

Congregations

FALL 2005

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OUR DENOMINATIONS, AND OURSELVES

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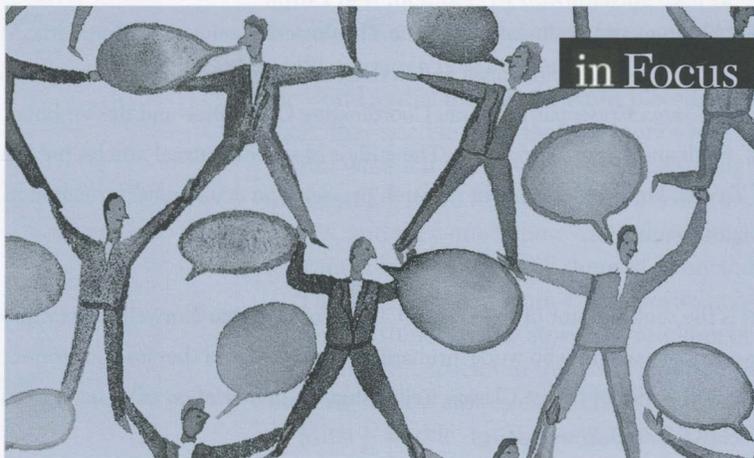
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Congregations

LEARNING LEADING CHANGING

FALL 2005

Talking about Faith



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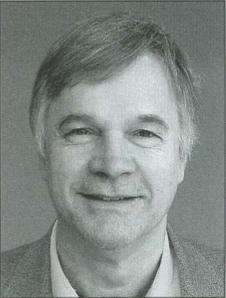
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Diana Butler Bass

Diana Butler Bass is a senior researcher at Virginia Theological Seminary. She is the author of several books, including *The Practicing Congregation: Imagining a New Old Church* (Alban Institute, 2004), *Strength for the Journey: A Pilgrimage of Faith in Community* (Jossey-Bass, 2002), and *Broken We Kneel: Reflections on Faith and Citizenship* (Jossey-Bass, 2004). Her latest book, co-edited by Joseph Stewart-Sicking and soon to be released by the Alban Institute, is *From Nomads to Pilgrims: Stories from Practicing Congregations*.



Larry Peers

Dr. Mitzi Budde is head librarian and professor at Virginia Theological Seminary in Alexandria, Virginia, where she teaches courses in ecumenism and in theological research. She also serves on the local Washington, D.C.-area Episcopal-Lutheran Coordinating Committee and the Virginia Council of Churches' Faith and Order Workgroup. The author of several journal articles published in *Ecumenical Trends*, Dr. Budde's current research project is on ecumenical formation in denominational theological seminaries.

Rev. S. Chapin Garner is the senior pastor of the United Church of Christ in Norwell, Massachusetts. He is also a professional playwright who works primarily with faith-based themes and stories. In addition, Rev. Garner is cofounder of Christ Clarion Fellowship, an organization of young mainline Protestant clergy (www.christclarionfellowship.org).



Roy Terry

Rev. Roy Terry is pastor of Cornerstone United Methodist Church in Naples, Florida. Cornerstone was launched by the Florida Conference of the United Methodist Church in 1996 and is recognized for its unique blending of liturgy and its diverse celebration of music, gifts, and people. Bishop Timothy Whitaker said it best when he defined Cornerstone as "Radical Liturgical." Over the past several years Rev. Terry and Cornerstone have been highlighted in *Divinity Magazine* (Duke Divinity School), *Practicing Congregations* by Diana Butler Bass, and on a PBS special addressing the emergent church. Rev. Terry is a founding member of the Amos Center, which works to generate positive dialogue between church and local leaders in the areas of peace, poverty, and planet Earth.



Wesley J. Wildman

Rev. Dr. Wesley J. Wildman is associate professor of theology and ethics at Boston University's School of Theology, a United Methodist seminary. A Methodist, he is ordained in the Uniting Church of Australia and served churches in Australia and the United States before taking a Ph.D. in theology and philosophy at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California. His scholarly research takes place at the junction of theology, ethics, and the natural and social sciences. His local church involvement currently emphasizes work with middle-school youth.



Shawn Zevit

Rabbi Shawn Israel Zevit is a senior consultant and the director of outreach and external affairs for the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation and a visiting rabbi with Dor Hadash in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. He has over 25 years experience in spiritual leadership, human relations training, musical recording and performing, interactive arts, and teaching. He teaches at Gratz College's Florence Melton Adult Mini-School and offers spiritual direction at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College. He serves as a consultant for numerous organizations in the areas of leadership, community building, money and values, creativity, and spirituality in the workplace. Rabbi Zevit is also the author of *Offerings of the Heart: Money and Values in Faith Communities* (Alban Institute, 2005), *Money and Jewish Values—A 12-Week Curriculum* (Reconstructionist Press, 2004), and *Kehillah Builders: A Guide to Organizing and Growing Communities* (Reconstructionist Press, 2005).

Knowing Our Stories



Congregations

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Moving?
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Congregations have been buffeted for years with advice about how to become something they are not: how they can attract new members by downplaying their denominational or theological identity; how they need to develop a new mission statement in light of changes in the congregation and the world around it; how they must take sides on the issues facing their denominations, the country, and the world so that they can be easily placed on the political spectrum we all reference everyday; how, in short, they need to leave their old stories behind and create a new one for a new day.

But what if a key to vitality for many congregations lies not in becoming what they are not, but in becoming more fully what they already are or have been? To do this well, they must know their stories, and they must know when those stories feed them and when they get in the way—and they must know how to tell them in a way that forms the congregation in health and love.

This issue is full of stories, and stories about stories. From a startup congregation that grounds its very existence on *the* story to a retelling of the evangelical-liberal divide of the past century and more, the articles in this issue grab the narrative bull by the horns and wrestle it to ground, showing us how stories can lead us into the future rather than leave us simply rehearsing the past.

Mitzi J. Budde, in "Welcoming the 'Other,'" tells the increasingly common story of a married couple in which the partners attend different churches, and offers advice to the congregations about how they can help support the couple in their "ecumenical marriage."

In "Unlocking Divine Sparks," Shawn Israel Zevit tells how creative approaches helped a synagogue reconnect with its founding mission 20 years after its formation to make the past present and to glimpse the future.

In "Re-Creating Congregational Stories," Larry Peers uses insights from narrative therapy to show how congregations can at times develop an unhelpful "problem-saturated" story, and how alternative "unstoried" narratives can be used as a basis for healing and the creation of a story for the future.

Diana Butler Bass, in "Reframing as Spiritual Change," tells how frames—the stories, definitions, and mental structures through which we interpret the world—can hinder or help our understanding of each other. "Can we actually reframe the story," she asks, "and create a new way of being faithful together in God?"

In "Becoming God's Church," Pastor Roy Terry tells how he resisted marketing advice to downplay his new congregation's "churchiness" and instead grounded it on practices that transcend time and culture. "If the church is serious about its full and humble participation in God's story," he writes, "then the church really does have something to offer."

Finally, we have devoted a large amount of space in this issue to an important article by Wesley J. Wildman, who teaches theology and ethics at Boston University's School of Theology. Whatever your persuasion, read "When Narrative Identities Clash: Liberals versus Evangelicals." You will never, we hope, think the same way about the "other." And don't miss Chapin Garner's "Coming Out—Liberal and Evangelical." As pastor of the United Church of Christ in Norwell, Massachusetts, he leads a congregation that refuses to choose between the two, proclaiming instead that "Jesus Christ is alive and central, and you are welcome in his presence."

On a much more somber note, just as we were preparing this issue to go to press, Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans, Biloxi, and the Gulf Coast. Please join us in praying for the victims and in generously supporting the relief efforts to help those affected.

Faithfully,

Richard Bass
Director of Publishing

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Worship...

*sheer wonder at the beauty of God,
gratitude for the gospel of Christ,
and eagerness to deepen
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Pastors' Untold Stories: A Silence that Begs to Be Broken

A new book by Dean R. Hoge and Jacqueline E. Wenger probes a painful topic that touches many American congregations. *Pastors in Transition: Why Clergy Leave Local Church Ministry* (Eerdmans, 2005) seeks to shed some light on a situation that has concerned congregational leaders and members, as well as denominational officers and seminary faculties, for quite some time.

The book does not give us definitive “macro” findings. There still are no solid numbers on just how many clergy exit ministry prematurely, but Hoge and Wenger cite a few earlier surveys to give us glimpses of the size of the problem. For example, Barbara Brown Zikmund’s 1998 study of clergy women found that only 67 percent of 5,000 clergy (male and female) from 15 Protestant denominations remained in local congregational ministry by the time they reached the 45 to 50 age bracket. An Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) study found that 15 percent of its 1988 ordinands resigned or were removed from ministry within 13 years. Clearly there are reasons for concern.

To unearth the factors that pull or push ministers out of congregational ministry, Hoge and Wenger surveyed and interviewed a random sample of what they term “parish leavers” from five very different Protestant denominations: the United Methodist Church (UMC); the Presbyterian Church, USA; the ELCA; the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod; and the Assemblies of God. A primary finding is that there are two main reasons why clergy become “parish leavers”: preference for a specialized ministry and conflict. Another is that there are four main intervention points where a real impact can be made on the situation: the recruitment, seminary training, and evaluation processes that certify candidates as qualified for congregational ministry; the placement process that matches graduates and congregations; the ongoing support system for clergy (or lack thereof); and the provision of targeted help when clergy find themselves in trouble.

These findings point to the areas where real change must occur if the situation is to improve. These matters require serious conversation and new plans of action by local congregations, denominations, and seminaries. However, instead of rushing immediately to proposing solutions to this large leadership problem, I want to lift up what may be the most important information in *Pastors in Transition*. Behind the trend lines, the statistics, and the conclusions of the authors’ research are the lives of real people. We dare not forget that this is about individuals who felt a call, prepared for ministry, and then took a spot on the front lines of congregational ministry. Hoge and Wenger will not let us do that, since their book is loaded with stories told by these “parish leavers.”

For example, a UMC pastor identified as “Phil” told a story of 17 years of congregational ministry in tiny churches and his difficulties working with his district superintendent and bishop. Still at minimum salary, he learned that because he was part of a clergy couple he was hard to place. Assigned to “a strange little church” that he discovered to be ingrown and bigoted, he put in two years and actually helped the congregation grow a bit. Then one member started spreading rumors accusing the minister of sleeping around and invading church funds. The district superintendent tried to move Phil again, but the bishop vetoed several promising possibilities and appointed him to a congregation that would

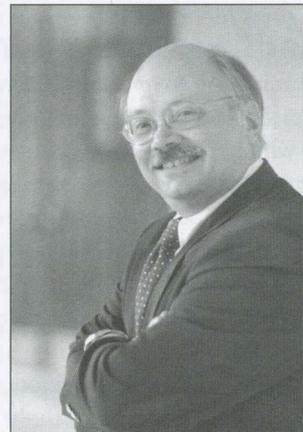
require a two-hour commute and a 20 percent pay cut. Phil resigned and began a new life as a computer technician. But not without giving voice to his pain and sense of betrayal:

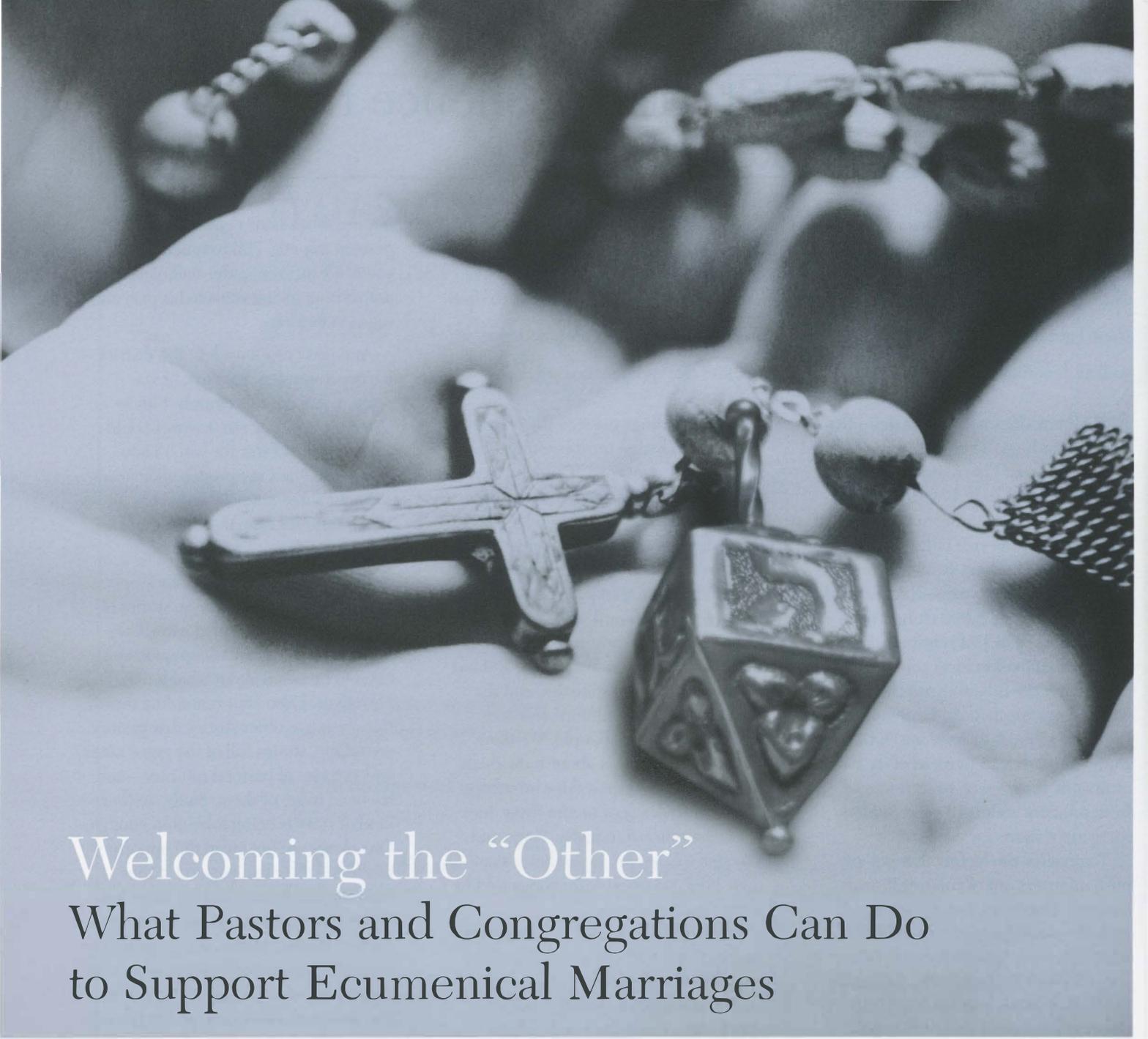
And just before we left, the district superintendent told me, “I was sorry you got this church. I know how mean they are. I wish I could have done better for you.” They had crucified my predecessor. You know, some animals, once they get the taste for human blood, that’s all they need.

As I read the individual stories of these clergy, I felt that these stories of leaving must be reckoned with. They need to be heard, and deep questions need to be asked about what led to these narratives. I also kept reminding myself that there are other stories that pastors are telling, stories full of the grace notes and surprise of pastoral ministry—and we need more of them. Sadly, neither kind of story is being told often enough. Our clergy are not given the opportunities to tell their real pastoral stories—both the epiphanies and the tragedies. Many congregations do not know their pastors’ stories. In fact, congregations frequently are not safe places where the real drama of pastoral ministry can be encountered. The result, all too often, is silence. Stories go untold. Opportunities to become a community of faith are missed. The real power of the ministry remains invisible, inarticulate, and

unperceived by clergy, the congregation, and denominational officials alike. The consequences of both kinds of untold stories are loneliness and breakdown. We must break the silence.

Rev. Dr. James P. Wind is the president of the Alban Institute.





Welcoming the “Other”

What Pastors and Congregations Can Do to Support Ecumenical Marriages

MITZI J. BUDDÉ

In American religious life today there is an upsurge of “church-hopping”—laity moving their membership from one denomination to another. Married couples do not always make this move together, however. A couple who began their marriage within the same denomination may find themselves in an ecumenical marriage some years into married life.

This was the journey my husband and I faced recently, in our ninth year of marriage, and I am convinced that the pastors and congregations of both churches have been critical partners in that journey. Both the congregation in which I remain and the congregation my husband has joined, and their pastors, have been examples of God’s grace and the work of

the Holy Spirit in our lives. Even the occasional comment of bewilderment (“It’s been three weeks since I’ve seen you at church with your husband”) or disappointment (“We’re so sorry to hear that you’ve decided to leave our congregation”) acknowledged that the congregations cared. However, we know of two other couples in a similar circumstance for whom the experience has not been so positive. In those cases, the parishes and ministers involved ignored the unfolding situation. If they had been willing to pay attention, these clergy and congregations could have played key roles in helping the couples transition into their changed church lives.

There are many reasons why one spouse might feel impelled to change congregational membership: a mid-life faith awakening, a tragedy that leads to soul-searching, a desire

Rene Beaupere suggests that a dual-church couple can live out a “re-doubled faithfulness: not to become fifty-fifty Christians but to achieve 200 percent faithfulness.” The reality, however, is more complex.

for a change in the routine of faith life, a moral conflict with a denomination’s chosen ethical stance, a theological dispute, or a desire for better programs for one’s children. In these and other situations, one spouse may want to change churches, while the other wishes to remain in the original congregation or denominational tradition. Sometimes a move to a new city precipitates such a change; the couple cannot find a congregation in which both are comfortable, so they join different congregations.

