan your sabbatical you’ll likely encounter some sabotage—from yourself and from the congregation. You’ll both develop a certain level of separation anxiety. Tell yourself that this reaction is natural. Don’t let it stop you from benefiting from an important resource for you and your church.

Seventh Year: Recharge or Burnout?

If you serve on a pastoral staff, the new senior pastor is probably on board by now. Your new boss will either take up the church’s vision and support your philosophy and approach to ministry, or will want to bring in his or her own vision of ministry. It’s time to call the district office, update the résumé, and perhaps even put out some “feelers.” If you and the new pastor have meshed and you decide to stay on, you’ll need to renegotiate your relationship and leadership function with the church.

If you’re the pastor, you’ll probably find yourself saying, “I can’t believe it’s been seven years!” And if you’re anything like those four pastors who came to me for spiritual direction, you’ll start feeling some stirrings that will blossom full-blown next year.

As for ministry management in your seventh year, it’s time for your sabbatical. Take it—no matter what.

The Eighth Year: The Pivotal Year

If you have made it to the eighth year of ministry in your congregation and decide to stay, something fascinating and powerful happens. You’ll feel an emotional shift in your relationship with your congregation—and the members will feel it also. In your eighth year you’ll notice that a whole generation of children who have grown up in the church are beginning to leave. You’ll find yourself officiating at the funerals of people who are now friends—not just “church members.” Perhaps for the first time, you’ll begin to understand what the metaphor of “pastor” really means.

At this point you will realize that the people in your congregation are the products of your ministry, and you’ll wonder what difference you are making. This realization is powerful, and it can be overwhelming.

This shift in the pastoral relationship is what drove those four ministers to seek help. All four intuitively sensed that they and their ministries were on the verge of something different and new.

They were in touch with the notion that staying in their respective places of ministry, regardless of the context, would require a new way of relating and ministering. For some, the prospect of entering into a more intimate relationship with their congregations was frightening. For others, standing on the border of uncharted territory aroused fears about their competence.

Ninth Year: The Year of Commitment

If you navigate successfully the relational and emotional shifts of the eighth year, you can make an emotional commitment to your congregation. You settle comfortably into the realization that this is your church and your home. You belong here. Your congregation, meanwhile, senses whether you are staying or going, and will respond accordingly.

Your relationship with the congregation now undergoes a definite shift. It becomes deeper, more honest, more intimate, and more vulnerable. As a result of this shift, ministry becomes more about relationships and less about management. And it is that shift, I believe, that so frightened the four pastors who came to me. Ministry as management is easy, really. Clergy training does fairly well in equipping pastors for the management of ministry. But the heart of ministry, like the heart of the gospel, is not management but relationship. And having a more intimate relationship with people is more frightening than standing behind the façade of professionalism and competence in “managing” people. Tragically, too few clergy are able to make the shift. Too many seem willing to abort the possibility of a long tenure at one congregation, opting instead for the safety of minister-as-manager in a string of short-term pastorates.

Tenth Year: Ministry Begins

If you have lasted up to the tenth year and have invested well in your tenure of ministry, you and your congregation share a mutual relationship of trust, a shared corporate identity, and a common vision of ministry. Your relationship with the congregation can provide the resources to begin working on whom you can become. Because your pastoral leadership function will take on new directions, now is the time to quit recycling sermons. More important, now is the time to begin thinking about the life of this congregation two or three generations into the future.

Now is the time your ministry begins. ♦

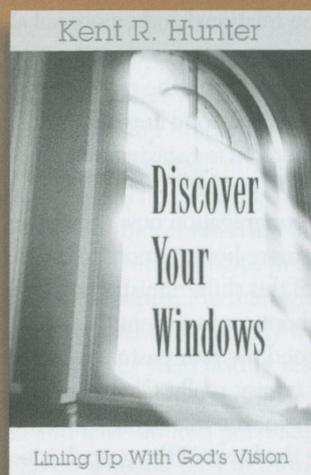
NOTES

1. See Alice Mann, *The In-Between Church: Navigating Size Transitions in Congregations* (Bethesda, Md.: Alban Institute, 1998). See also Gary L. McIntosh, *One Size Doesn’t Fit All: Bringing Out the Best in Any Size Church* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Revell, 1999).
2. Michael and Deborah Jinkins, “Surviving Frustration in the First Years of Ministry,” *Congregations* (January/February 1994): 6–9.
3. See A. Richard Bullock and Richard J. Bruesehoff, *Clergy Renewal: The Alban Guide to Sabbatical Planning* (Bethesda, Md.: Alban Institute, 2000).