This freedom to change denomination reflects the successes of the ecumenical movement of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. In feeling free to make denominational switches, laity are affirming the true *koinonia* of the church by embracing other denominations as faithful representatives of another part of the Body of Christ, recognizing the marks of the Church (“one, holy, catholic, and apostolic”) in the other.

When the spouses are both committed Christian people, they need to negotiate whether to go to church separately all the time or whether they will sometimes attend church together. Rene Beaupere suggests that a dual-church couple can live out a “re-doubled faithfulness: not to become fifty-fifty Christians but to achieve 200 percent faithfulness.”¹ This suggestion is clearly intended to be affirming to couples who seek to participate actively in the life of two congregations, what Beaupere and others have called “double belonging.” The reality, however, is more complex. How can one be involved in church leadership, Sunday school teaching, or choir (to cite only a few examples) when one is away once or twice per month attending one’s spouse’s congregation? The alternative is for the couple always to worship apart, which has its own issues, or for only one to be involved at this level while the other splits his/her attendance between the two congregations so that the couple can worship together part of the time. But this is a one-sided solution that raises issues for the marriage relationship. Of the two individuals in an interdenominational marriage, John Pobee contends, “neither may individually ‘unchurch’ the other.”²

The stakes are even higher for a family with children. Decisions must be made about the children’s participation in the life of the church, especially Sunday school and youth group. In which congregation will the children be baptized and confirmed, and who decides? Will the children attend

each church part of the time or one church exclusively? What will the family do about major religious festivals; for example, will they attend one church together on Christmas Eve? These decisions must be made by each family. Whenever age appropriate, the children should be encouraged to be part of the decision-making process so that they feel ownership over the outcome.

Most of the literature on ecumenical marriage assumes that the couple’s denominational difference was a stable factor during their engagement and throughout the marriage, or that the change that was made was toward homogeneity. A 1999 Creighton University study, for example, analyzed marriages in three categories: interchurch couples, same-church couples, and couples who moved from the interchurch to same-church category during the marriage. The study did not address the opposite scenario: couples moving from being members of the same church to an ecumenical marriage.

The good news for clergy is that the 92 percent of the interchurch couples in the Creighton study reported that clergy are either “very committed” (43 percent) or “somewhat committed” (49 percent) to helping a couple of mixed denominational commitment.³ But what is it that clergy and congregations can do to provide support and ministry to those couples who find themselves in a mid-marriage change of denominational affiliation? The answer depends, in part, on the relationship of the church to the couple.

The Receiving Church

For the church receiving one member of a couple, there are a number of things that can be done to support the couple and their faith lives.

When one member of a couple indicates a desire to join the church without the other, inquire about what is going on in the relationship. Listen and seek to discern what is going on with the couple’s faith life. How is the Holy Spirit guiding the faith journey of the couple or family and each of the individuals involved?

If possible, invite the non-joining spouse to be present at the worship service during which the other spouse joins the congregation. Ask whether the non-joining spouse wishes

Communicate your theology clearly. Is your Communion table open to church members’ non-member relatives when they attend? Do you consider their baptisms to be valid? If so, say so! If not, explain why not.

Each congregation needs to speak of other denominational traditions with respect and sensitivity—whether in casual conversations, in sermons, in Sunday school, or at church suppers. Ecumenism begins with respect for the other.

to come forward with the joining spouse. Also ask whether he/she wants his/her membership in the other congregation acknowledged and supported as part of the spouse being received into this congregation.

Usually the congregation automatically embraces the new member into the fellowship. Encourage the congregation to embrace non-member spouses as well, and to welcome them when they visit the church (without trying to force them into membership). Lay leaders may want to inquire as to the church the non-member spouse belongs to and to affirm that person's faith life. The goal is to find the right balance between inviting non-member spouses to attend this church and honoring where they are in their faith journeys—to "welcome one another, as Christ has welcomed you, to the glory of God" (Romans 15:7).

If your polity allows an associate membership status, offer that opportunity to the non-member spouse, but always with the sensitivity that even that status might not be possible or desired.

Communicate your theology clearly. Is your Communion table open to church members' non-member relatives when they attend? Do you consider their baptisms to be valid? If so, say so! If not, explain why not. This suggests that clergy need to be conversant with various churches' theologies and polities, and that seminaries need to teach future clergy to be knowledgeable about other denominations. It also means that all those involved—clergy and laity—must honor and respect those boundaries until the day of ecumenical rapprochement between the two traditions involved. Ignoring the denomination's theology and polity is a misguided attempt at being pastoral. Instead, it demonstrates that one does not respect one's own tradition nor the other's, and it indicates a lack of awareness of the real differences that can be bridged through attentive ecumenical work.

Invite the non-member who attends with the member spouse to play a minor role now and again. There are many church roles rightfully reserved for members, such as serving on the governing council, but other roles do not need to be reserved in this way. For instance, a non-member could be invited to lead an adult discussion class on his own tradition.

The Relinquishing Congregation

Hospitality is more difficult for the pastor of a church where one member of a couple is leaving and one is staying. If the person who is leaving is joining another Christian community, inquire as to what has brought the individual to this decision, listen to the answer, and support the faith journey that has led the person there. Even if the conversation includes criticism of one's ministry or one's denomination, it is important to hear what is impelling the person to this decision. One does not have to agree in order to listen pastorally.

Offer to write a letter of transfer to the receiving congregation, indicating that the departing member is a baptized member in good standing, if that is the case. This demonstrates to the departing parishioner that you honor his or her decision.

Notify the appropriate lay leaders of the congregation of the transfer. It can be embarrassing to the remaining member to field well-meaning but frequent inquiries about the circumstances surrounding his or her spouse's absence from church.

The bottom line for congregations is to be pastorally sensitive to the dynamics of ecumenical marriages and families and to take the time to find out what is going on spiritually for the couple and for each of the individuals involved.

Communicate clearly that the now solo member continues to be as welcome as he or she has always been, and reiterate whenever appropriate that the former member is always welcome to come back and worship without pressure to rejoin. Returning for a worship service can feel awkward for former members, so welcome them warmly. Realize, too, that the attendance of children in church programs and events—even if it was once regular—may become intermittent, and provide these children with a hospitable reception when they do come.

Offer support for the marriage and family. This couple has reached a point of individuation in their marriage. It may be a healthy step or it may be a crisis point. Help them to explore the implications of their decisions.

A Dual Effort

Each congregation needs to speak of other denominational traditions with respect and sensitivity—whether in casual conversations, in sermons, in Sunday school, or at church suppers. Ecumenism begins with respect for the other. The church should be a welcoming, open environment for all, including non-member spouses and children.

Both congregations should be available as supports to the family and children in the decision-making process concerning their church affiliation and attendance. Congregations may go out of their way to meet the special needs of children of divorced parents who are sharing custody, yet not realize that in terms of children's participation and sense of belonging there are similar issues in ecumenical marriages. Each congregation should be flexible in its efforts to meet the needs of the children and should include them in activities whenever possible. For example, in preschool or early grade school, stars are often given to children for perfect attendance. Children who can attend only every other week could instead be given a star for perfect attendance on all of their scheduled attendance dates.

Affirm that this circumstance can be an opportunity for spiritual growth. My husband's decision to join a tradition that practices adult baptism sparked a deepened theology and spirituality in relation to my own baptism at the age of five weeks, followed by confirmation as a teenager.

Regularly include prayer for other churches and other denominations in the prayers of the church. This is spiritual ecumenism, praying for the unity of the church as Jesus prayed for us to have a unity that reflects the interior life of the Trinity (John 17:21).

Celebrate the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity and invite the ecumenical couples to be involved in the planning and leadership. Consider inviting the congregations of non-member spouses to join your congregation in the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity celebration.

When appropriate, include some hymns or liturgical settings from other traditions, particularly those denominations with whom your church is in ecumenical dialogue or full communion and those denominations represented in ecumenical marriages within your congregation. A Moravian love feast, for example, is a wonderful Christmas or Easter season tradition.

The bottom line for congregations—both those receiving a member of a couple and those keeping one—is to be pastorally sensitive to the dynamics of ecumenical marriages and families and to take the time to find out what is going on spiritually for the couple and for each of the individuals involved. This situation presents a key opportunity for pastoral support and ministry with a couple, as well as with their children.

It is easy in parish life for our congregational identity to be the first identifier and the broader Christian commitment to be secondary. But we are Christians first. Our congregations will be more welcoming to visitors, more open to potential members, and more hospitable to ecumenical marriages and families if we can foster an attitude that all Christians belong within any part of the Body of Christ's church. Talk of "members" and "non-members" or "church family" and "guests" can readily become insider-outsider talk. We are all guests, Christ's guests, at the eucharistic table, led by the Spirit to worship God in spirit and in truth. ♦

NOTES

1. Rene Beaupere, "Double Belonging: Some Reflections," *One in Christ*, No. 18 (1982), 42.
2. John Pobee, "Perspectives for Ecumenical Formation Tomorrow," *Ecumenical Review*, No. 48 (October 1996), 485.
3. Center for Marriage and Family, Creighton University, *Ministry to Inter-church Marriages: A Summary Report* (Omaha: Center for Marriage and Family, 1999), 7.

How Are We Doing?

We would like to hear from you. Please share your thoughts on the content of this issue by writing to Richard Bass, Director of Publishing, at rbass@Alban.org.

Dean R. Hoge and Jacqueline E. Wenger

Pastors in TRANSITION

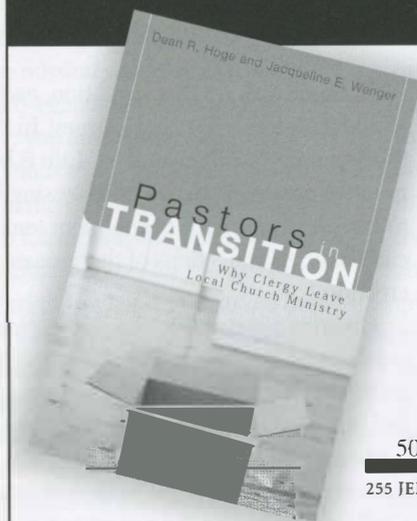
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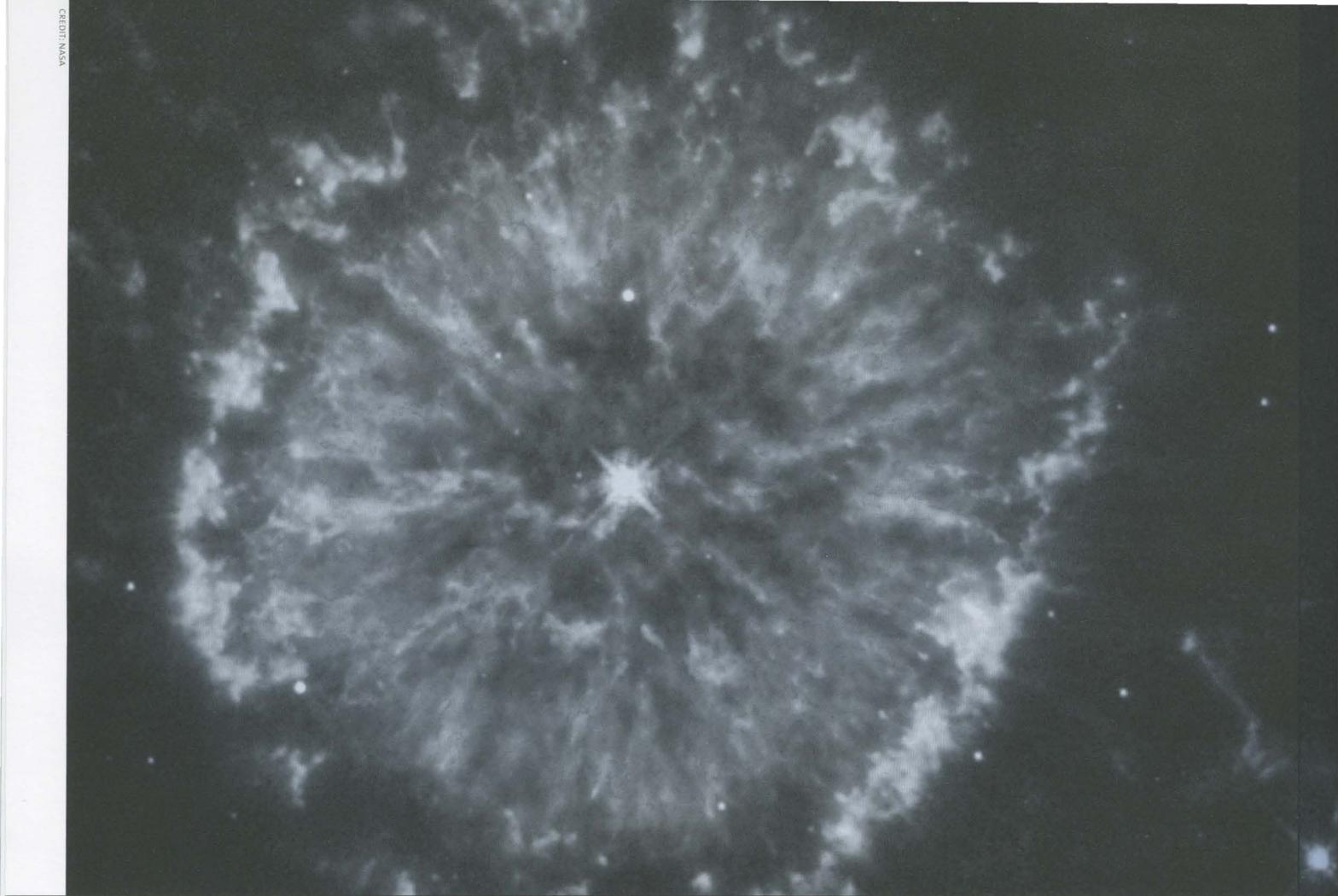
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Unlocking Divine Sparks

Creative Approaches to Decision-Making in the Spiritual Life of a Community

SHAWN ISRAEL ZEVIT

“In beginnings, worlds are created. In creativity, meanings are formed”¹

In the Jewish mystical tradition, each human being is viewed as a creative spark awaiting more kindling on his or her soul journey. In the Hebrew Bible, the very first words of Genesis are, “In the beginning God created...” Life is brought into being through a combination of order and intuitive creativity. In the first blessing before one of the core prayers in the Jewish liturgy, we pray to *hamehadesh b’tuvo bekol-yom tamid ma’aseh bereyshit* (the One who renews creation’s work each day). As reflections of that prayer, we, too, yearn to participate in the perpetual renewal of creation.²

Creative approaches to congregational planning, spiritual practice, decision-making, and values clarification can be a gateway to engaging and releasing this renewal. These approaches are not merely parlor tricks or artistic flourishes. They are keys to unlocking the very spiritual, emotional, and intellectual energy that may be dormant or blocked in a congregational system.

As Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan wrote in *The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion*, “A modern equivalent of the notion of creativity, which tradition regarded as the very essence of the Godhood, would be the concept of the latent and potential elements in the universe as making

for an increase in the quantity and quality of life ... a spiritual conception of life is consistent only with ... the belief that both humanity and the universe are ever in a state of being created. The liturgy speaks of God as 'renewing daily the works of creation.' By becoming aware of that fact, we might gear our own lives to this creative urge in the universe and discover within ourselves unsuspected powers of the spirit."³

Creative Reconnections

I have discovered the truth of Kaplan's words in my own work. For example, I recently worked in creative ways with a 300-household Jewish congregation that wished to reconnect with its founding principles and mission—with its pre-building, pre-rabbi, pre-staff stage of communal life, which began two decades ago. With the aim of helping them accomplish this goal, I was brought in to facilitate the congregation's annual retreat for members, clergy, and staff. The approaches I used were probably unlike any they had experienced at previous retreats. They were "creative" both in the sense that they employed narrative, imagery, role playing, and imagination, as well as in the sense that they were generative of something new, unexpected, and alive.

We began gently, with a familiar ritual—a *niggun*, a wordless melody that brings focus to the group's energy and acts as a reminder of the sacred intent of our gathering and the commitment to the relationships formed in the name of community. Afterward, I began my presentation by projecting onto a screen a photograph from two decades ago. It showed a group of people gathered at a founding member's home; this was the meeting where the idea of starting the congregation was hatched. I invited both seasoned and new members to use the body language and expressions of the people pictured to suggest what they were thinking. Wonderful stories came to the fore from the founders, and creative interpretations were offered by newer members, especially children and

These approaches are not merely parlor tricks or artistic flourishes. They are keys to unlocking the very spiritual, emotional, and intellectual energy that may be dormant or blocked in a congregational system.

youth. I then showed more photographs from the congregation's 20-year history, asking for more real or imagined thoughts or dialogue to be provided for those pictured. When we arrived at a current photo of the synagogue itself, I invited participants to find a partner and share what it was they believed this building would want prospective members to know about its people and its history.

The final image in my presentation was a supersized version of the congregation's mission statement, which I invited the president to read aloud. Then I asked everyone to "become" the adjectives included in the mission statement: "You are 'warm and welcoming.' Why are you in the mission statement and what are you here to remind us of?" I asked. "I am here to remind everyone that we are to always be an open tent like our ancestors Abraham and Sarah, like the ancient festival celebrations in Jerusalem that welcomed in the Israelite and the stranger," one participant responded. "That we are to be open to people who may have been alienated from religious life and are seeking a nonjudgmental home to return to," offered another.

We went through all the descriptive words in the mission statement in this way: "You are 'egalitarian' ... you are 'inclusive' ... you are 'valuing tradition' ... you are 'innovative.'" More and more voices joined the exploration. I offered appreciation for the mission statement and thanked its initial crafters for the wisdom they imparted through it. I then asked the participants what they had learned from the document that expressed the reason for their community's existence. An hour later, with the conversation still buzzing, I brought the evening to a close by offering a series of questions for everyone to consider in preparation for the next day's session:

"Imagine that you are back at that founding meeting 20 years ago. Would you change this mission statement in any way and why? What values would you like to see reflected in it? Imagine that it is five years from now and you are looking at a photo of this weekend: what was said at this time that supported the congregation in growing and thriving in the years that followed?"

That evening the past was present and the future was glimpsed. Individual and congregational stories were brought to the table, later to become inspiring references for the work ahead. On subsequent days of the retreat, we studied texts from the Torah, the Talmud, and the Hasidic masters. We looked at other congregational mission statements and a previous five-year plan to examine the elements needed to help build a conscious, supportive, and spiritually and intellectually vibrant community. We broke into subgroups to revise the mission statement, to clarify the value of a variety of religious practices and the synagogue's worship style, and to explore educational issues that needed to be addressed in the year ahead. During prayer, we paused when one of the values or themes being explored in our work together surfaced in the liturgy, and we added additional prayers for those values (such as creativity, love, deep listening, and unity) to be present in the work of the board and committees, the clergy, and teachers in the year ahead. There were no activities—study, group dialogue, worship, brainstorming, or late-night conversation—that were seen as being outside the process and goals of the weekend or the subsequent year in the life of the community.

This is just one example of the power of creative modalities in work with communities. The more my rabbinic,

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—RABBI MORDECAI KAPLAN from *The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion*

educational, performance, and consulting work takes me into a variety of faith-based, not-for-profit, organizational, educational, and governmental settings, the more I see accomplished in both the short and long term by finding the modality—or combination of modalities—that best suits the group or organization and its mission, spiritual values, and traditions. Process and outcome, form and content become mutually enhancing and interdependent ways of realizing the divine potential of individuals, communities, and larger organizational systems, especially when conflict, stagnation, and habit are exerting stress on the congregational or organizational system.

Giving Voice to the Unexpressed

There are many ways to interact with our sacred texts and to weave in how we experience the Divine working through us now. For example, a number of the psalms include dialogue with God. Similarly, one way I have worked with both young people and adults in the area of congregational decision-making, visioning, and planning is to ask them to write a “Dear God/Source of Life,” “Dear Self,” or “Dear Congregation” letter, allowing for a variety of comfort levels with personal theological language. This exercise provides an avenue to voice what is not in scripture but is informed by it, or to voice something that is in an individual’s heart but is not conventionally expressed. Sometimes I ask participants in this exercise to also write their own answering letters addressing their

particular queries or areas of conflict or concern. What often emerges from this exercise is a soul response that is more expansive, flexible, and capable of holding polarities (even when resolution is not always accessible) than is produced by opinion sharing or conceptual discussion. The suspension of judgment and deep listening to the words beneath the words are very important in any of these exercises, just as they are in group spiritual direction or consensus-building exercises.

Another exercise involves asking group members to create a human “sculpture” around a particular value as it relates to an issue requiring a decision that will impact the community at large. For example, if *tikkun olam*—social justice and community activism—is the chosen issue about which members are trying to develop priorities, resolve conflict, or self-educate, participants can be asked to create a sculpture representing the various values, causes, or organizations under discussion. The exercise begins with one person striking a pose expressive of the cause or value he or she wishes to represent (for instance, the environment, international relief, or ending hunger). One by one, others take positions in relation to the first person and offer a one-word description of the aspect of *tikkun olam* they represent. During the exercise, the facilitator can interview various people as to why their cause is a priority. The different members of the sculpture can be invited to dialogue among themselves (“Environmental concerns, why are you an important priority and what do you have to say about your relationship to the other priorities?”). Those remaining seated can be invited to offer

what they observe and how the dialogue impacts their view of the causes they believe congregational human and financial resources should be invested in, and in what priority.

The art of inviting participants—whether in study, during worship services, in youth or adult educational settings, or at meetings or retreats—to give voice to the unspoken thoughts and feelings of characters or situations in scripture can also be a powerful way to assist members of a community to unlock insights in the Bible (“bibliodrama”⁴) and discover their relevance to contemporary issues. I have employed this technique in my work with congregations. For instance, to explore the dynamics of leadership with congregational or organizational boards, committees, clergy, and staff, I often use the story of Moses receiving and acting on his father-in-law’s advice about delegating and avoiding leadership burnout to explore the dynamics of leadership (Exodus, Chapter 18, or Deuteronomy 1:9-15). Exploring the scripture bibliodramatically might involve reading a few verses of text, then inviting people to offer suggestions as to why Jethro felt compelled to give Moses his advice, or asking participants to consider what Moses really thought when he heard Jethro’s advice and why he decided to listen to him. What is gleaned from this enactment and the text itself that relates to leadership and communication issues in the community can then be explored in discussion.⁵

Retelling the Story

Telling a community’s story through a scriptural lens, or creating vignettes of the history of one’s congregation, school, or organization and the values it stands for can help a group realize how it can live in and create sacred community. This creative and maximalist approach is central to a productive values-based decision-making process that can be employed for crucial issues in the life of a faith-based community. A paradigmatic model suggested by Dr. David Teutsch, director of the Center for Ethics at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, consists of:

- ◆ study of the sources of religious and cultural traditions and practices
- ◆ study of current information from the natural and social sciences (including organizational dynamics, systems theory, etc.)
- ◆ reflection on personal and communal values
- ◆ analysis of the impact of each possible decision on each affected party
- ◆ democratic and inclusive processes that maximize the number of participants along the way to a final decision⁶

To this approach, I have added the creative techniques for reflecting on personal and communal values described earlier in this article, as well as role playing to help in analyzing the impact of possible decisions. An in-depth process such as this may take a year or more in the life of a community, so this is not a model I would recommend for making minor decisions. However, in the areas of religious services, board governance, operating practices, financial resources, education, and involvement in social justice causes

well as active participant—is crucial to the success of such endeavors. By trusting that when we openly look at and name the dynamics of power, authority, and responsibility that we, as clergy or lay leaders, have in a congregational or organizational system, we can facilitate ownership by other members of the community for their part in the decision-making process—to everyone's benefit.

An example of this occurred recently in my own life, when I became the visiting rabbi at a lay-led congregation, Dor Hadash, in Pittsburgh, a faith community experimenting with a hybrid of leadership models. In this congregation, we arranged for the signing of the rabbinic contract to be a ritual event. After the president of the congregation convened the evening, the leadership of the *havurah*, a subgroup within the community that, with the support of the larger congregation, had accepted responsibility for bringing a visiting rabbi to the congregation each month, shared what it meant for them to arrive at this moment. The *havurah* liaison and

tional *shehekiyanu* prayer, thanking God for being the sustaining Source and for bringing us to this day. This was followed by a shared meal, where we traded stories about our personal journeys. Finally, we embarked on a three-hour planning session that laid out the year's activities for the *havurah* and how it would interface with the congregation as a whole.

People remarked upon how our study together and the sacredness of the signing ritual had directly contributed to the energy, creative thinking, and enthusiasm for the decision-making and planning that followed. At evening's end, I invited the leadership to share what they were taking away from our first collective working session. A number of participants commented that their fear of losing their voices with a rabbi present had given way to new energy, empowerment, and a sense of being supported to take on greater roles in their spiritual and communal lives. Weaving together ritual, individual and congregational stories, study, prayer, a shared meal, administrative objectives, and program planning can mutually enhance each of these components, helping to build relationships and a sense of sacred community at the same time.

I have discovered that capital campaigns and efforts to decide what type of membership dues or fee structure a community will adopt can also be enhanced by these types of creative values-based decision-making approaches. Dorshei Tzedek, a growing congregation in Newton, Massachusetts, spent a year studying money and Jewish values en route to a community-wide vote on restructuring the congregation's membership dues system. Having participated in a similar process to update their mission statement, they are now applying this approach to their emerging capital campaign.⁸

Creative and participatory approaches to the spiritual life of any community are enhanced the more people see themselves as active participants in their individual and congregational religious life. This can help narrow the divide between practices and expressed values both within a faith community and outside its walls. In addition, seeing adults become more invested in the major issues that

In the moment of a creative encounter—as in any artistically alive and spiritual moment—our task is to be present to what the relationships and dynamics in the room are calling out for.

in the larger world, combining creative techniques with this serious approach to discernment can powerfully impact the level of participation, the outcome, and the ownership of decisions.

Cultivating Active Participation

Many faith communities and organizations employ such participatory processes to engage the entire congregation in renewing and reinvigorating worship services, coming to deeper ownership of congregational Shabbat practices and guidelines, and other areas of ritual. The role of clergy as teacher and guide—as

I both shared that we had experienced the contract negotiations as a truly holy conversation. We then discussed the themes of power, authority, and accountability as they occur in any group or organizational system, studied biblical and contemporary texts on leadership, and explored our hopes for our rabbi-congregational relationship.⁷ Next, using a ritual format often used at Jewish weddings, the president handed me the contract, asking if I agreed to the covenant of our terms. He then did the same with the *havurah* liaison. After we had signed the document, other *havurah* members were invited to sign as witnesses if they so chose. Afterward, we chanted the tradi-

determine the current and future actions of their community can also inspire young people to become involved.

Of course, we can misuse any creative or participatory process—to block needed action and consign decision-making to an endless process of processing, for instance. We can also hide behind anti-authoritarian approaches, undermining clergy and leaders by insisting that everyone needs to approve every decision or that consensus is required at every turn. To avoid these pitfalls, it's important to be aware of the shadow side of any creative process when we approach core issues in sacred community creatively and with maximal member involvement. Ultimately, when we enter into discussion about an important issue in our community, we are entering sacred ground. Godliness can manifest through the approach and content of our decision-making. We are, in short, striving for a process that contains Godly values and yields an outcome that fulfills the mission of our community and the spiritual growth of the participants.

Whatever approach we take, it's crucial that we do our homework beforehand, trust in the development of our own styles of leadership and the social and spiritual bonds in the community we are committed to. We also must recognize that we might have a strong bias in favor of a particular outcome. This is part of the creative tension when we move decision-making from an elite activity into greater communal participation. Moses faced this tension with a burgeoning community at Sinai. Managing polarities is part of the decision-making process. In the moment of a creative encounter—as in any artistically alive and spiritual moment—our task is to be present to what the relationships and dynamics in the room are calling out for, in balance with the mission and values of that community. The insights, healing, enjoyment, and challenges people will experience from such an encounter depend on this practice of presence, as do the creativity, compassion, and conscious choice-making that can be its result. ♦

NOTES

1. Hasidic story about Menachem Mendel of Kotzk, as told by Rabbi Harold Schulweis, *In God's Mirror: Reflections and Essays* (Hoboken, NJ: KTAV Publishing, 1990), <http://www.ktav.com>.
2. From the blessing for light and creation in the *shakharit*, or morning service.
3. Kaplan, Mordecai, *The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion* (Detroit: Wayne State Press, 1994), 62-3, <http://wsupress.wayne.edu/index.html>.
4. Peter Piztele, a therapist and psychodramatist, structured this process (which emerged in some Jewish and Christian circles in the 1970s and 1980s) into a form of interpretive play he termed "bibliodrama." For a full description of the process of bibliodrama, see Peter Piztele's *Scripture Windows: Towards a Practice of Bibliodrama* (Los Angeles: Torah Aura Productions, 1997-98), <http://www.torahaura.com>. Also see <http://www.icmidrash.org>, the Web site of the Institute for Contemporary Midrash.
5. For a collection of texts that can be effective tools for leadership training and board and committee development, see *Jewish*

Communal Leadership and Congregational Governance: A Resource Manual for Training and Developing Effective Boards and Committees, compiled by Rabbi Shawn Zevit and Shira Stutman (Elkins Park, PA: Reconstructionist Press, 2005), www.jrf.org.

6. For more material on Jewish values-based decision-making, see Rabbi Richard Hirsh and Dr. David Teutsch's articles in *The Reconstructionist: Decision Making*, Volume 65, No. 2, Spring 2001 (online at www.therra.org); Rabbi Shawn Zevit's article, "The Evolving Face of Reconstructionism," *Reconstructionism Today*, Summer 2004, Volume 11, No. 3 (under *Reconstructionism Today* at www.jrf.org).
7. *The Rabbi-Congregational Relationship: A Vision for the 21st Century*, Rabbi Richard Hirsh, editor (Elkins Park, PA: Reconstructionist Press, 2001), www.jrf.org.
8. For a full case study on this community, see Shawn Zevit's *Offerings of the Heart: Money and Values in Faith Community* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2005), www.alban.org; and *Money and Jewish Values: A Twelve-Week Curriculum* by Shawn Zevit and Shira Stutman (Elkins Park, PA: Reconstructionist Press, 2004), www.jrf.org.

Questions for Reflection

1. What creative approaches have been most successful in moving your community through an impasse or in dealing with a major decision? Which ones have been least successful? What contributed to the outcome of success/lack of success? What would you do differently in the future?
2. What issue in your community has not been resolved or is being avoided? What method described in this article might be applied to help deal with the lack of resolution of this issue, the tension it is causing, or the resistance to dealing with it?
3. What biblical text might resonate with an area of concern or interest in your community that might help you gain insight into that issue? How might you integrate a bibliodramatic or other creative approach to this issue?
4. Using the outline of values-based decision-making provided in this article and doing further research through the suggested resources mentioned in the footnotes, how might you structure a similar process in your community? What core issue would best be served by such an approach?
5. In what moments have you most strongly felt your faith or a Divine presence present in a major decision or activity in the life of your community? What roles did spontaneity and creativity play in this experience? What roles did study, weighing values, and open discussion of different viewpoints play?



Re-creating Congregational Stories

Insights from Narrative Therapy

LAWRENCE PEERS

There is a growing recognition, in many disciplines, of the capacity stories have to influence, limit, expand, and nurture life on the personal, religious, and organizational level. In congregations, narrative often pervades our way of being together. Whether through Torah or Bible study, lectionary readings, sermons, or testimonies, stories are told and retold, interpreted and reinterpreted in ways that aim to build faith, inspire commitment, and influence lives. Congregations are primarily interpretive communities, seeking new meanings in familiar stories and enduring wisdom for contemporary challenges. Moreover, congregations not only interpret stories of faith together, congregations *are* stories—each with its own characters and story line, dramas and dilemmas. When we enter a congregation we enter a story that is already going on. We seek to find our way into the trajectory of events that enfold us, as did those who came before us.

Although there is a recent emergence of the use of narrative in organizational and leadership development work¹, narrative therapy developed in the field of psychology in the early 1980s as a way of explicitly using the stories that individuals and especially families told about their problems. Drawing upon some of the insights from their therapeutic practice and from anthropologists and philosophers, Michael White and David Epston, in their book *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends*, value the “storied” way in which their clients often represented their problems. They found that what was often left out of these stories could also be a source of change and renewal.

Since the common vernacular of religious communities is story and interpretation of story, congregational leaders may find that a narrative approach is a forthright and skillful means of motivating positive change. Indeed, some of the practical concepts of “narrative therapy” have informed my own consulting work with congregations. I have discovered that a narrative approach can be a springboard for deeper change, particularly in those congregations that may feel “stuck” or are in times of transition or conflict. Over time I’ve recognized the narrative dimensions within even seemingly businesslike processes like strategic planning, visioning, or even in congregational conflict work. As White and Epston point out, there is the recognition that oftentimes people come to therapy “when the narratives in which they are ‘storying’ their experience, and/or in which they are having their experience ‘storied’ by others, do not sufficiently represent their lived experience.”² Likewise, congregations that are planning new future mission directions or experiencing conflict are seeking not just some new “plan” or “vision” or some resolution to the conflict but also some new way of understanding who they are and who they might become that may not be included in the current way they “story” their experiences.

For example, in a congregation I worked with recently, the leaders were seeking help in the redevelopment of

the congregation, clearly understanding that before they could move toward a new vision they also had to transform the conflict in their congregation. Some of the key concepts of narrative therapy—including the “problem-saturated story,” “externalizing the problem,” “unique outcomes” or “sparkling moments,” and “the alternate story”—are clearly illustrated by this congregation’s story and journey toward change.

The Problem-Saturated Story

In my first interactions with this congregation, located in a thriving southeastern city, I learned from the pastors about their difficulties in getting the congregation to move forward from its past. These pastors and some of the lay leaders were concerned that the congregation couldn’t get beyond the influence of its former founding pastor, even following his death. Some people left the congregation because it was no longer like the church they had known under “Pastor John.” Others agitated for a return to the way things used to be—in the music, the preaching, and in the leadership. The current pastors felt under constant criticism. At the same time, a significant number of people, both older and newer members, felt fulfilled by the congregation and its current leadership. Nevertheless, many were feeling discouraged by the tensions that existed in the congregation.

When I met with the church’s board, I encouraged them to step back and take a “balcony perspective” on the story they were telling about the congregation. I pointed out that their story had the characteristics of a “problem-saturated story,” which often has the effect of making them feel stuck on a downward spiral with no way out. They could readily agree that this was their dynamic.

Rather than refute the story they were telling, I asked them to delve into the problem-saturated story even more. Drawing on some of the practices of narrative therapy³, I asked curious questions about the process in which the problem arose and the impact the problem was having on the people in the congregation. For example:

- ◆ When did you first recognize the problem arising?
- ◆ What do you notice makes the problem worse?
- ◆ How does it affect people differently in the congregation?
- ◆ What behaviors have you resorted to in relationship to these situations?
- ◆ What gets in the way of your developing the kind of relationship with this situation that you would like?