Discover Your Windows

LINING UP WITH GOD'S VISION

Kent R. Hunter
Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002



review book

There's been much written in the last decade about the impact of the "personal paradigm," the idea that there exists a unique lens through which each individual views the world. Through research involving over 18,000 church members, Kent Hunter has developed a model that describes 10 of these lenses or "windows"—10 personal paradigms—that can help congregations "become more productive for God" (p. 10). Hunter argues that how we answer questions relevant to each window has a critical impact on the life of our congregations.

What congregation has *not* had a conversation on appropriate forms of worship? How much should worship continue in traditional forms and how much should it be opened to new ways of praising God? In the chapter on "The Window of Change," Kent Hunter uses this question to explore a congregation's paradigm regarding change.

The rate of change in the world around us is astounding, and so it is in

the church. Hunter makes a strong case that churches should not shy away from change, but instead embrace any change that will further their mission. To decide which changes those are, congregations must first determine what is essential to their mission and what is not: "The essentials are what we die for, non-essentials come and go" (p. 87). Churches are advised to appreciate the past—but also to develop ministry for the future, to avoid making idols of our buildings and our practices, to recognize the principle of facilitating spiritual experience for newcomers, and to find new forms, words, and music to express faith in the 21st century.

I found the "Window of Change" the most compelling. In my church, as I imagine in thousands of others around the country, we are constantly asking ourselves how much we have to change who we currently are to assure an effective practice of our mission. While many of us love the old songs of our childhood, the pastoral themes of many hymns do not resonate for urban teenagers, many of whom have never even visited a farm. In a recent responsive reading, I watched my son's face contort in puzzlement as he read aloud, "the bowels of kindness." And I asked myself, in light of Kent Hunter's question, are these metaphors essential or nonessential? They certainly are traditional. But is their irrelevance driving away our youth and the historically unchurched? While I too am reluctant to let go of *my* favorite traditions, I am now asking myself, "Am I making an idol of my favorite forms of worship?" As I read this section, I was awakened and chastised. If you read only one portion of Hunter's book, I heartily recommend this one as a springboard for discussion in your congregation.

In "The Window of Leadership," Hunter notices that what we expect from our pastor says a lot about what our congregation is capable of accomplishing. One window perceives that we hire pastors to minister on our behalf; another envisions that we hire pastors to lead *us* in becoming ministers of the

gospel. The former is the more popular view because it excuses the laity from taking full part in the church's life. It is also a recipe for congregational noninvolvement and pastoral burnout. By contrast, the latter window reveals that each of us—laity and clergy alike—must take responsibility for our congregation, its internal fellowship as well as its external outreach.

I remember the first time I attended New York Avenue Presbyterian Church in Washington, D.C., several years ago. Its Sunday bulletin listed pastors and ministers. The difference? The pastors were paid staff; the ministers were *all the members* of the congregation. "Of course," I said to myself, "of course." And yet, until that time, no one had ever put it to me quite so simply. Now with the emerging movement of Ministry Teams, we see a growing emphasis on congregational participation in and ownership of the ministries of the church. Yet, there remains a core group of Christians who think if the pastor hasn't done it—whether it is visiting the sick, counseling troubled teens, or leading a book discussion—it hasn't been done right. We must stop thinking of the pastor as the only qualified minister: rather, the pastor should be the one to lead the laity to develop their particular gifts for ministry. Kent Hunter is on top of this trend, urging pastors to nurture and prepare their congregants for ministry, and for congregations to multiply their ministries through the active participation of all members.

These are only two of the 10 windows through which Mr. Hunter encourages congregations to seek the Kingdom of God. Each window offers something that any congregation can learn from. However, I must offer a couple of caveats. First, Mr. Hunter writes from a distinctly evangelical point of view. He repeatedly cites as Jesus' most important charge the call of Matthew 28 to make disciples of all nations. In doing so, he tends to neglect the also-critical mission of the Body of Christ caring for itself. Unless we focus inward, we will not be spiritually enabled to do what I believe is Jesus' most important outward charge—to love our neighbors.

Second, I would have liked a bit more discussion on discernment. The book urges

readers to line up their windows with God's vision. Well, God's vision may seem quite obvious at times, but more often I find that it is less than clear. Questions such as whether we should put an addition on our building or whether we should send our youth abroad to assist in a church-building project have no obvious right or wrong answer. Some churches have energized themselves by asking, "What would Jesus do?" It's an excellent question—but when the answer isn't clear, how do we find it? Several times in this book, we are asked to have faith that God will provide the resources (financial and otherwise), as long as we are implementing God's plan. Yet, it is not clear how we discern whether what looks like a risky leap into the future actually is God's plan.

Finally, Hunter operates a consulting business in which he is known as The Church Doctor, and nearly every chapter of the book pitches further reading, watching, or listening that involve purchases from The Church Doctor. I would have been far more comfortable with a more complete list of resources, located at the end of the book.

In spite of these reservations, I cannot think of a congregation that would not benefit from *Discover Your Windows*. Adult education classes, small groups, ministry teams, and governing boards may all find this book helpful as a way of uncovering the paradigm differences that result in divergent opinions on how to be church. Openly exploring how our world-views are or are not consistent with the teachings of the gospels is likely to bring church members into greater harmony with one another and congregations into greater harmony with God.

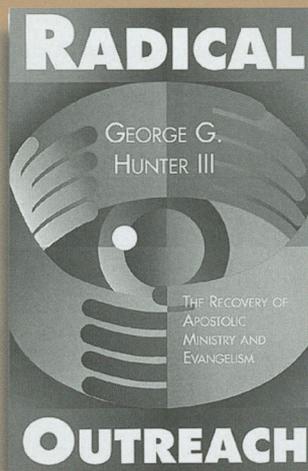
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Radical Outreach

THE RECOVERY OF APOSTOLIC
MINISTRY AND EVANGELISM

George C. Hunter III
Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003



review book

Many congregations are cultural islands, isolated enclaves of old friends huddling behind stained-glass barriers for shelter from the winds of change. They hire clergy to serve as chaplains whose primary focus is on the needs of members. They regard people outside the church as strange and threatening, if they think of these people at all.

Such a mindset should change. It can change. Indeed, it is already changing in congregations that embrace apostolic ministry.

George Hunter began *Radical Outreach* when the curriculum committee of Asbury Theological Seminary, where he teaches, requested material for a new course on apostolic ministry. In the book, Hunter defines apostolic congregations as those that "believe themselves to be 'sent' to reach one or more 'pre-Christian' populations, and their effectiveness is indicated . . . by their 'conversion growth' rate" (p. 16). Just as the book's subtitle places ministry before evangelism, Hunter argues that Christians first offer humble service to hurting people, then engage them in conversation.

Apostolic churches don't fear, judge, or avoid "secular" people—defined as people

"with no Christian memory" (p. 13)—but instead approach them with compassion. Historical movements illustrating the apostolic dynamic include Pentecostalism, Methodism, Patrick in Ireland, Martin in Gaul, and of course the Apostles themselves, who practiced the ministry example of Jesus. In fact, Hunter draws principles for outreach ministry from Paul's letters to the Corinthians.

Two essential marks of an apostolic perspective are cultural relevance and an empowered laity. Apostolic churches study and adapt to culture in order to reach people of different cultural groups in their communities: this is a lay-led initiative. Hunter says flatly, "wherever the clergy are expected to do most of the ministry, the church stagnates or declines; wherever the laity do most of the ministry, with the clergy 'leading and feeding' the laity for their mission, the church thrives and grows" (p. 117).

The book describes a few exciting congregations that have moved from tradition to mission. Hunter's fond hope is that many other older congregations will follow suit. To reach secular people, congregations must answer all of these five questions in the affirmative:

1. Do we want to know them?
2. Are we willing to go where they are?
3. Are we willing to spend time with them?
4. Do we want secular and outside-the-establishment people in our church?
5. Are we willing for our church to become their church too? (p. 187)

Like Bill Easum and Tom Bandy's *Growing Spiritual Redwoods* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), Hunter's *Radical Outreach* splits open assumptions that choke a church's outreach potential. It will be useful to leaders of traditional churches who want to create a holy discontent with the status quo. In fact, my only disappointment with this book was that it lacked a discussion guide and a more complete consideration of how outreach changes us.

The winds of change are howling, but there is yet hope for traditional churches. God's Spirit blows where it wills, impelling caring Christians toward their neediest neighbors.