By asking this type of question about the congregation’s story, two things occurred: One, the leaders were invited to take a reflective (rather than reactive) stance toward the problem. They were able to step outside of the problem-saturated story that had dominated their conversations for many months. (Examination through curious questions often deconstructs the problem-saturated story.) Also, indirectly and most importantly, by talking about the situation in this way they began to “externalize the problem.”

Externalizing the Problem

Often, the tendency in the dynamic of a problem-saturated story is to place blame on, assign fault to, and feel resentment toward various people or groups within the congregation and to internalize the problem by feeling guilty, angry, or depressed. In externalizing the problem, a space is created between the persons and the problem. Once a reflective stance toward the problem-saturated story begins, one can give a name to the problem. The name this church’s board gave to the congregation’s problem was “The Transition.”

By mapping out the way that the problem of “The Transition” was impacting people in different ways, we moved from blaming one group to looking at the problem as the protagonist in the congregation’s story. As we spent time talking about transitions that members of the board had experienced in their own lives, we talked about the familiar patterns of letting go and of the messy, uncertain, in-between time before being able to

move forward. Indeed, the congregation was in one of those messy times now—some still mourning the past, others ready to move into the future, and most living in the turbulence of the present.

The Unique Outcome or Sparkling Moments

By asking questions that help to externalize and deconstruct the problem, we open a space in which leaders and members of a congregation can look at the problem-saturated story as only one version of their experience.

Sometimes spontaneously, but most often through consistent questioning, exceptions to the problem-saturated story are uncovered. Following the initial exploration of the development of the problem, a group is more ready to have a conversation about when “the problem” doesn’t exist or when they are doing something outside the problem-saturated story. In narrative therapy, such an event is referred to as a “unique outcome” or “sparkling moment,” which Gerald Monk *et al.* define in *Narrative Therapy in Practice: The Archaeology of Hope* as “a moment in any problem-saturated story when the client demonstrates a surprising achievement in defeating or limiting the influence of the problem in her life. Such moments, which are often isolated and neglected, are the shining stars in a sky darkened by the dominance of the problem.”⁴

These “unstoried” dimensions—those not included in the dominant or problem-saturated story of a congregation’s narrative—can be the source for an alternative story that holds promise for new possibilities for a congregation seeking deep change or healing. They are exceptions to the plot that is so convincingly reiterated again and again in the problem-saturated story. In the story of the congregation described earlier, the “unstoried” parts were how the congregation was successfully making transitions in some of its life, such as in an openness about its finances and in a sharing of leadership among a wider circle of members. The “unstoried” parts of any congregation’s story come out in

side comments and through deliberate questioning to ascertain exceptions to the dominant or problem-saturated story.

“Every time we ask a question,” writes David Epston, “we’re generating a possible version of a life.” Thus, the religious leader who can ask curious questions can often help a congregation become aware of its dominant story and move toward its alternate story.

Creating an Alternate Story for the Future

This initial work with the board and pastors prepared us for the work with the larger congregation, which was done as a large-group intervention known as a “Future Search Conference.”⁵ More than 120 members of the congregation from various stakeholder groups—long-term and newer members, parents of young children, singles and retired people—gathered around small tables in a big auditorium for a weekend to participate in the Future Search process, which employs a series of structured activities and dialogues through which participants review the congregation’s past, own their present challenges, and discern their common-ground future together. Implicit in this process is a communal hermeneutics—an interpretation by the whole congregation of what their story has meant in the past and what some of the possibilities are for their future story.

Early in the conference, participants were asked to tell the story of their congregation’s past. Each participant wrote on a wall-sized timeline the events he or she considered to be significant in the unfolding story of the

congregation. As a group, we then interpreted the story revealed through the timeline. It became clear that there were some competing stories in the congregation. Not everyone who had been a member of the congregation under the previous pastor felt that these were the “golden years”; indeed, they shared some hard facts about how buildings were neglected until a crisis occurred, how the finances were not always openly disclosed, and how lay people were not always included in the decision-making. On the other hand, others who had been part of the congregation during these earlier years shared some accomplishments and some high points of the congregation’s history from that time that not everyone had known about. Those who had joined the congregation in recent years also shared some of their own joys about the congregation.

The task before us was not to determine which version of the story was correct and which wasn’t. Instead, it was to recognize that there were many competing stories the congregation could

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tell. In this psychic and social space where multiple interpretations of the past were now exposed, the task before us was not to determine whose version of the story was “true” but to choose how to move forward.

This was a time of transition in which the resources of both the past and the present would help the congregation create a new future. We looked for other times when the congregation had navigated a transition successfully so that we could string these “sparkling moments” together into an alternate story about the congregation. Moreover, as we looked into the present and not just the past for clues about their future story, we recognized that their future had to be an intentional building upon their past strengths and a forthright owning of their present opportunities. Only in the presence of this alternate story could they consider what they wanted to carry forward and what they wanted to leave behind as they constructed their common-ground future.

Threshold Moments

To symbolize the importance of making this transition from the past through the present and toward the future, I decided we needed to ritualize this recognition early on in the conference so that our further discussion could proceed with this understanding. After asking the participants to stand I led them through a guided meditation in which they, together as a congregation, imagined that they were standing in front of a doorway. Their next step together from this imaginary threshold would be about creating something new together that brought the best of the past forward and moved them together toward their common-ground vision.

Esther de Waal, the contemporary writer on Benedictine and Celtic topics, reminds us that in ancient wisdom “a threshold is a sacred thing.” In monastic practice, threshold moments occur throughout the day:

The monk or nun enters the church for the saying of the daily offices, but always leaves him or herself time to stand, to wait, to let go of the demands of whatever the

previous activity had been, with all its concurrent anxieties and expectations. That stillness permits one to enter into that space kept empty in the heart for the Word of God.⁶

Likewise, in the unfolding story of a congregation, there is a need for creating “threshold moments,” when the congregation can listen anew to the stories it tells of itself and can “stand, to wait, to let go of” whatever has come before.

In the biblical traditions, God works within and through the interaction between the local and the cosmic stories. Sometimes our task as religious leaders is to beckon forth other possibilities from the stories that we or our congregations tell—so that we might see how the Spirit is working on the sidelines, in the murmurs and the yet-to-be-discovered aspects of our congregational story.

As the congregation described earlier has discovered, recognizing one’s problem-saturated story is only the beginning, and standing on the first threshold that follows this recognition is only another step upon the journey. This congregation, like most, will continually face “threshold moments” in which they can decide to stay within their problem-saturated story or to bring forth new possibilities for themselves

through the re-creation of their story. From the pause at these open doorways miraculous new beginnings can emerge. ♦

NOTES

1. Annette Simmons, *The Story Factor: Secrets of Influence from the Art of Storytelling* (New York: Basic Books, 2001); John Seely Brown, et. al., *Storytelling in Organizations* (Burlington, MA: Elsevier Butterworth-Heinemann, 2005); Stephen Denning, *The Leader’s Guide to Storytelling* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005).
2. Michael White and David Epston, *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1990), 14.
3. Jill Freedman and Gene Combs, *Narrative Therapy: The Social Construction of Preferred Realities* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996).
4. Gerald Monk et al., *Narrative Therapy in Practice: The Archaeology of Hope* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997).
5. Marvin Weisbord and Sandra Janoff, *Future Search: An Action Guide to Finding Common Ground in Organizations and Communities* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.).
6. Esther de Waal, *To Pause at the Threshold: Reflections on Living on the Border* (Harrisburg, PA: Moorehouse Publishing, 2001).

Questions for Reflection

1. What are some of the stories our congregation tells and retells about itself? What meaning or values are conveyed directly or indirectly in those stories?
2. Have there been times in your congregation when competing stories were present? What were these?
3. Is there a dominant story about your congregation? Is there a problem-saturated story in your congregation? What is the history of this story?
4. What are some sparkling moments or unique outcomes that point to an alternate story to the dominant or problem-saturated story?
5. What is the story line of this alternate story? What future does it point your congregation toward?
6. What places or opportunities do you have in your congregation to take a reflective stance toward the stories you tell? How can you create these times?
7. What do you do as a religious leader to honor the threshold moments that occur within congregational life?



Reframing as Spiritual Change

Transforming Hopelessness into Wholeness

DIANA BUTLER BASS

Last spring I led a clergy conference for an Episcopal diocese on the topic of cultural change, Christianity, and postmodernism. During one session I explained the shift in American society from a single voice of authority to multiple voices and the impact of such a change on churches and denominations. For many people in the room, I presented a different framework for understanding contemporary congregational life. As I built a new model for them they jumped into the fray—asking questions and for clarifications, and testifying to the truthfulness of cultural change in their ministries.

One man, however, did not seem happy about the presentation. Others later told me he was the priest of a congregation that was threatening to leave the diocese over the issue of homosexuality. He sat off to the side, positioning himself as an outsider, and perhaps a victimized one. He put his hand up. I confess that I did not want to call on him. But I did.

“I don’t buy this,” he challenged. “This is relativism. Christians can’t be relativists.”

Although he did not exactly say it, he clearly implied that I, because I was talking about cultural change in a hopeful way, was a relativist. His colleagues recognized the potential assault. Everyone stared, wondering how I would respond.

Stories are the frames by which we understand the universe and events around us. Stories are, in essence, the building blocks of our worldviews.

“Did I say I was a relativist?” I asked. “No, but . . .”

“Well, let me say it clearly: I am not a relativist. I believe that Christianity is good, beautiful, and truthful. But, in all postmodern modesty, I cannot claim that it is the Truth. I am not a relativist. You have to be a modernist to be a relativist and I am not one.”

The priest stopped and thought for a moment. I don't think it had ever occurred to him that a person could be postmodern and not a relativist. I cannot say that he changed his mind about postmodern cultural analysis or me. However, he listened. And, for the rest of the conference, he asked respectful and thoughtful questions. He engaged ideas instead of attacking the messenger.

One does not need to understand the philosophical niceties of postmodernism to understand what happened in this exchange. The priest had been poised to attack me on the basis of his definitions of “postmodern” and “relativism.” Having a sense of his worldview, I knew that I did not fit these definitions. Instead of entering into a challenge on his terms, I changed the offered definitions to my understanding of the terms. In short, he had one story about Christianity and postmodernism and I had another. Instead of arguing with his story, I simply told my own. Changing the story transformed the encounter. Instead of a dead-end fight about relativism (a code-word for “faithless liberalism”), I decided I did not want to win—or frankly, to lose. As a teacher, I tried to open a different possibility and tell a story I suspected he had never heard before. We entered the mystery of the teaching moment. Everyone in the room learned something, including me.

The Frame as Worldview

Lately, I have been thinking a lot about denominations, conflict, and change. This may be due to the fact that I am an Episcopalian and my church is struggling right now over the issue of homosexuality. Recently, I lunched with a friend who is a priest. We talked about the pain of the last two years—the time since the Diocese of New Hampshire elected Gene Robinson, a priest living in a faithful, same-sex partnership, to be its bishop. “You know, I think the church handled this all very poorly,” my friend said. “Right after the vote, everyone who disagreed with Robinson's election was all over the media, protesting, holding press conferences. Those who agreed kept saying ‘no comment, no comment.’ *The church, as a whole, had no story to tell.* Interest groups and individuals had stories. Those who were mad at the church had a story. But the church had no story.”

one at the clergy conference to institutional decisions, the stories we tell—or do not tell—have powerful consequences. That is because stories are the frames by which we understand the universe and events around us. Stories are, in essence, the building blocks of our worldviews. Indeed, as Berkeley linguistics professor George Lakoff argues, stories frame reality: “Frames are mental structures that shape the way we see the world.” Writing about frames in national politics, he says,

As a result, they shape the goals we seek, the plans we make, the way we act, and what counts as a good or bad outcome of our actions.

In politics our frames shape our social policies and the institutions we form to carry out policies. To change our frames is to change all of this. Reframing is social change.¹

When I first read Lakoff, the proverbial light bulb lit up! As he writes, “Framing is about getting language that fits your worldview. It is not just language. The ideas are primary—and the language carries those ideas, evokes those ideas.”² For several years, I had suspected that a crisis of storytelling lay deep within the malaise facing most religious institutions. After all, my denomination had great ideas—powerful,

“Liberal versus conservative” exemplifies the power of framing a religious story—and how long a frame can last.

I looked at her in amazement. She was right. We had become, in effect, a church with no story to tell. Or, worse still, we had a story, but we failed to tell it. We let others tell it for us. In the absence of story, conflict grew, divides deepened, and those who had stories to begin with set the larger framework for storytelling. The church—as a whole—has spent much of the last two years responding to someone else's story, entering into the worldview created by someone else's language and definitions, arguing within a framework that does not carry the spiritual realities of original events.

From individual encounters like the

life-giving ideas of justice, hospitality, friendship, love, and risk—but, sadly, we lacked the language to talk about those ideas in ways that made sense to those listening. We had no story to tell. Lakoff made me wonder: If reframing is social change, might it be spiritual change as well? Could it be congregational and denominational change, too?

Reframing as a Healing Act

I get a little nervous, however, appealing to George Lakoff in an audience that I

cannot see. Surely someone will point out that Lakoff is a political liberal who is self-consciously trying to defeat conservatives. Is that the point of religion? Liberals defeating conservatives? Or vice versa? What does all this matter for telling faithful stories?

Although Lakoff applies his theory to contemporary political life, it easily translates into contemporary religious life as well. As a matter of fact, the whole language of “liberal” and “conservative” is a good example of successful framing. The current denominational tensions over homosexuality serve as a useful case study. Long before anyone used the word “homosexual” in polite company, the issue was framed. Our great-grandparents framed it in the late 19th and early 20th century when they told *their* story: American Protestantism was caught in a life-and-death struggle between fundamentalists and modernists, between conservatives and liberals. The war for America’s soul was on: People lined up and took sides. Conservatives depicted themselves as champions of orthodoxy, and they depicted liberals as purveyors of “another religion.” Liberals depicted themselves as “fearless modernists,” as Christians who were willing to embrace the intellectual consequences of science and history, and they depicted conservatives as half-witted, backwoods snake-handlers. There were, of course, plenty of folks who saw all this as extreme and refused to take sides, but the story of the middle way (or ways) was effectively silenced amidst the framework of “liberal versus conservative” and the discreet frames each side developed.

In our great-grandparents’ frame, the liberals eventually “won” mainline denominations, leaving fundamentalists to fend for themselves in exile. The framing of the story destroyed lives and institutions, setting the template for Protestant tensions for generations to come. For more than a century, church historians taught this frame to future clergy. “Liberal versus conservative” exemplifies the power of framing a religious story—and how long a frame can last.

Some Protestants today still act as if that frame applies. Essentially, the story of most contemporary religion is told

in our great-grandparents’ framework. Certainly, the “liberal versus conservative” analysis dominates the issue of homosexuality. But what if the framework does not fit the ideas? What if the frame was never true in the first place? What if that frame has always been violent and exclusionary? What if it is based on a premise of winning? What does that say of the Christian message? It is time to jettison our great-grandparents’ frame and start telling our own stories. Might new stories open new possibilities of dealing with church conflict? Can we actually reframe the story and create a new way of being faithful together in God?

Seeing “with the mind of Christ,” as the New Testament demands, pushes church leaders to ask tough questions about frames. How and why do we tell certain stories? What are our motivations? Are we trying to win? Or are we trying to teach? Are we trying to attack, to close conversation? Or to open unseen possibilities? What language carries our most cherished ideas of God, the good life, of beauty, of truthfulness?

Thinking about frames—and the act of framing our stories well—goes beyond politics, far beyond the old world of “liberal versus conservative” constructed by our ancestors. Indeed, if framing has political consequences it also has spiritual ones. Reframing is a healing act as well as a social one.

Some health professionals actually use a process called “narrative therapy” to help clients who are stuck in destructive patterns escape and find new, healthier ways of being. Counselor Gerald Monk refers to this as an “archaeology of hope,” in which the therapist assists the client in reframing life experience. By reframing the traumatic past into a different kind of story, patients can “rediscover the remnants” of good things in their lives, “bypass the problems that have stalled them,” and “reconstruct their lives.” The new stories “change the teller in the telling.”³ Reframing happens by deconstructing old stories and searching out alternative stories, redefining characters, establishing new trajectories of plot, and finding a new audience. The process gives the patient an entirely new way of being, a sense of meaning and hope, not simply

a technique to fix a problem. In short, reframing is spiritual change, a process that can transform hopelessness into wholeness. It is an archaeology of hope.

In an era riddled with division, fear, anger, and invective—when people are wandering like spiritual nomads across the land—religious leaders must tell new stories. And, before we start telling our stories, we must discover some new frames. We need to learn how to be archaeologists of hope—how to carefully and patiently recover what lies under the debris, how to sift through the tell of faith and reconstruct our story. After all, if we have no story, or let someone else tell our story for us, why even bother with church? ♦

NOTES

1. George Lakoff, *Don't Think of an Elephant: Know Your Values and Frame the Debate* (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2004), xv.
2. Lakoff, *Elephant*, 4.
3. Gerald Monk, et al., eds., *Narrative Therapy in Practice: The Archaeology of Hope* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997), 3-4.

Questions for Reflection

1. Which of your congregation’s stories about itself or the church as a whole carry your most cherished ideas of God, the good life, of beauty, of truthfulness?
2. Which frames are exclusionary, divisive, or fear-based? What are the motivations for these frames? How can they be revised to bring them into alignment with Christian notions of love and faith?
3. Where is there trauma, conflict, or hopelessness in your congregation, and what are the stories that are told about these conditions? How can these stories be re-told in a way that begins to heal these conditions?
4. What stories of meaning and hope are going untold in your congregation?



Becoming God's Church

A New Congregation Finds its Place in God's Unfolding Story

"This stuff is way too churchy!" the marketing director proclaimed as my wife and I sat down to discuss how to tell the community that a new congregation was being formed in Naples, Florida. "Too churchy!" she advised as we presented our concepts for a brochure that would be mailed to every household

Pastor Roy Terry describes how his congregation lets God take the lead in everything they do

in a 20-mile radius. We had consulted the marketing director at the recommendation of the Florida Conference of the United Methodist Church, which thought a marketing company would be helpful in developing a plan for launching a new congregation.

Cornerstone United Methodist Church was about to be born and the marketing director was to help midwife that process. But upon consulting with her we discovered that she thought our ideas were way off base.

After looking at our humble brochure, she suggested removing any language that might offend or distract people from considering Cornerstone. "Do not use the word 'church.' Instead, try 'community' or 'family,'" she advised. "Take out any reference to Jesus Christ; you know we don't want anyone to be turned off." In an instant the marketing world was taking hold of the story that would let everyone know about Cornerstone. With some new suggestions and formatting, our marketing director was developing a story that would accommodate the masses. It was deception, and every bad image of the marketing world began to flood our minds. Why hide behind fancy language that appeals to everyone? Why use images of perfect people in the brochure, which was supposed to be about the celebration of diversity through Jesus Christ?

To follow the advice of the marketing director would be to participate in consumer deception. This was the beginning of a participation in the narrative of the church, which was not to be manipulated and distorted. The church is a people called to worship, celebrate, and invite everyone to participate in the grace of God. So we told the marketing director to develop the brochure with the language we had prepared, the language she had told us would not work. Within this context Cornerstone began to share its story, and that story is beyond human control. Together, my wife and I decided

The core elements of the early worshiping community celebrated those things that were a means of grace. The center of this celebration was worship. Worship shared more about the church's identity than any marketing strategy or brochure. Participating in worship and practicing those things that transcend time had to be our center as well, so that is where we began—with worship.

God had laid out, through these practices that transcend time and culture, a model for worship that is beyond human agendas. Initially, many on the launch team thought this sounded a

of the Holy Spirit. It was in committing to God's tremendous gifts that led the church to a place of creative and imaginative freedom.

If the church is serious about its full and humble participation in God's story, then the church really does have something to offer! If this is all about God, and not about establishing human social clubs and institutions, then it opens the door for the serious work of inviting everyone to worship. As vessels for the work of the Lord, the practices that transcend time form the church into a community that is hospitable to all who come. If this is the focus, then worship itself becomes the invitation, and, in gathering, the church gives flesh to those gifted practices.

So Cornerstone invited everybody to come and worship. Many came, from all over Naples and even Fort Myers. They came to see what was going on, what God was doing in the midst of a new congregation. Worship had taken on new significance, and within this celebration those

participating found new freedom. If this action is seriously about God, then the practices that appeared old gave new breath to creative imagination and freedom in worship. Traditions based on human agendas or a need for comfort (such as a particular dress code), which restricted the invitation for all to come and worship, were no longer in place. These old "gatekeepers" had fallen away. People came to worship in suits and ties, shorts and t-shirts. They were



If this is all about God, and not about establishing human social clubs and institutions, then it opens the door for the serious work of inviting everyone to worship.

that honesty about God's call and work was far more important than selling the church like some consumer commodity.

This story of marketing the church is crucial for understanding what and who Cornerstone was to become. In the first few months of the church's organization, a launch team was developed to help discern how we could become God's church together. During meetings, the launch team would pray, study, and discuss what it meant to participate in the work of God as the church. They drew heavily upon the book of Acts, and the text that seemed to jump off the page was Acts 2:42-43: "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone..."¹. The early Christian community was helping to form and inform the team about the good work of worship. This work was to be a participation in the story that transcends time and culture. It is God's story and a privilege to be a part of it.

lot like the same old story. "Why do we want to just reinvent the wheel that is leading the church to its death?" My response to their questions was one of affirmation and it caught many of them by surprise: "Yes, it is the same story, but it is never old!" While many of the practices discussed had been celebrated throughout the years, it was not those "core elements" that were getting old but rather the human traditions that surrounded them that stifled the breath



When the Body of Christ, the church, is about the business of "becoming," it removes the dross that clogs the free-flowing winds of celebration and transformation.



The walls of the church building had fallen down to reveal the true church. It was the Body, the people, gathered to participate in the formative practices of faith.

young and old, of different races, and from different socioeconomic classes. If this was all about worshiping God, then it was not limited by our human agendas but liberated for all to offer their human expression of praise and thanksgiving. The “core” elements transcend time and culture, but the work of the people comes from various forms of imaginative expression. As the congregation sang together, some would clap, raise their hands, and literally dance unto the Lord. Others would sit reflectively, but everyone was free to be present before the Lord without the pressure of congregational or denominational stereotypes. Together the community found that God’s formative story was being unleashed. “Come as you are” became Cornerstone’s invitation as we set our hearts toward becoming God’s church.

It was an early Sunday morning when I experienced a vivid image of the Kingdom breaking through at Cornerstone. As I walked through the cafeteria/sanctuary I saw a young man named Jimbo sitting with one of the oldest and most conservative participants of the church. They were having a deep conversation, and then they laughed together. There was Jimbo, sitting with hair down to his hips, tattoos all over his arms, in a t-shirt and blue jeans talking with an elderly gentleman in a suit and tie. They were really talking, sharing, and interested in each other. I thought to myself, “Where is the camera?” These two individuals were from very different places in life, but none of that mattered in this time and space. They had come to the church with the same purpose: to worship. The invitation was for all,

and they were receiving each other in the unity of the Holy Spirit. They had gathered to receive from the Lord and in that moment they were willing to receive from each other. As everyone was invited to come and receive the Eucharist meal that day, they stood next to each other, hands cupped, bread and wine offered.

In the weeks and months that followed the initial launch of Cornerstone, music took on a whole new form. We began singing the historic hymns of the church but welcomed musical expressions from everyone. One morning I brought my guitar to church and shared a song I had written a few weeks earlier. The very next week a gentleman came up to me and asked if he could play his own guitar in church with me. By the end of the month there was a full-fledged rock band sharing songs in worship. The choir began to sing songs from various traditions, and soloists came forward offering contemporary music as well as some “high church” Latin chants. Cornerstone did not begin with the intention of offering one style of music over another but patiently

and openly waited to see what gifts God would generate from the congregation itself. The imaginative space that was offered through participating in the narrative form of the church was taking on flesh. Participants were starting to understand that God initiates a whole diversity of gifts and people. When gathering, it was not to judge brothers or sisters based on our personal prefer-

ences but to celebrate whatever those brothers and sisters bring to offer the Lord. It is in offering that the community begins to see the real beauty of worship. While music styles change with the times and other artistic means of expression give testimony to our place in time and culture, worship centered on the apostolic core gives the solid foundation upon which these human means of expression can find voice. “Let’s celebrate it all” became our rallying cry as Cornerstone continued its journey toward becoming God’s church.

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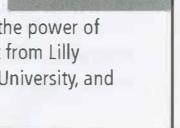
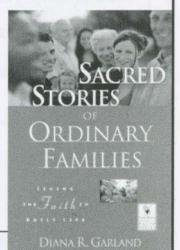
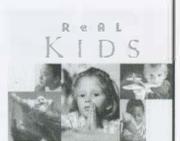
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“Becoming God’s church” was the essence of what the congregation was learning together in those early years as Cornerstone participated in worship and practiced God’s unfolding story. The practice formed by narrative was liberating the church to share and express itself in new and old ways. The “practices” were calling everyone to participate in worship. Cornerstone uses the phrase “becoming God’s church” in all humility. This is not our church to control or manipulate; all

belongs to God. “Becoming” indicates that all participants are on the journey of faith, and the practices that form the community have been made available for all throughout the ages. When the Body of Christ, the church, is about the business of “becoming,” it removes the dross that clogs the free-flowing winds of celebration and transformation. “Becoming God’s church” also helps in acknowledging all those who have gone before and have contributed to the growth and

health of the church. Those from the “old school” have a voice in this new day as well. Their experiences and struggles contribute to who the church is today and call the church to move forward in faith.

It was at a co-ed softball game that the word “becoming” took on new life. The softball team was participating in a heated match with one of our sister churches down the road when a lady sat down on the bleachers to watch a bit of the mayhem that was taking place on the field. The children of the church were playing on the bleacher in front of her when I heard her ask one of them, “What church is this?” Seven-year-old Kyle turned to the lady and said, “Cornerstone United Methodist!” “Where is that church?” the lady asked. Kyle thought for a moment and then proclaimed, “They’re out there on the field.” The walls of the church building had fallen down to reveal the true church. It was the Body, the people, gathered to participate in the formative practices of faith. Not finished yet but out on the field playing the game, striving together with great patience and fellowship to bring home a run.

Worship means much more than simply gathering on Sunday and “playing” church. It is in and through worship that disciples are formed in the image of Christ. Where that formation takes those who follow is back out into the world. If the church participates in those practices that transcend time and culture, it also equips the church to let God take the lead in everything it does. If the priority of gathering is God, it moves the church away from simply seeking its own kudos and opens the door for genuine dialogue and serious discernment. Does this work all the time? No. But it is in striving that the community grows, and it is in the struggle that the community finds direction, and it is in faith that the church seeks to bear good fruit.

In the second year of ministry at Cornerstone, the church council decided to seriously consider what it meant to be a missional church. There were already many opportu-

In emergency, call “D.Min. (Prin.)”

n. (ca. 1631) **1** : the rising of a submerged body above the surface of water; *now rare.* **2** : the process of issuing from concealment, confinement, etc.; *obs.* **3** : the arising, sudden, or unexpected occurrence (of a state of things, an event, etc.); *obs.*

Oxford English Dictionary

The term “emergent church” seems to apply to a highly varied, ill-defined, and often exciting collection of grassroots attempts to “be church” in ways different from the past. It’s a young “movement” still finding its feet.

Following the *OED* one might also, intriguingly, call it the “emergency church,” to refer to people in ministry who are seeking to rise above the stagnant surface of old ways, come out of institutional confinement, and discover the theologically unexpected. The D.Min. could easily have been invented for such people—people searching for new forms and understandings of community and social context, of thinking theologically, and of spirit and growth. Emergencies are (by definition) ongoing; they are still happening, “emerging,” and if you are a minister who is in a context like this, we especially want you to investigate the D.Min. at Princeton Seminary.

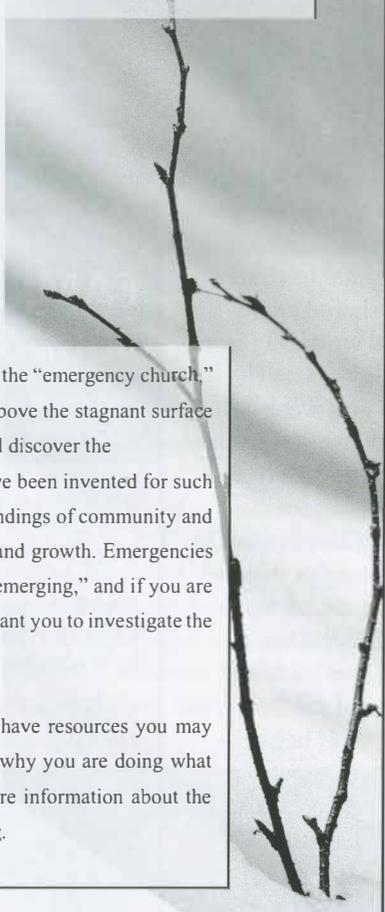
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When Narrative Identities Clash

Liberals versus Evangelicals

WESLEY J. WILDMAN

If there is one thing North American Christians at the beginning of the 21st century think they understand it is the divide between liberal and evangelical in the church. Polarized ecclesiastical publications tell their stories from the left or from the right, constructing competing denominational identities that clash in the consciousness of members. If a denomination has only one important publication, it avoids the issue with quaint desperation, trying to keep everyone happy. Mainstream media relentlessly draw our attention to “religious culture wars” and lavish attention on high-profile court cases on controversial moral issues.

Spare a thought for seminarians. They face this conflict head-on in theology and Bible classes, where they have to find their way in what sometimes feels like hostile territory. Some students can't grasp why the seminary class does not take literary and historical criticism of the Bible for granted and get into the wonderful details. Others feel increasingly desperate as the Bible's authority is challenged over and over again. Church history classes present the massive pluralism of Christian belief and practice, which delights some students while making others skeptical of their treasured assumptions about Christian identity and spiritual unity. Entire seminaries have theological “cultures,” at least by reputation. Well-intentioned mentors fearfully advise future seminarians to “steer clear of school X because it is too liberal and will destroy your faith” or “to stay away from school Y because it is too evangelical and hostile to freedom of inquiry.” In practice, seminary life is always more textured, but the cultural realities are undeniable.

Churches, like seminaries, have cultures. Church reputations are often skin deep, and a pastor quickly gets a sense of the real pluralism within a congregation upon arriving to begin ministry there. But the pastor's education about existing pluralism often comes in the form of multiple pressures to meet stated needs in particular ways: "We like biblical preaching." "We like issue-oriented preaching." "We like to hear about our pastor's personal faith journey from the pulpit." "We want a healing service." "We want more opportunities for social action." Do the squeaky wheels get the grease? What about all the people who don't come right out and say what they expect from their minister? What do they really think? What do they truly need? How does the congregation's local history produce these frustrations and longings? And what are the minister's obligations beyond just meeting needs and satisfying congregational desires?

Alongside the pressure to "be this or that for us," ministers have to endure the families that leave, disgusted with one or another aspect of the new ministry: "You're too conservative for us." "You don't take the Bible literally enough for me." Ministers have to negotiate semi-organized blocks of gossipy parishioners who spend more time sniping at the pastor's ministry in the shadows than in building up the church community in Christian worship and practice. All this is frustrating, enormously stressful for spiritual identity, and a serious challenge to the minister's sense of call.

Conflicting Caricatures

Around the all-too-familiar conflict supposedly looms a liberal-evangelical divide. In theology, in biblical interpretation, in seminary styles and church cultures, liberals and evangelicals know they are different from one another and feel the differences sharply. Inevitably, caricatured readings of the "other" come to life.

Caricature #1: Liberal Christianity is a tangle of habits that, like a parasitic vine, chokes the very life out of

the church upon which it grows. Its good news is an intellectually tortured and ultimately incoherent story about, well, something to do with love. It is high-culture religion, socially and economically privileged, and full of bleeding-heart activism seeking economic and social justice for the less fortunate. It has little emotional power to draw people together in life-transforming ways because high-culture people are afraid of their own psychological shadows and don't know how to get emotional. It is old-fashioned, sensible, and bores young people to tears. It sends many folk right out the church door, never to return, once they see what they are asked (or not asked!) to believe and do in the name of liberal Christianity. It is treasured by many faithful Christians the way lovely suburban neighborhoods are treasured, but is shrinking in its relatively small corner of global Christianity.

Caricature #2: Evangelical Christianity is all about passionate proclamation. Its gospel story is clear in the way bedtime stories for children are clear. It requires buying into an alien worldview that has little to do with the modern world we inhabit and love to complain about. It is confident in an afterlife where everything bad about this world gets put right, but that just brings comfort to the confident while undermining serious social activism. It promotes life-transforming experiences that change people's personalities and make for large and bustling churches, but is perpetually naïve about the way strongly bonded groups always produce spectacular life changes, regardless of the gospel preached. Best of all, evangelical enthusiasm lets you take your feelings out for a spin while giving your brain a good long rest. It boasts a countercultural moral posture, but on economic issues is a premier instance of culture-Christianity. It is famous for sheep stealing and overblown numbers, but there is no question that evangelical forms of Christianity are expanding all over the world.

The caricatures are potent. Just like cartoon drawings, they distort prominent features to make a point. Non-religious people seem to get a big kick out of them, so there must be an opportunity for laughter here somewhere. Of course, non-religious people can afford to chuckle because they are not on the cartoonist's sketch pad themselves.

If we could find our way to a humorous appreciation of these caricatures as affectionate teasing rather than hostile character assassination, we would all be significantly better off. But most of the time that lightness of heart, that companionable modesty, seems impossibly distant. It demands the kind of spiritual maturity that places love ahead of power, and caring for others ahead of defending our rights. In practice, congregations are impatient around these issues, and harshness and arrogance from both left and right are the result.

It is difficult to love when we feel attacked, and surely we are not always wise just to sit there and take it. But Jesus' injunction to love our enemies (Matt. 5:44) kicks in at moments like that. The ones we love may or may not remain our enemies, and we may or may not choose to resist their aggression, but we make decisions about how to act from the perspective of love. Everything else is a clanging cymbal (1 Cor. 13:2).

Avoidance or Engagement?

If some get angry when they feel caricatured, others are utterly sick of thinking and talking about conflicting liberal and evangelical religious world pictures. They just want to get past it all. To dwell on the bogey words "liberal" and "evangelical" is to reify the very caricatures we seek to transcend. These people want new words and new ideas because the old ideas are dead and the old words poisonous.

I don't believe avoidance or new terminology will help in the long run. Despite the clarity of the rhetoric, few Christian people are neatly liberal or evangelical. Many Christians and congregations instinctively sense that "liberal" and "evangelical" belong together and long to find a way to honor what they love in both. For them, this conflict is like having divided loyalties

in a civil war: victory by either side can't possibly be a good thing and you just want the fighting to stop. But these individuals are also rightly suspicious of new words and phrases that just repackage without truly engaging the problem. To them, avoidance just lets something fester, and jingoistic re-labeling seems scatterbrained.

They are right. We need to mount a direct attack on the religious rhetoric of our cultures and churches and on the conflicting narrative worlds that inspire it.