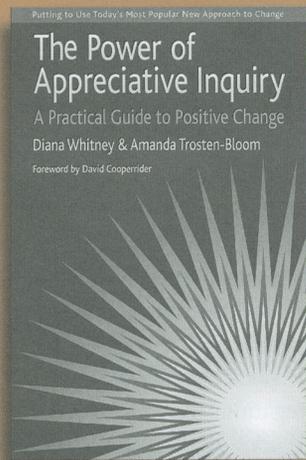
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The Power of Appreciative Inquiry

A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO POSITIVE CHANGE

Diana Whitney and
Amanda Trosten-Bloom
San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2003



review book

New ideas in any discipline can set off warning bells among its traditional members. Sometimes, though, a new approach can turn the entire discipline upside down, as did the work of Professor Suresh Srivasta and his doctoral student David Cooperrider in their 1987 essay titled “Appreciative Inquiry in Organizational Life.” In it they suggested that problem solving as a way to understand and nurture organizations had reached the end of its usefulness and become counterproductive. They proposed an alternative approach that identified, studied, and magnified in an organization what was vital and alive, however scarce.

Cooperrider’s doctoral research at the distinguished Cleveland Clinic initially focused on enhancing human relations. But after months of on-site observation, he reported having nothing in his doctoral skill set capable of improving what was clearly a leading-edge, high-morale, robust organization. An easy

alternative would have been finding another, more “broken” organization. Instead Professor Srivasta sent his student back to the Cleveland Clinic to ask *why* it functioned so well. That first question was the seed of what was to become Appreciative Inquiry.

Two decades later, Appreciative Inquiry is now being applied to fields as disparate as violin instruction, community development, curricular reform, organizational governance and strategic planning, NGO collaboration, new therapeutic models, clergy leadership development, and interfaith relations, to say nothing of business and industry. Major AI projects in more than 80 countries have helped build bridges across the divides of nonprofit, commercial, and governmental communities. Five years ago, the Web search engine Google offered fewer than 100 links for “Appreciative Inquiry”; a search today yields 57,300.

The bookshelf of AI texts grows wider each month, and the existing bibliography has excellent offerings. *The Power of Appreciative Inquiry* goes to the head of the list for several reasons. To start with, Whitney and Trosten-Bloom’s last chapter—which describes six kinds of freedom AI unleashes in people—is a unique contribution to the field and, in my opinion, is alone worth the price of the book. The chapter introduces these freedoms by asking:

What is the value of a naturally and comfortably *powerful* human being? A person who knows that the world is subject to human influence? Who knows that she personally has the power to change the world? Who chooses to exercise that power for the good of the whole? Who encourages and grooms the people around him to similarly exercise their power? Who invites others into cooperation to discover, dream, and design the future? (p. 236)

The book’s answer is that AI liberates power in people by effectively promoting the six freedoms:

1. the freedom to be known in relationship;
2. the freedom to be heard;
3. the freedom to dream in community;
4. the freedom to choose to contribute;

5. the freedom to act with support; and
6. the freedom to be positive.

Whitney and Trosten-Bloom’s definition of AI also serves as a good short answer to *how* AI nurtures these freedoms.

At the heart of the practice of Appreciative Inquiry is the quest to discover what gives life to an organization when it is at its best. In this sense the practice of Appreciative Inquiry is positive, or fully affirmative. Appreciative Inquiry is not a search for positive as opposed to negative, or good as opposed to bad. It is a search for what nourishes people for better performance and organizational excellence, what excites, energizes, and inspires employees, customers, suppliers, and the organization’s community (p. 68).

Parishioners appropriately can be added to the list; both authors, as well as Cooperrider (who has written the book’s foreword), are people of faith and practice with a history of donating their gifts to religious and interreligious communities.

For newcomers, the bird’s-eye view is important. When people sharing a particular context (e.g., a family, a business, a congregation) come together, AI offers a host of creative ways to focus on what is most precious and valuable to them in that context; to stretch and share their dreaming about best futures for the group; and to funnel their own best options into an action strategy that will propel them into a shared future with enthusiasm, vision, and a working map. Along the way, problems—no longer a focal point—are not so much “solved” as “dissolved” by the shared energy and imagination appreciative dialogue typically generates.