Here's the crux of the issue: As I said earlier, most North American Christians at the beginning of the 21st century *think* they understand the divide between liberal and evangelical in the church. In fact, most Christians, even most ministers, do *not* understand these ideas well. They don't know their history and how the words first became precious before they were co-opted for ideological infighting. They don't appreciate the sociological principles that explain the conflict. They don't grasp the theological insights that guide a meaningful resolution. And they don't understand the demanding nature of the solution.

There is a classic Christian solution to the problem of cultural and ecclesiastical pluralism. It requires walking through the fires of painful words and bitter resentment. We must spiritually confront our own demonic hostility to the other in all its forms. We must acknowledge that following Jesus Christ makes homeless beggars of us all, gratefully serving the kingdom of God, committed to the reign of God and not to a fruitless ideological triumph.

I contend that "liberal" and "evangelical" really do belong together. The "and" that joins them is not sappy can't-we-all-just-get-along hopefulness but a considered theological judgment about the historic meanings and inherent possibilities of the two ideas. Liberal and conservative are opposites, in many ways, but liberal and evangelical are not.

Beneath the Surface

The deepest problem in trying to put liberal and evangelical instincts together

is that their gospel narratives and their guiding world pictures do not seem to match. Let's ponder this fundamental difference.

Since the Reformation, "evangelical" Christians have typically defined themselves in opposition to some other group of Christians. They have also derived a strong moral framework from pietism's instinct that our lives are lived transparently before God, with whom we have a personal relationship (sin is an in-your-divine-face insult to God). The word "evangelical" has enjoyed its greatest staying power among groups that combine group-defining oppositional elements and morality-defining piety elements with a stress on spiritual rebirth (being "born again") and a particular understanding of the gospel, the story of good news in Jesus Christ.

Specifically, this evangelical story stresses: (1) the severity of the problem of sin for human beings, (2) our inability to do anything through thought or deed to save ourselves from this problem, (3) a substitutionary theory of the atonement, whereby Jesus dies for us and our sins in order to reconcile us with God, (4) a conversion experience of repentance and being born again, (5) a personal relationship with the living Jesus Christ, (6) a personal idea of God as a being to whom we can relate now as well as for all eternity in the heavenly life to succeed this one, and (7) the Bible as the authoritative source for this story and for all other matters of faith and morals.

In the 19th-century North Atlantic world, evangelical Christians discovered a liberal-conservative split in their midst. A plain reading of the evangelical story just outlined naturally presupposes a supernatural worldview, but in the 19th century that worldview came under fire, wrecking the story and its narrative power. And it was not just secular outsiders who were attacking it but also well-meaning Christians. By the beginning of the 20th century, many battles had already been fought over authentic evangelical Christian identity. Many more were to come once the First World War shattered the bogus assumption of unlimited cultural progress under the guidance of

secular democratic nation states with free-market economies. A chastened feeling was abroad: something had gone badly wrong in western civilization. The threats to the narrative integrity of the evangelical story were symptoms of a deeper sickness.

Chastened conservative evangelicals sensed the failure of plausibility structures and moral habits that formerly nurtured Christian life and they responded. They hardened the evangelical gospel, reaffirmed its supernatural worldview, and organized themselves to resist anything they saw as a threat to Christian identity. They steered away from critical historical research and stressed the authority and inerrancy of the Bible. Their denominations reasserted uniformity of doctrine and practice. Some of them became fundamentalists.

Chastened liberal evangelicals turned toward rather than away from the problem, as they saw it. They struggled to come to terms with a simultaneously devastating and liberating discovery about the Bible and the early church: its "core-message pluralism."

What is core-message pluralism? It does not take a seasoned biblical scholar to notice that the New Testament has many colorfully different formulations of Christianity's core message, and that none of them is much like the official creedal Christianity of the fourth and fifth centuries. The most obvious and famous contrast is between Jesus' preaching of the Kingdom of God and Paul's preaching of Christ crucified; the evangelical gospel sounds a lot more like Paul than Jesus. And neither of those is much like Peter's preaching to Jews as recorded in Acts 2, in which the crucifixion and resurrection are not about salvation but about injustice and God's reversal of it, confirming Jesus' authority, his message, and his identity as the Christ. Hebrews presents a technology of sacrifice that bears no resemblance to James' vision of Christian salvation. And then we have the much later doctrinal developments of the Trinity and Hypostatic Union, which articulate the good news in a metaphysical way that is quite alien to the conceptuality of the Bible, despite elements of continuity.

Coming Out—Liberal and Evangelical

CHAPIN GARNER

In seminary I knew I was different, but I didn't have a name for what I was. I was the product of an unusual union of Christian traditions, and this left me feeling out of place. My early faith formation took place in small evangelical house churches where being born-again, faith healing, speaking in tongues, and the daily battle with the devil over my soul were paramount to the Christian life. At the same time, I was an active member of the First Congregational Church in Fairport, New York. This was a very proper church in the center of town that was concerned about the poor, prided itself on its youth and church school programs, and was always wary that the slate roof might spring a leak and cost a small fortune to repair.

It was in the house church that I learned to pray; it was in the brick church that I learned to play. It was with my born-again friends that I developed a personal relationship with Jesus; it was with my congregational friends that I learned to talk about God, instead. In battling the devil I learned about the power of faith and the fear of damnation; at church bake sales and harvest festivals that supported our local and wider missions I learned about God's grace and care for all people. In living rooms I learned to take the word of God literally; in the ornate sanctuary of our church I learned that there was room for interpretation in scripture.

I grew up in two worlds, one evangelical and Christian and the other liberal and Christian. The two never met face to face until they collided within me during seminary. I loved the passion, spirit, conviction, and holy mystery of evangelical faith, but I was repulsed by the exclusive nature of it. I loved my institutional church, with its broad welcome and its embrace of the diversity of God's creation, but I loathed its barren sermons and limp faith. Was there a way to be a passionate, unapologetic Christian while still embracing the complexity of the world? Was there a way to be liberal and still love Jesus? Could the Christian message be energetically shared with the world while respecting the traditions of others? Could I be both liberal and evangelical? Was there anyone else like me?

A LIBERAL AND EVANGELICAL CHURCH

I have found that being both liberal and evangelical is kind of a "don't ask, don't tell" proposition. Staunch liberals find evangelicals offensive, and passionate evangelicals believe

liberals are intent on emasculating the Christian faith. I found I could move in both liberal and evangelical circles with relative comfort as long as I kept my mouth shut and my opinions to myself. My liberal friends didn't want to hear about my Jesus, and my evangelical friends didn't want to hear about my gay friends. I was overjoyed when, in my search for my first senior pastorate, I came across a congregation that described itself as both liberal and evangelical. They were an open and affirming church that believed fervently in an inclusive gospel while trying their best to be faithful followers of Jesus Christ. Feeling as though we were made for each other, it wasn't long before the church and I got "hitched." I have now served the United Church of Christ in Norwell, Massachusetts, for almost five years, and it has been an extraordinary journey of faith and discovery.

DID I HEAR YOU CORRECTLY?

It is fair to say that the church wasn't entirely liberal and evangelical, or at least they weren't as liberal and evangelical as they thought they were—or in the way they thought I was. It wasn't long into my pastorate and preaching ministry in Norwell that people began to approach me with questions. The church had just completed its "open and affirming" process a few months before my arrival, so many of the more evangelical or conservative Christians had left in a huff. The first questions came from the more liberal members of the congregation. They were glad I was committed to the inclusion of all people in the life of the church. In fact, they were thrilled to have a young, white, heterosexual male championing the place of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people in the life of the church. But they also had concerns. Why did I talk about Jesus so often? Did I really believe in an actual resurrection? And what was all this "Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior" business about?

In time, word got out that our church was talking about Jesus and that began to draw in more conservative and evangelical Christians. It only took a Sunday or two before those folks made their way to my office. They were thrilled to be in a New England church that focused so intently on the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, but they were confused by the talk about welcoming gay people. As I have often mused, there is

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Coming Out—Liberal and Evangelical (continued from page 31)

enough in a liberal and evangelical message to offend everyone. But people came, and the buzz about our church intensified. The talk about town was that the church was growing rapidly but that it had become much more conservative even though we had an affinity for rainbow flags. There was confusion within our church itself; liberal members did indeed believe we were becoming more conservative, and the conservative members felt it was the most liberal church of which they had ever been a part.

LISTENING AND COMMUNING CAREFULLY

The liberal and evangelical message is counterintuitive enough that if you don't listen carefully you might miss its dual call to love Jesus and everybody else, too. Early on I worried that we would lose our Unitarian members and our evangelical members because they would become frustrated by the seeming ambiguity of our stance. *"What are we talking about here? Who are we? What do we really believe?"*

As it turns out, regular celebration of the Sacrament of Communion and our inclusive call to Holy Communion have offered us a language for what we are. Early in our ministry together we moved to celebrate Communion almost every week. The presence of Jesus Christ was going to be central to our worship services and to our life together. At the same time, we decided that we were always going to have all of our children present when we celebrated a sacrament in the life of our church. Without fully realizing it, we broke down two fairly typical Protestant exclusions to the Communion table: the participation of children in the Eucharist and the regularity with which we refused ourselves Communion due to our tradition of monthly celebration. Suddenly our call to Communion had added significance: *"This is the Lord's Table, therefore the invitation cannot come from a pastor, a deacon, a church council, or a denomination. The invitation comes from Jesus Christ himself and it is always the same: Come as you are. It doesn't matter where you have been or where you are going. It doesn't matter what you have done or what you have left undone. It doesn't matter if you believe yourself a success or a failure. There is room at this table for you. All you ever need to approach this table is a willingness to come forward. This is the Lord's Table and you are invited to make it your table."*

Week in and week out, we proclaim this message: Jesus Christ is alive and central, and you are welcome in his presence. Careful Communion and careful listening have turned out to be the keys to our growth as a liberal and evangelical Christian church.

THE RESULTS

I wish I could say that we have seamlessly woven together liberal and evangelical Christianity, but that is not the case. My people still have questions, and our message makes everybody a little bit uncomfortable at times. But the church is alive; in fact, it is thriving. People come from all over southeastern Massachusetts to worship and grow with us. These people long to hear about Jesus and they long to be welcomed as they are in the hope that they might grow into the people God knows they can be. I would love it if every member of my church could proudly say *"I am a liberal and evangelical Christian"* and have a basic understanding of what that means. Right now I simply feel blessed that they know our mission statement by heart: *"We are a Christ-centered, inclusive community called to ministry."*

Liberal and evangelical. It's different, but it fits. I fit.

The changes in Christian practice during the same period are as important as those in theology.

Liberal evangelical Christians throughout the 20th century wanted to take core-message pluralism seriously. But how could they do this without losing their evangelical identity, with its dependence on a plain gospel story that could win the hearts and minds of ordinary people? The writings and sermons of liberal evangelicals such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Reinhold Niebuhr show exactly how they did it. On the one hand, they loosened ("liberalized") some parts of the evangelical gospel to reflect core-message pluralism. In particular, they recognized that there was a vast array of atonement theories within the Bible and subsequent Christian thought, and similar variation in ideas of divinity and in metaphysical worldviews, so they allowed diversity on these points. They went the opposite direction from conservative evangelicals on the authority of the Bible, seeing it as a sacred but culturally conditioned source of revelation and so inspired but not inerrant. On the other hand, liberal evangelicals stressed three principles to secure social unity in their pluralized form of evangelical Christianity: (1) The Principle of Humility states that we human beings simply don't and can't know enough about divine matters to settle all questions, not even in the light of divine revelation. We must live with uncertainty and accept doubt as a natural part of faith. (2) The Principle of Love states that Christians should cleave to one another unconditionally, accepting and loving one another. It is a difficult but deeply rewarding calling. (3) The Principle of Christ-centeredness states that Christianity is about Jesus Christ, not picky debates over details of belief and practice. Jesus' own ministry becomes our model for the "cost of discipleship" (to recall Bonhoeffer's famous phrase).

On this view of core-message pluralism, there is room in Christ's Church for plural understandings of the gospel. There is room for the fabulous diversity of spiritual practices evident within the history of Christianity. Liberal evangelical Christians believed that open-hearted humility, unconditional

love, and Christ-centeredness would keep the church together in spite of the chaotic threat of core-message pluralism.

Mutual Attraction

The likes of liberal evangelicals such as Bonhoeffer and Niebuhr seem to be long gone. But their high-profile public influence is sorely missed. The religious airwaves are now dominated by conservative evangelicals and fundamentalists. Conservatives have claimed the word “evangelical” and liberals have done little to stop them. But the word “evangel” just means “good message” or “gospel,” so it should be the property of every Christian.

It is this sense of a deeper shared Christian heritage that inspires a profound mutual attraction across the evangelical-liberal divide among many ordinary Christians and congregations. I would not want to speak for all liberal Christians or all evangelical Christians here, but I am willing to speak for the worried, the frustrated, the disaffected, or the bored folk who look longingly toward the other camp and want some of what it has. There are plenty of such people on both sides.

What do liberals want that evangelicals have? In crass terms, they envy the numbers, the money, and the sheer institutional buoyancy of most evangelical churches. More profoundly, they envy biblical preaching that is comprehensible, educational, and inspiring. They envy the spiritual energy of dynamic music and passionate worship. They long for those small-group meetings where people reach out in compassion to one another. They thirst for explicit expectations that translate the cost of being a Christian into moral, financial, and spiritual terms.

They would not want to surrender their freedom to interpret the Bible according to their conscience, as guided by critical scholarship. They would not be eager to embrace an authoritarian form of religion, nor shake-and-bake spirituality, nor flat-footed theological responses to life's terrible moments of suffering. They would never surrender their passion for social justice and practical commitment to the transformation of social condi-

tions affecting the poor, nor their love of learning and the literate ideal of humanity passed down through the liberal tradition of politics and religion. They might not change the way they vote, but they would prize an energetic Christian community with a comprehensible message and the power to help them forge close relationships, transform recalcitrant habits of thought and behavior, and inspire them to an intimate relationship with God.

What do evangelicals want from liberals? Freedom to be themselves. They want freedom from arbitrary authorities that impose convention in place of reasons and stamp out creativity, originality, and the freedom to think and feel across the range of life's complexities, within and beyond the core narrative of their own faith. They want freedom from social coercion in which their group's way is the only way, and freedom to see the group from the outside, through the eyes of the marginalized or ignored “other.” As much as they love their core message, they want to be freed from its sameness and simplicity, and freedom to make it more realistic, more flexible, and more persuasive. As much as they love the energy of close-knit church life, they want freedom from its intrusiveness and transparency, and freedom to have the privacy of their thoughts and feelings honored in a less invasively bonded community.

They would not want to give up their personal relationship with Jesus, their confidence in God's revelation in the Bible, their belief that divine wisdom is more important than cultural wisdom, or their passionate commitment to salvation as the ultimate goal of human life. They might not change the way they vote, either, but they are tired of moral intolerance, doctrinal rigidity, and monochromatic spirituality. They want to decide for themselves in worship and at prayer what to believe and how to act.

The Big Problem

How does evangelical Christianity come by all its good stuff? In a phrase, social cohesion. Evangelical Christianity has better glue for social life. This glue may

not make the kind of flexible bond that liberals are used to, but it holds diverse people close together and fosters the heat that starts the fire that changes lives. The recipe for the glue is simple enough and I think there is evidence that the principles involved are common to human beings whatever their social and religious setting: There must be a compelling story! The core message must make a convincing narrative, one that captures imaginations with its grandeur and richness, its historic boldness and prophetic edge. It must make sense to children and yet unfold onto endlessly fascinating details. It must be practical and immediately relevant to the existential struggles of our lives. It must conjure a new world—what Swiss theologian Karl Barth called the “strange, new world of the Bible”—that changes the way we look at the world we think we know. It must be told often in creatively diverse but consistently reinforcing ways. Core beliefs and practices must be keyed directly into the narrative elements of the message. Corporate life must involve energetic worship bound closely to the message and must focus attention on personal growth in faith, bonding experiences of sharing faith with other believers, adrenaline-rush experiences of sharing faith with those outside the group, and explicit demands of the group on the individual.

It sounds wonderful, doesn't it? It works, too. But there is a Big Problem: core-message pluralism complicates the message and weakens the social glue that is the secret to evangelical Christianity's attractiveness. Intuitively sensing this social disaster right on the heels of every challenge to the unity of Christianity's core message, evangelical groups typically let challengers know—quickly and in no uncertain terms—what “the group” believes. They often tolerate curiosity and diversity, but when group identity is in danger it is common to see strategies of control such as definitive restatements of the group's guiding narrative, appeals to authority, subtle accusations of disloyalty, and the implicit or explicit threat of social marginalization. If liberals typically migrate to evangelical settings full of stiff

awkwardness but eager for some real excitement and amazed at the energy they find, evangelicals often arrive in liberal land feeling seriously beat up and stunned that there is a place where they are loved for who they are and where their personal views are welcomed.

Pluralism at the heart of the Christian movement is an immovable problem. Do we celebrate the pluralism but lose social cohesion in the process? Or deny the pluralism in order to preserve the tie that binds? This kind of catch-22 is not

that uncommon in life. Life and institutions alike are about dynamic balance and adjustment, not static perfection. This is the deepest theological reason why liberalism and evangelicalism need each other, like yin and yang need each other, like the Boston Red Sox and the New York Yankees need each other: they are complementary.

How does a liberal evangelical church brew the glue and hold the center even while admitting there is more than one way of reading the Bible, more than one core message of Christianity, more than one

Christian worldview, and more than one way to live as a faithful servant of Christ?