Philosophically AI finds a comfortable home in postmodern social constructionism as developed by Kenneth and Mary Gergen, Srivasta, Cooperrider, Whitney, and others, all building on *Social Construction of Reality* (1966) by P.L. Berger and T. Luckman. They are skeptical of anyone’s ability to capture truth unalloyed. They promote relationship and the endless mystery of language as the appropriate context for creatively exploring what is most important to us and the world we live in. No absolutes here, no

ontological assumptions, no particular vision of a better world except each person's own subjective point of view. AI practitioners never claim to be objective; instead, they strongly believe in inquiring rigorously into our deepest values, nurturing active respect for community members, and attending to healthy, vital outcomes. Social constructionism and AI's underlying assumptions are surveyed in chapter three of the book.

Chapter four sketches a brief history of Appreciative Inquiry and shows how in both for-profit and nonprofit settings AI can enhance an organization's capacity for positive change. We hear about British Airway's goal of improving baggage-loss figures morphing into a plan to create an "exceptional arrival experience" for all BA passengers, and how it transformed the airline.

What kind of effect can AI methods have in the congregation? Once called upon, an AI inquiry attempts to create an "empty stage," clearing the way of previous conflict and allowing members to become the center of attention. Instead of building goals around solutions to problems, the dialogue—beginning one-on-one for everyone—centers around what matters most to the participants about their shared context. Good feelings, clarity of values, and meaningful language surface almost immediately when appreciative questions are posed and answered. Members find themselves asking, "After all the nay-saying is over, what is it that we most love about the Church in general and about this church in particular?"

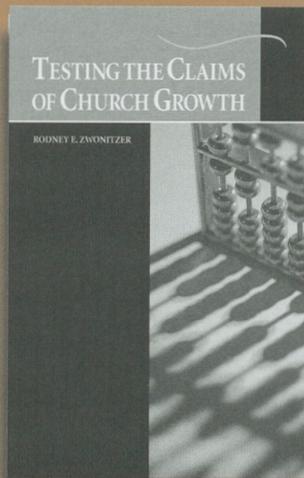
In sum, what makes *The Power of Appreciative Inquiry* a great resource is that the book's treatment of the history and philosophic grounding of AI are accompanied by practical information and case studies. The book will be a useful, powerful source of hope for and a witness to hopes already fulfilled in communities that are broken, or thriving, or a little of both.

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Testing the Claims of Church Growth

Rodney E. Zwonitzer
St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2002



review book

Evangelism. Outreach. Growth. These are the buzzwords of today's denomination meetings, from the conservative Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod to the liberal United Church of Christ. The Church Growth Movement, as it is called, emerged out of concern for declining congregational membership in the mainline, and its prescription is for congregations to adopt "modern styles" for communicating the "substance" of the Gospel. The Movement places a premium on evangelism to the unchurched and the once-churched, even when this means adjusting traditions to suit the tastes of newcomers.

Rodney Zwonitzer's concern is that the Movement takes its direction from nonbelievers instead of from the Gospel. Explaining the membership decline in the Missouri Synod, he says, "The failure is with people, be they churched or unchurched. They do not like the things of God. Then why should we constantly rearrange and reorganize the church around their 'felt needs?'" (p. 99). In other words, allowing unbelievers to determine the content of the Church's witness is illogical and unfaithful.

The critique of the Movement Zwonitzer

offers may be convincing only to members of his own denomination, for his concerns come directly from denominational resolutions, theological commitments, and the general identity of the Missouri Synod. Indeed, it is the very "Lutheran-ness" of his argument against the Movement that makes the book worthwhile and his concerns valid. In many ways, Zwonitzer suggests that the Church Growth Movement will bring rival theologies into his denomination, supplanting orthodox Lutheranism with covert Calvinism. Church Growth consultants would temper preaching about Law and Gospel, open the communion table, and alter the role of women. And although what condemns the Movement for Zwonitzer may recommend it to others who do not share his theological commitments, it would be a mistake to dismiss his concerns, for even the non-Missouri Synod reader will find that his testimony highlights the cost of exposing church identity to the whims of nonmembers.

Certainly Zwonitzer shares with the Movement a real desire to see more people converted to Christianity. But he rejects the Church Growth approach, saying instead, "It is vital that a truly Lutheran missiology, based on Scripture and the Confessions, be written, published, and implemented" (p. 117). As many mainline denominations employ evangelical models of outreach and church planting, we would do well to remember Zwonitzer's vigilance. For instance, just as Zwonitzer is concerned that the Missouri Synod would water down its preaching about Law and Gospel, I worry that in the name of outreach my denomination might falter in its commitment to social justice. What ideologies are sneaking in through the back door? What theological commitments do we postpone simply to reach out? To paraphrase Zwonitzer, we need missiology that grows organically out of denominational identity and theology. Zwonitzer begins that process for the Missouri Synod; his book may inspire others to do similar work in their own traditions.