I have heard answers to this question that amount to "Let's celebrate our diversity!" We have to do that, certainly, but this is blessedly naïve as an answer to the question of social cohesion. There has to be another way that comes to grips with the hard fact that core-message pluralism weakens social cohesion and spoils the narrative simplicity that forges powerful group identity. It has to be a compelling way that avoids the intellectual sins of liberal fudging and evangelical oversimplification. It must be a socially realistic way that creates excitement and changes lives without committing the social sins of suppressing diversity and boring people witless. It needs to be a spiritually vital way that rejects the dual sins of avoiding spiritual depth through compassionate social outreach and neglecting the world in the name of individualistic salvation.

Does such a way exist?

The Classic Solution to Conflicting Narratives

Let's face it: if there were a tried and tested formula for forging church unity in the face of core-message pluralism, most people would already be using it. The festering mass of church splits—in the early church and these days especially among Protestant Christians—shows that formulas for unity often have not worked. Splitting the church when narratives diverge is a kind of solution to core-message pluralism in the way that amputation is a kind of medical treatment. It might be necessary for optimizing health, but it is still a disaster.

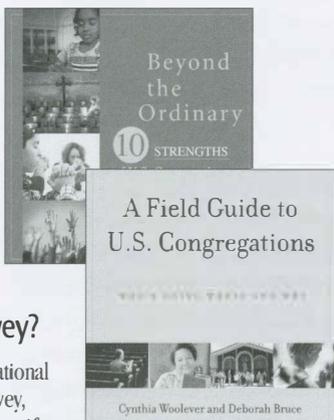
Yet there is an ancient solution to the problem of conflicting Christian narratives. It runs parallel to the mutual excommunications, recriminations, violence, and ecclesiastical splits that have been so common in church history. It is apt to be overlooked because we notice fights more easily than the many times fights are avoided. In a phrase, it is humble tolerance of differences in love. Jesus commends it in his sermon to his disciples about unity (John 14-17). Paul praises it in his medi-

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tation on how to cope with pluralism in congregations (1 Cor. 12-13).

Humbly tolerating differences in love is a practical way of life that many Christians walk every day of their lives. The path of inclusive love is difficult because it calls for selfless acceptance of discomfort in the name of radical inclusiveness. As the life of Jesus shows so clearly, true acceptance of different kinds of people always messes with religious authority structures and the comfortable boundaries they maintain on behalf of their own power and their people's needs for security. Jesus' ministry was an utter failure at the time of his execution because his message wasn't sexy, it was true. It wasn't customized to bind masses of people together but to confront the few who really listened with the dynamic reality of the Kingdom of God in their midst. But people love the truth, even when it hurts, because it convicts and frees and opens up new worlds for them.

So let's take stock. We know there is a biblical solution to the problem of theological and spiritual pluralism. We know that this solution—humbly tolerating differences in love—is more like a journey than a rule, and a lot more like a long hard journey than a pleasurable walk in the park. We know that this solution sometimes succeeds and sometimes fails.

But—let's be blunt here—so what? We also understand the social pressures that produce the demand for a simple, strong story to support church identity. We understand the fact of core-message pluralism and its negative effects on social cohesion. These social realities seem massively inevitable. People clump together when they share a compelling story, period. If stories conflict, split the group to help everyone feel more at home. This is a simple solution to narrative conflict within and beyond religious contexts. By comparison, the solution of humbly tolerating differences in love seems like juvenile idealism.

Few Christians are so idealistic that they simply deny the social principles that explain the way human beings flock together around shared stories. But most of us want to blend realism about theological and spiritual differences with

a blazing streak of idealism that makes the church a genuine example of love at work in groups of people rather than an object lesson in the perils of ignorance and selfishness.

I believe this combination of realism and idealism excites Christian people in our time. It makes them long to put liberal and evangelical sensibilities together in churches. Reuniting Protestants and Catholics and Orthodox churches is not likely. Putting Anglicans and Methodists back together is probably not in the cards. But finding persuasive common ground between liberal and evangelical ideas and practices seems within reach, while still remaining attractively idealistic. It presents an opportunity to put into practice Paul's vision of unity in the face of pluralism, to experience love that makes a difference by uniting differences, and to send a message to the wider culture that love really is the best answer to pluralism, even if it is not the only answer.

● Of course, the ideal of humble tolerance of differences in love across the liberal and evangelical divide is just that: ideal. That makes it difficult and easy to ruin. It is a high and a hard calling and therefore not for those who can cope only with the low and broad highways of self-indulgent comfort. Concretely, this means that the liberal and evangelical church is always on the edge of one disaster or another. Republicans and

Democrats may come down on different sides of a sermon, or some controversy might arise over the doctrinal identity of the church. A church with even that much pluralism is inherently unstable. But that is also precisely why the liberal evangelical church is important.

When the going gets tough and worldview conflicts cause fights, that's the time to retell the old, old story. We remind each other about Jesus and Paul and their efforts to transcend barriers. And we retell our local congregation's heritage, its story of unity in the face of difference, its testimony to the power of humble tolerance of differences in love.

I love liberal openness to core-message pluralism and its Christ-like radical inclusiveness. I love evangelical fervor and determination to follow Jesus Christ. The move to combine them may not be completely practical and the sociological odds may not be completely in its favor. But this is just the kind of challenge many congregations need if they are to show what they stand for. By unifying itself in spite of significant theological and spiritual pluralism, the liberal and evangelical church testifies to the fact that love covers differences and unites strangers, it becomes a beacon to a world that rarely finds wider unity in sustained ways, and it lights up Jesus Christ's path of love once more in our own time and place. ♦

Questions for Reflection

1. **What kinds of diversity does your congregation embrace? What kinds does it have difficulty embracing?**
2. **Is core-message pluralism acknowledged in your congregation's worship, preaching, education, and mission?**
3. **In what ways does your congregation use oversimplified labels for itself in order to define its identity? In what ways does the congregation use these labels to define others?**
4. **In what ways does your congregation struggle to achieve and maintain an identity?**
5. **Does your congregation make a point of developing local stories about its history and mission to cultivate identity?**
6. **How is Christ's radical inclusiveness alive in your congregation?**

A Manifesto for Liberal and Evangelical Christians

WESLEY J. WILDMAN

This manifesto pairs foundational convictions with strategic responses under seven themes. This reflects my conviction that strategies and techniques are blind without theological depth, and theology is lame without artful action.

LIBERAL REPENTANCE

The modern history of the word “liberal” carries forward its medieval associations with class and privilege, whereby only the free could learn what they wanted and form their own opinions openly and honestly. In our time, this has become a cultural form of condescension whereby only high-culture, high-brow, high-minded liberals can face the truth about group-identity-destroying core-message pluralism because everyone else needs the group identity more than they love the truth. Like our mothers told us, after we are rude to someone, we have to say we’re sorry.

Core Conviction: We need to repent of the condescension that links class to religious courage and culture to religious honesty. Learning confers great advantages of understanding and sweetly complicates every part of our lives. But learning does not go with class and culture. It goes with opportunity and discipline.

Strategic Response: Prioritize education. Liberal evangelical churches must stress education generally and Christian education specifically. They must work to create opportunities for learning and to cultivate the spiritual and emotional disciplines needed to make the most of those opportunities.

EVANGELICAL REPENTANCE

The modern history of the word “evangelicalism” began with an act of semantic theft, turning the evangel, the gospel, into a club with which to beat one’s opponents. It’s fun when you are winning and it makes for intense togetherness when under fire, but it is still theft, massively narrowing the sense of the gospel and suppressing legitimate diversity in the name of rationalizing local group identity. Like our fathers told us, after we take things that are not ours, we have to give them back.

Core Conviction: We need to repent of our attempts to control the gospel (the evangel). We all long to be comfortable, but, as Jesus’ ministry shows, the gospel discomfits as much as it comforts. We need the Protestant commitment to perpetual reformation because we get comfortable too easily.

Strategic Response: Admit pluralism in the core message and practices of Christianity. The truly ugly history of Protestant

Church splits sends a clear message: basing church identity on doctrine when the Bible is your authoritative source will always lead to splits because the Bible does not say one thing. Neither does church history. We earn moral and spiritual orientation through a discerning conversation among plural voices, including biblical, traditional, and contemporary wisdom.

WORSHIP IS THE BOND

When we allow the pluralism of the Christian movement to register in the core message of a church, we weaken the glue that keeps everyone together. Liberal evangelicals have to find a way to brew the glue of social unity even while admitting core-message pluralism.

Core Conviction: We need to recognize that worship and sacraments hold the church together better than doctrines and beliefs. As humbling as this may be for Protestants, we need to learn this lesson from the great Catholic mother church. Liberal evangelical churches must centralize worship and sacraments, and place doctrine in a subordinate, though still essential, position. And not just any worship will do.

Strategic Response: Strive for excellence in public worship. Energetic worship and inspiring sacraments can engage every dimension of human beings. Gifted leaders of worship know how to ease people out of their comfort zones and into new reaches of their own spiritual potential. They know how to steady those whose enthusiasm outruns their discipline. They understand how the sacraments bond Christians together despite their differences of opinion.

MESSAGE MATTERS

When the pastor steps into the pulpit to preach the gospel, the rubber meets the road. Will we hear vague nonsense, shallow thinking, or spiritual paralysis in the face of a profound intellectual challenge? Will we hear a muddled message presented as if we are supposed to find it exciting, or shallow moral maxims that mask all-important details? If so, liberal evangelical Christianity in the 21st-century United States is just a naive dream.

Core Conviction: We need to proclaim that God was present in Jesus Christ, reconciling the world. This is a truly excellent story. We can meditate on Jesus’ life and teaching and notice the life-changing effects he had on his followers as well as on his enemies. We can trace the way his followers struggled to understand how Jesus’ power to change lives continued after his death, how God could work through him apart from his physical

presence. We can ponder the marvelous theories of atonement that shift with every worldview Christianity passed through. We can wonder at the way Christianity always existed in translation, always adapted to new contexts, always drew forth new ideas as the core message of the gospel passed across cultures and eras. Through it all, with no need to oversimplify and no shortage of excitement, God has been in Jesus Christ, reconciling the world. This message preaches; it opens up onto a world of full of religions, and it invites Christians to educate themselves about that world as a way of deepening their own faith.

Strategic Response: Strive for excellence in preaching. Having a message that preaches doesn't help unless preachers of the Word know their Bible and theology, work hard in preparation, bring spiritual vibrancy into the pulpit, and love their people. None of that happens by accident.

VIBRANT SPIRITUALITY

What about spirituality for liberal evangelicals? Where is the internal fire that sparks fellowship, heals the ravages of sin, breaks addictions, inspires forgiveness, and makes us strong to love God, others, and ourselves?

Core Conviction: We need to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus. Liberal evangelical Christianity is not just a gospel about Jesus Christ; it is a relationship *with* Jesus Christ. Following Jesus each day of our lives is more important than being able to explain on demand the Doctrine of the Trinity or the Chalcedonian Definition. Remembering Jesus in the Eucharist meal is more important than being able to define the Real Presence or whatever it is that keeps Christians coming back ever and again to the Communion table. Trusting that God was in Jesus Christ reconciling the world, making us at one with God, is more important than being able to justify our favorite theory of the at-one-ment. When the Christian keeps his or her eyes fixed on Jesus, the back gets straighter, the spirit gets stronger, the joy gets deeper, and the task of faithful Christian living gets clearer.

Strategic Response: Seek a personal relationship with Jesus Christ through prayer, biblically-guided meditation, and spiritual disciplines. All relationships need work as well as inspiration. Liberal evangelical Christians must pray, and so they must learn to pray. They must meditate on the stories of Jesus' life and so they must learn to read the strange new world of the Bible. They must find a spiritual path on which to follow Jesus and so they must learn about the Christian church's vast variety of spiritual disciplines, each tuned to different personality types and contexts.

KINGDOM MISSION

What does spirituality mean when we leave the church service? What do we do at work, at home, in the voting booth, in social action? How do we avoid the infamous evangelical trap of neglecting Jesus' command to serve the poor and marginalized and the liberal trap of understanding our own salvation in terms of the good works we do?

Core Conviction: God's mission of love and justice is our mission. Discerning Christians are invited to participate in it by extending God's love in Christ to others. We can't love others in the name of Jesus Christ unless we struggle with them to achieve justice, health, and healing. Social justice and evangelism are essential components of our mission within God's Kingdom mission.

Strategic Response: Explicitly link social activism with spiritual life. Social action is a spiritual practice because it is part of God's mission in Christ as this has extended into the work of the Church. The social work of discerning Christians is not merely a way to keep busy; it is an expression of our love and gratitude to God, whose mission has transformed our lives.

RADICAL HUMILITY

God's being far surpasses our cognitive and spiritual ability to comprehend. The work of God's spirit is not tamed by our limited understandings or tied to struggling church mission. Beyond our church there are other churches, beyond Christianity there are other spiritual communities, beyond our understandings there are other deep visions of the truth.

Core Conviction: We must humbly and thankfully confess that God's spirit moves in every place, every time, every way. God is not tamed by our insecurities or limited by our imaginations. God's truth is not exhausted by our doctrines, and access to God is not controlled by our sacramental gateways. Our God images are always too small and the reach of God's grace broader and deeper than we can conceive. Ignorance of the other for the sake of comfort and clear identity is nothing other than neglect of another part of God's creation.

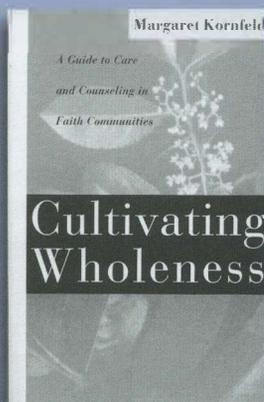
Strategic Response: Embodying humility in ecumenical openness and radical inclusiveness. Liberal evangelical Christians and churches define themselves by a God that can't be tamed and a divine mission that exceeds our control. This blessed humility inspires the radical inclusiveness of the Christian gospel, breaking boundaries of class and culture and reaching out in transforming love across political and religious differences. The humble power of radically inclusive love heals and transforms more surely than arrogant force.

Cultivating Wholeness

A GUIDE TO CARE AND COUNSELING
IN FAITH COMMUNITIES

Margaret Kornfeld

New York: Continuum International
Publishing Group, 2004



review book

Parish clergy are on the front lines of community mental health services, but many are unprepared to meet the challenges of the distressed who seek them out. Margaret Kornfeld's excellent, encyclopedic book, *Cultivating Wholeness*, addresses the very real need for expert, accessible, and wise guidance.

Kornfeld, a former president of the American Association of Pastoral Counselors and an American Baptist pastor, provides both a broad and thorough discussion of key issues that leaders of faith communities and lay caregivers regularly face. Not only does she analyze pragmatic matters—such as clergy confidentiality, unemployment, and fee-taking—but she also sensitively attends to the spiritual well-being of the “counselor in community.” In each instance, Kornfeld offers fine, concise case illustrations, a bibliography for further study, Internet resources, and information regarding relevant professional associations. A wide range of readers, lay and

ordained, will welcome Kornfeld's clear and thoughtful presentation.

The caregiving model that Kornfeld most highly recommends is the solution-focused method. For those familiar with various models of brief therapy this is a particularly accessible approach. The “five steps” of the solution-focused method are ably presented and illustrated. This section alone will reward the reader, particularly those connected with faith communities.

What are some of the other features of this book that make it so helpful for community caregivers?

First is Kornfeld's engaging style, which invites the reader to reflect on topics in a disciplined yet creative way. For example, her discussion of “listening with empathy” is detailed enough to give new insights to experienced caregivers while remaining instructive for less clinically informed readers. All will find her spiritually sighted presentation of “holy listening” as an “act of prayer” worthwhile.

Second is her thoroughness. Broad topics such as “the seasons of life” are identified and discussed in short, manageable subsections. This makes the material highly adaptable either for periods of personal study or a focused continuing education piece for Stephen Ministers, deacons, or clergy discussion groups.

Third, the appendices are a gold mine. Not only will readers find an instructive chart of the human life cycle but also a wonderful appendix entitled “On Trying to Change People: Approaches that Usually Do Not Work.” There are even recommended permission and referral forms for everyday use in caregiving ministries. Who has not needed such materials only to seek them in vain?

In a pastor's study filled with care and counseling books, this is the best guide of its kind that I know. Keep it handy on your shelf.

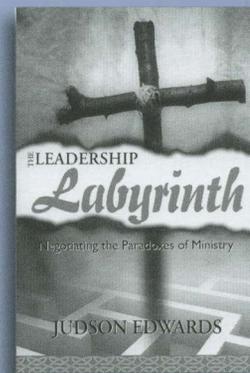
DR. GARY S. ELLER
First Presbyterian Church
Omaha, Nebraska

The Leadership Labyrinth

NEGOTIATING THE PARADOXES
OF MINISTRY

Judson Edwards

Macon Georgia: Smyth & Helwys
Publishing Inc., 2005



review book

Judson Edwards is a Baptist pastor of at least 30 years who writes with candid experience, expertise, and a sincere intent that “pastors and church leaders who are willing to *think paradoxically*, will dare to turn the ministerial lug the wrong way and to see what happens.” Ironically, what Edwards means by thinking paradoxically is that clergy must “re-examine their approach to ministry” in relation to the church's method, and at the same time “realize the wonder of our calling and the privilege that is ours to preach and teach and lead in the name of Christ . . .” For Edwards, the paradox lies in the incongruity between the pastor's approach and training and the church's practices. This incongruity can lead to a lifetime of frustration, conflict, and disappointment for both participants. In 21 short chapters, Edwards masterfully illustrates a variety of contradictions clergy face, such as the “leadership paradox” (the harder you try to control a group, the less control you will have) and the “stewardship paradox” (the

more you preach about money, the less you will receive).