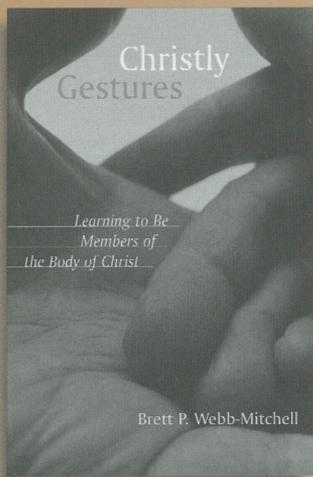
REV. ANDREW B. WARNER

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Christly Gestures

LEARNING TO BE MEMBERS OF
THE BODY OF CHRIST

Brett P. Webb-Mitchell
Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2003



review book

Author Brett P. Webb-Mitchell teaches Christian nurture at Duke Divinity School, where he challenges students and instructors to look beyond Christian education that focuses merely “on the habits of the mind and the heart” and towards the formation of concrete practices for Christ’s body, the church. To do so, Webb-Mitchell argues in *Christly Gestures*, conventional Sunday school or catechetical instruction should address its three primary limitations: content that is irrelevant to the real complexity of people’s lives; students who are not engaged in true dialogue and learning; and pedagogy that is too individualistic and that does not recognize the importance of community. The value of Sunday school or catechism should not be measured by how much knowledge it communicates to its students, but by whether its students are changed and transformed by faithful instruction: “[The] purpose is to teach us to be truthful, charitable, and faithful members, one of another, in the body of Christ” (p. 12).

Webb-Mitchell’s belief is that the church can be a school that encourages active discipleship. Church life *in its entirety* can be formational. Here we can learn to perform the gospel, not just gain historical facts and other people’s theological ideas. To do so, we need to enter the practicing life of the church: worship, prayer, corporate meals, telling of the Christian story, and service. Webb-Mitchell says that the three primary communal practices of Christianity are baptism, Eucharist, and hospitality. I noticed that he omits foot-washing, a sacramental rite of reconciliation and hospitality in many Christian traditions, but mostly forgotten or neglected in much of the church. I suppose he was writing with the larger, more-established churches in mind.

Another complaint I had was that for a book urging a more embodied Christianity, *Christly Gestures* is rather erudite. The author claims to be writing for lay leaders and local Christian educators, but the dense writing style may have interfered with his goal to weave together “academic and pragmatic threads” (p. 24). Moreover, the long theoretical discussions on philosophy, sociology, theology, and church history are at times unwieldy and too complex. I would have welcomed more practical examples, especially since Webb-Mitchell has had substantial ministry experience. As a result, *Christly Gestures* may be more suitable for students and teachers of Christian education in seminaries and other religious institutions than for the lay leaders or Sunday School classes it addresses. Nonetheless, there

is much about this book that I recommend. I do not recall ever having encountered so much integrated reflection on the Rule of St. Benedict, the vision of Jean Vanier and L’Arche, and the work of John Howard Yoder—all in one book. His critique of disembodied critical thinking addresses the urgent need for spirituality in these days, reminding us that “just the facts” are not enough. *Christly Gestures* is a fine contribution to the growing body of literature on Christian practices. Just as the books of Alasdair MacIntyre have already encouraged theologians to explore the significance of the shared activities of God’s people, which form our lives and identities, *Christly Gestures* does not reduce the gospel to routine alone, but contends for a deep unity of body and mind, of thought and action.

REV. DR. ARTHUR PAUL BOERS

Author, *Never Call Them Jerks: Healthy Responses to Difficult Behavior*
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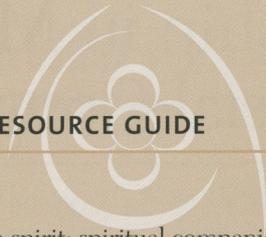


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RESOURCES ON THEOLOGY FROM THE CONGREGATIONAL RESOURCE GUIDE



Aron, Isa. **Becoming a Congregation of Learners: Learning as a Key to Revitalizing Congregational Life** (Woodstock, Vt.: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2000). Aron instructs readers to transform synagogues into houses of learning where adults, as well as children, may pursue a deeper understanding of their faith. She presents a blueprint for creating and implementing a clear vision of the learning congregation. Included are case studies, sample meeting agendas, recommended resources, and reproducible handouts.

Bass, Dorothy C., ed. **Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People** (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997). This book examines 12 central Christian “practices,” or shared activities, that address fundamental human needs and form lives of integrity and faithfulness. The book’s contributors explore each practice by placing it in its historical and biblical context, examining its relevance to our times, and showing how it gives depth and meaning to daily life.

Cobb, John B., Jr. **Reclaiming the Church: Where the Mainline Church Went Wrong and What to Do About It** (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997). To experience transformation, churches must engage in theological education locally rather than allow it to become the exclusive province of professionals. They must also learn to express the classic truths of their traditions in contemporary ways. Cobb offers a background of substantive self-study for mainline congregational leaders.

Farnham, Suzanne G., et al. **Listening Hearts: Discerning Call in Community** (Harrisburg, Pa.: Morehouse Publishing, 1991). A theological and practical exploration of the meaning of call, this book explores the ways that discernment in community can help us find our vocation. It emphasizes the importance of prayer, reflection, and opening the heart to God’s will. Guidelines for discernment groups and questions to consider during discernment are included.

Hahn, Celia Allison. **Uncovering Your Church’s Hidden Spirit** (Bethesda, Md.: Alban Institute, 2001). Celia Allison Hahn presents methods for seeking the

church’s hidden spirit: spiritual companionship, discerning first and acting second, moving from the heart (soul and spirit) of the congregation rather than from the head (ideas and “oughts”), letting stories surface, listening to many voices, and identifying spiritual leaders among the laity.

Killen, Patricia O’Connell and John De Beer. **The Art of Theological Reflection** (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1994). Theological reflection at its best invites us to weave “the threads of our lives and our religious heritage more strongly into a single story of faithfulness.” The authors present nine processes for theological reflection—each of which focuses on our lived experiences and enables those experiences to converse with our religious heritage.

Process, Not Program: Adult Faith Formation for Vital Churches (www.congregationalresources.org/adultfaith/pl.asp). This tutorial is particularly valuable for people seeking to nurture and develop spiritual growth, theological reflection, and Christian practices in their congregations. Rather than presenting a set of programs, it presents a way to help congregations become more fully aware of their unique identity and God’s call.

Volf, Miroslav and Dorothy C. Bass, eds. **Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life** (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2002). Asserting that “our thinking about God and our way of living should go hand in hand,” this book focuses on the reflective processes by which people learn to embrace specific Christian practices—such as hospitality or keeping Sabbath. Contributors also address the “gaps” between beliefs and practices.

Whitehead, James D. and Evelyn Eaton Whitehead. **Method and Ministry: Theological Reflection and Christian Ministry** (Chicago: Sheed and Ward, 1995). The authors outline and illustrate a model of theological reflection that draws on three elements: Christian tradition, personal experience, and our culture. Their model invites us to attend to these elements, learn from the consonances and dissonances between them, and apply our insights toward faithful actions that serve God and others.

www.congregationalresources.org

Leadership in Multicultural and Multiracial Congregations

Q: I am the pastor of a church in a changing neighborhood, and it is clear that we need to be more multicultural/multiracial in our ministry. How can I begin to create real community amid difference?

A: Although American congregations share the call to inclusivity, studies show that more than 90 percent of U.S. Christians worship in congregations in which 90 percent or more of the congregants share their racial/ethnic heritage (see Mark Chaves, National Congregations Study, National Opinion Research Center, 1998). Even churches with a sincere desire to diversify may encounter barriers such as location, language, and worship style. My consulting/research practice at the Alban Institute has included work with chaplains, pastors, lay leaders, and denominational officials who are accurately reading that in a time of shifting demographics, the valuing and building of culturally and racially diverse faith communities increasingly will be the norm. Yet the numbers speak for themselves: achieving diversity and inclusion is difficult work.

Concurrently with my action-research with Alban Institute clients, I have experienced two other learning environments—a one-year conversation with a diverse group of clergy, denominational leaders, and Alban staff on what it means to negotiate cultural boundaries (see Jeffrey Haggarty, “In Mission on the Boundaries—On Purpose!,” *Congregations*, Summer 2003), and my doctoral studies at Drew University, where I am writing a dissertation on the identity development of clergy who serve racially and culturally diverse congregations. I suggest that clergy are able to tell compelling stories of a new world order as they build congregations that celebrate difference.

Although my research still is in process, it seems clear that leadership is key to building authentic community. I

use “leadership” to mean “the ability to create a safe environment or *container* in which the uniqueness of individuals, difference in culture and experiences, and healthy conflict can be affirmed.”

Leaders need these capacities to create this safe container:

- ◆ A clear, consistent ethic that “being on the frontier” is a critical theological task
- ◆ The ability to bring critical analysis, faith tradition, and a learned articulation to bear on situations
- ◆ The willingness to be wrong
- ◆ Courage to speak the truth, and to know when to be quiet and listen
- ◆ Strength to live with ambiguity, including the dissonance between what we think the relationship between God and humanity ought to be and what it is
- ◆ Determination to address conflict head on
- ◆ The savvy to know that borders shift—today it may be race and ethnicity, tomorrow gender and sexuality
- ◆ The humility to be self-aware and self-reflective, to be open and take in information
- ◆ The boldness to be visionary and prophetic, and the spiritual willingness to act when action is not popular, knowing that deliverance is coming
- ◆ The patience to live on the border amid tension, even death
- ◆ The knack of recruiting allies and partners for ministry that is lonely work
- ◆ A binding vision, the ability to articulate it, and passion for the work
- ◆ The skills to read and interpret the environment
- ◆ The authenticity and integrity to “walk the talk” and “practice what you preach”
- ◆ The grace to be hospitable and welcoming

- ◆ A sense of humor, and the capacity for play
- ◆ A willingness to step on and over the edge, knowing that folk on the edge are sometimes cut

Valuing All Voices

One way leaders build diverse communities is through storytelling and structured conversations. We learn several truths from these conversations:

- ◆ The stress of racial difference can make people mistrust their voices at the table. Those in the minority, and even white men, can feel that their voices do not count. Trust must be built so that people learn that their voices are valued.
- ◆ When sharing stories, people can at times feel that there are parallel histories—one black and the other white—and Hispanic and Asian peoples may feel left out of the story altogether. How do we learn to value all the stories and to weave them together to create one?
- ◆ Stories may overlap and yet differ substantially. It is important to value all perspectives.
- ◆ Language and word choice are important.
- ◆ Attentive listening helps heal wounds.
- ◆ While it takes time to create a container for difficult conversations, groups feel uplifted by candid exchanges, and when success is celebrated, they are more likely in the future to enter into meaningful exchange.



Rev. Jacqueline J. Lewis is a senior consultant at the Alban Institute responsible for the Negotiating Cultural Boundaries Project. Rev. Lewis is ordained in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), and has served diverse urban congregations. She lives in North Bethesda, Maryland.

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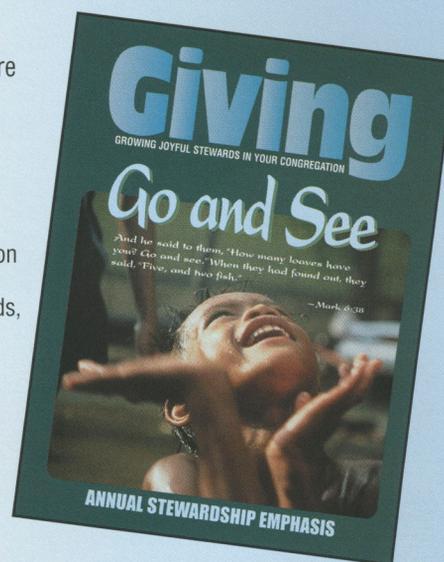
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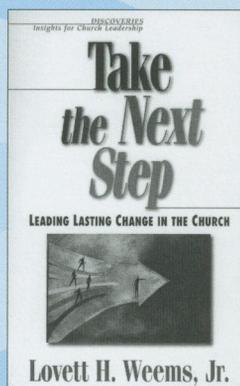
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The Alban Institute serves leaders – both ordained and lay – across the denominational spectrum through consulting services, education events, book and periodical publishing, and research. Our work is supported by membership revenue, grant funding, and the sale of programs, services, and publications.

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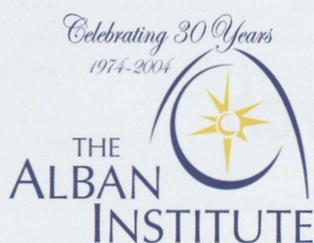
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