Edwards' thesis is simple, in a profound sort of way: As pastors seek to honor their calling within the context of their role, function, and clerical position in the church, the ideals they carry within meet head-on with the reality of working with people whose principles do not always match their own. Edwards therefore offers some knowledgeable advice (from both personal experience and the counsel of others) for each of these potentially perilous situations. For example, the "leadership paradox" advice he offers is: "As pastor, I have the responsibility to define myself and to proclaim the truth. But leadership is not about dominance.... It is about loving what I do and being playful, honest, and real." This is a thesis Edwards returns to again and again throughout the book.

In my experience as a pastor of 24 years, Edwards has spoken volumes into my soul through this small offering in ink and paper, volumes that corroborate and confirm what I have already experienced—and continue to—in church ministry. All young, promising pastors need a Judson Edwards to walk alongside and encourage them during times of deep contradiction in their ministry. More often than they wish to admit, clergy feel torn apart, disappointed, and even depressed by the seemingly unbearable impossibilities they face on an almost daily basis in their churches. Fortunately, the hope that Edwards offers in this must-read little text is that pastors can find their way through the labyrinth of paradoxes in ministry by using what he calls *unconventional wisdom and unorthodox ministry methods*.

I highly recommend this book to every pastor who is out there wondering how to handle the seeming inconsistencies and incongruities of church ministry. This book will lift the spirit and give hope to the soul. It ought to be on the required reading list for every seminary student. Thanks, Judson.

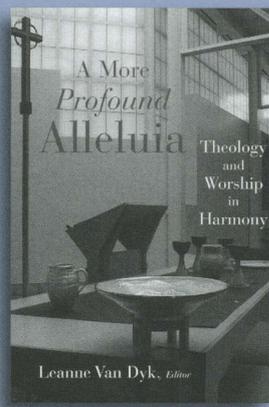
REV. DR. R. WAYNE HAGERMAN

First Baptist Church
Prince George, British Columbia, Canada

A More Profound Alleluia

GETTING YOUR CHURCH IN GEAR

Leanne Van Dyk, Editor
Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005



review book

In the opinion of the Calvin Institute of Worship, worship as commonly practiced today takes its cues from contemporary culture but pays little heed to theology, resulting in malnourished worshipers and weakened witness. In an effort to remedy this situation, the Institute has launched the Liturgical Studies Series, the goal of which is to connect Christian thought and life in order to "promote deeper and more vital worship practices." *A More Profound Alleluia* is the latest volume in this series. According to its editor, Leanne Van Dyk, *A More Profound Alleluia* seeks to "make explicit the many implicit theological assumptions of worship practices and to draw out the rich worship practices implicit in the treasures of the Christian theological traditions." The book is also intended to carry forward the interdisciplinary conversation between theologian and worship practitioner. Special attention is given to hymns as bearers of "compact theological statement."

The several authors have organized the chapters by tying each of six actions of worship to a relevant theological theme:

- The opening of worship correlates with the Trinity.

- Confession and assurance stand alongside sin and grace.
- Proclamation belongs with revelation and Christology.
- Creeds and prayers connect to ecclesiology.
- The Eucharist sits beside eschatology.
- The ending of worship embraces ethics.

Each chapter explores these pairings in the hope that pastors and liturgists can put "theological thoughtfulness" into planning and carrying out worship.

In general, each author explores the biblical and historical background of the particular doctrine and then makes connections to worship practice. These connections have very practical implications, as in the chapter dealing with proclamation and revelation and Christology: "When Scripture is read in gathered worship, *Christ is presented* to the community of believers. This ... implies that the reading of Scripture ought to be done with preparation and care." (One is tempted to respond, "Well, of course," but quickly remembers hearing the Bible on far too many occasions read as if it were a phone book.)

Who should read *A More Profound Alleluia*? Pastors and others charged with the regular planning and leading of worship who seek to bring depth to it will find stimulation on page after page and reason after reason to think about and link theology to practice. John D. Witvliet, director of the Calvin Institute, in his chapter on the opening of worship and the Trinity, says it well: "Long-term worship renewal doesn't come out of singing a little faster, praying a little harder, or making worship a bit more proper or a bit more fun. Worship renewal can issue only from the depth and mystery of the gospel that Christians proclaim."

This reviewer's thoroughly underlined copy has "amen" written in the margin in many places. *Alleluia's* profound insights and practical directions deserve wide consideration.

DR. JOSEPH I. MORTENSEN

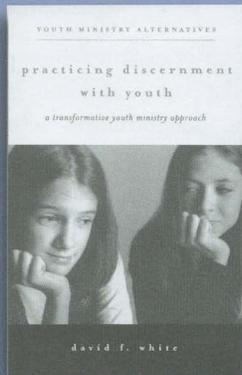
Midland, Michigan

Practicing Discernment with Youth

A TRANSFORMATIVE YOUTH
MINISTRY APPROACH

David White

Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2005



review book

Take a glance at any church youth group calendar and you will

probably find activities such as overnight lock-ins, movie nights, and Ultimate Frisbee competitions. These events have become the programming fodder many youth pastors draw upon to keep young adults “engaged” in the church body.

In his new book, *Practicing Discernment with Youth*, David White states his belief that the context of youth groups must change and challenge the current trends in our culture in order to draw youth back to the deeper calling of the Christian life. White proposes that this must begin with a shift in perspective among church leaders.

“It is one thing to understand youth ministry as a means to an end,” White writes. “It is an entirely different thing to value youth as youth with their unique vocation, to fully recognize the gifts that youth bring for human flourishing and the reign of God.” Our youth are not simply in a holding pattern, waiting for the day they embrace adulthood, but instead are in the process of fulfilling God’s call on their lives daily as youth.

Their dynamic, God-given gifts are essential to impact the world for Christ, and it is the responsibility of pastors, directors, and parents to provide them with the tools to examine the world around them.”

White reasons that the most important tool to offer our youth is the centuries-old practice of discernment. Discernment enables believers to connect, through prayer and contemplation, with the awesome, Holy God in order to discern his perspective of the world. The practice of discernment also creates a sensitivity of “heart” in the life of a believer to refine his ability to hear the voice of the Spirit guiding and directing his paths. According to its author, *Practicing Discernment with Youth* “introduces the practice of discernment as a more inclusive rhythm of life, involving not only dilemmas of which we are aware, but also a deliberate habit of raising to consciousness the preconscious tensions and contradictions inevitable in human life, especially in cultures hostile to life and faith.”

In order to help youth ministers practically apply the concept of discernment with their youth, White unfolds four main movements to the practice of discernment: listening (loving God with your heart), understanding (loving God with your mind), remembering (loving God with your mind), and acting (loving God with your strength). In order to facilitate ease and familiarity with the practice of discernment, each chapter contains exercises and suggestions for use with youth and adults. In addition, many of the experiential exercises at the end of each chapter are designed to bring real understanding and concrete insights for youth groups to implement in the future.

Pastors, ministers, and directors will benefit from *Practicing Discernment with Youth*. David White does an excellent job of presenting an opportunity to utilize discernment in drawing our youth back from the pressures of a consumer culture. I can think of few other things that deserve our time and attention more than our youth today. Explore this resource and let it spark something amazing in our youth!

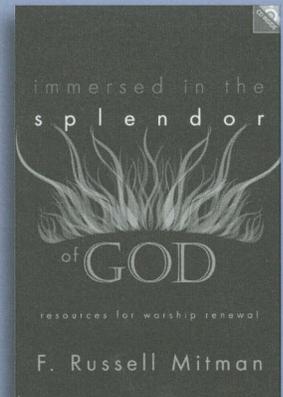
CHRISTINE RYNIKER
Westwood, New Jersey

Immersed in the Splendor of God

RESOURCES FOR WORSHIP
RENEWAL

F. Russell Mitman

Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2005



review book

So energizing and engaging is *Immersed in the Splendor of God* that

it is difficult, while reading it, to refrain from breaking into song or speaking a prayer. And that is precisely the point. As author Russell Mitman points out, “When the worship hour is over, we ought somehow to be aware that we are at a different place than we were an hour earlier. Physical movement heightens such awareness, and faithful structuring of the service will reflect a sense of spatial movement of the people of God in its pilgrimage on earth.” The title of this book reflects the idea that worship begins when baptism “immerses” us in God’s splendor. The particulars of worship, Mitman says, are organic, changing over the centuries, yet they will always provide continual remembrance and continual questioning.

The resources for worship renewal Mitman provides in this volume address the dynamics of the structure of worship and provide concrete ideas in an easily accessible format. While offering alternative liturgies for different times of the year, Mitman declares that “a structure that is

faithful to the divine-human interaction will have an integrity of its own," and he emphasizes that whatever is added to a service visually, musically, or verbally must maintain liturgical integrity.

The book is divided into sections in order of liturgical structure: Gathering, Penitence, Word, Offertory/Eucharist, and Sending. Within each section are component parts suitable for various seasons, including interactive prayer, song, recitation, and silence for meditation.

Mitman moves fluidly within genres, sometimes placing familiar material into unexpected contexts, making it fresh and vigorous. Although music plays a large part in the worship events Mitman describes, it is the reimagined language of the prayers—filled with anticipation and inviting participation—that makes this book particularly attractive: "We come into your presence, O Holy One, dragging on our feet the mire of everything profane in which we have found ourselves stuck. We have not taken off the shoes of the world you have commanded us to shed as we stand here on holy ground. So here we are, clothed in the rags of our riches, unwashed, unworthy, unprepared for the divine encounter. We beg you to take us as we are and to transform us into what you want us to be."

The author also deals with the practical matter of presenting liturgy to a congregation in the Sunday bulletin. He makes suggestions for keeping the bulletin meaningful and makes the point that it has an impact beyond the weekly service. To make inclusion of this "new" material as simple as possible, the book includes a CD-ROM.

This work is an update of Mitman's *Worship in the Shape of Scripture* (Harper & Row, 1987). In the author's words, "My hope then, as now, was and is to offer some worship resources of my own shaping along with some needed introductions for their use." How fortunate it is that this gifted writer, musician, and poet has presented us with these inspired and inspiring ideas.

BARBARA WIES

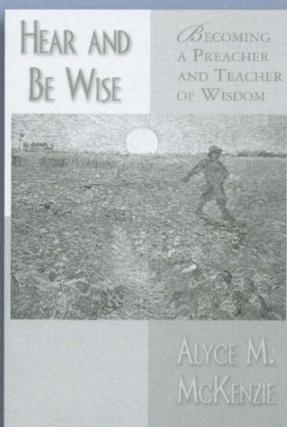
St. Peter's Episcopal Church
Carson City, Nevada

Hear and Be Wise

BECOMING A PREACHER AND
TEACHER OF WISDOM

Alyce M. McKenzie

Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004



review book

Alyce McKenzie writes in the introduction to *Hear and Be Wise* that her hope is "that this book will inspire and equip preachers to step up to our identity as sages and that it will help laypeople hone their gifts for their crucial teaching ministry."

The book is developed around four qualities of the wise teacher: the bended knee, the listening heart, the cool spirit, and the subversive voice. McKenzie believes we have neglected the wisdom tradition and sees this as a serious omission in our shared ministries. Her work is a logical unfolding of the four pillars of wisdom, followed by a discussion about how pastors can apply these qualities in their teaching and preaching.

McKenzie serves as spiritual director for the reader in the journey to a vision shift away from certitude and fact-based preaching and toward a lived experience of the wisdom offered in biblical stories. She acknowledges that the scientific culture does not provide much encouragement to value what is old or traditional, and says we must become more thoughtful in order to develop a precise language that pays attention to what is shared in the

stories of faith by our people. She knows her invitation is for persons who are not afraid to be immersed in the unknown and challenging aspects of the feminine as it forms and shapes our deepening wisdom. It is here that she may have difficulty in being accepted by those who are threatened by the depth of wisdom's journey. I, for one, would encourage readers to move beyond such fears because I have discovered that when we set aside our perceptions we begin to notice the fruits of our risk both personally and professionally; we serve out of a different space as preachers and teachers.

The key to McKenzie's guidance is the nurturing of our attentiveness. "For attentiveness is a risk," she says. "Attentiveness promises as we continually exercise it, we will continually encounter God—sometimes where we could never have imagined we would encounter God." The practice of attentiveness is "to all of life, one's own experiences, those of others, and the created order. For they are all arenas of God's revelation." As she states boldly, "Our goal in teaching and preaching with a listening heart is to help hearers replace habits of distraction and self preoccupation with attentiveness to the revelatory glimmers of God's redemptive work in everyday life."

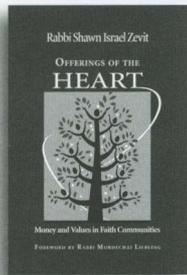
As you read this book, McKenzie will trouble you at the level of your current practices in preaching and teaching. Reading her book will nudge you toward a fuller acknowledgment of the contemplative journey and its significance in your hunger for God. A hope expressed through the words of Walter Brueggemann is for our openness to a greater "passion... the capacity to care, to suffer and to die and to feel." McKenzie's journey calls us to the unruly wisdom of God, which draws us to a deeper understanding of God's pain and suffering, joy and celebration.

May *Hear and Be Wise* enter our hearts and lives. May we come to know the accompaniment of Sophia (Wisdom), granting us greater attentiveness in serving others as we preach and teach out of the depths of the shared wisdom of God.

REV. DR. ALDEN E. SPROULL

Clinical Chaplain
Redlands Community Hospital
Redlands, California

New & Noteworthy



Offerings of the Heart: Money and Values in Faith Communities

SHAWN ISRAEL ZEVIT

AL271; \$18.00

In this book, Rabbi Shawn Zevit brings the depth and breadth of Jewish teachings on money and the spiritual life to all faith communities. The title of the book comes from the Hebrew phrase *Nadiv Lev*, which means “offerings of the heart,” a phrase that sets the tone for the Jewish spiritual perspective that money is a tool for actualizing God’s presence in the world. Building on this core value and setting aside the financial/spiritual split with which many congregational leaders operate, Zevit demonstrates how faith communities can create values-based approaches to developing and managing financial and human resources that are rooted in the very sacred traditions, principles, and impulses that bring us together.

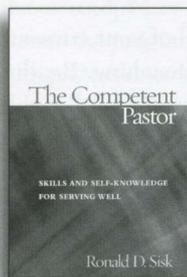


Paying Attention: Focusing Your Congregation on What Matters

GARY PELUSO-VERDEND

AL298; \$18.00

Many congregations offer Jesus to an attention-challenged people assailed by a cacophony of distractions. Author Gary Peluso-Verdend writes in *Paying Attention* that when we squander our attention we also waste the resources God has given us to fulfill the mission to which we are called. He challenges congregations not to lose attention, the most precious gift we bring to God. This book persuades readers to strengthen the practices of giving Jesus our best attention and offers suggestions for how we can develop the practice of paying attention in our daily lives.

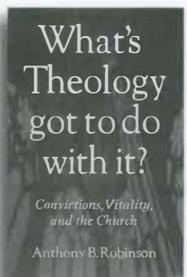


The Competent Pastor: Skills and Self-Knowledge for Serving Well

RONALD D. SISK

AL294; \$18.00

Everybody wins when ministers are competent. Competence, defined as the ability to do what needs to be done, requires ministers to understand themselves and others and to keep a realistic perspective on their lives as human beings, as Christians, and as ministers. A competent minister functions by moving toward this kind of understanding and perspective. Competent ministers will be happy in their jobs or will be able to figure out why they’re unhappy and move forward. If competent ministers get stuck, they’ll know specific steps to get unstuck. With half the book dealing with personal issues that affect competence and the other half dealing with skills related to ministerial competence, this book is a source to which pastors can turn to assess their own level of competence and to increase it.



What's Theology Got to Do with It? Convictions, Vitality, and the Church

ANTHONY B. ROBINSON

AL310; \$18.00

The aim of this volume, addressed to both clergy and lay leaders, is to contribute to a theological re-funding of the mainline Protestant churches. Author Anthony Robinson believes that when we are fuzzy about our core convictions and unsure of their meaning or value, organizations are likely to be ingrown, conflicted, and driven by the personalities of leaders and members. But when we are reasonably clear about our core convictions and their relevance to our life and purpose as church, chances of health and vitality are great. In *What's Theology Got to Do with It?*, Robinson reflects on the nature of theology and the characteristics of healthy congregations. He then goes on to examine the relationship between congregational vitality and Christians’ understanding of the role of Scripture, the Trinity, God as creator, the person and work of Jesus, the Holy Spirit, sin, and other central convictions.

RESOURCES for TALKING ABOUT FAITH FROM THE CONGREGATIONAL RESOURCE GUIDE

Boomershine, Thomas. **Story Journey: An Invitation to the Gospel as Storytelling** (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988). Thomas Boomershine believes stories from the Gospel serve as resources for our life journeys. *Story Journey* discusses the significance of stories and enables readers to hear, learn, and tell Gospel stories in meaningful ways. For each story Boomershine presents, he also suggests connections with our personal and collective realities.

Branson, Mark Lau. **Memories, Hopes, and Conversations: Appreciative Inquiry and Congregational Change** (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2004). Mark Lau Branson offers an account of how one Presbyterian church used appreciative inquiry to understand its history, encourage its members to discover their dreams, and call a new pastor who could help realize those dreams. Branson shows that appreciative inquiry—an attitude as well as a process—broadly applies in many settings.

Brown, John Seely, Stephen Denning, Katalina Groh, and Laurence Prusak. **Storytelling in Organizations: Why Storytelling is Transforming 21st-Century Organizations and Management** (Burlington, MA: Elsevier Butterworth-Heinemann, 2004). This book explores both the power and the limitations of storytelling and narrative in organizational life. Included is a look at diversity in storytelling among people of different ages, genders, and ethnicities. Congregational leaders may be especially interested in the discussion of narrative as a tool for change.

Freedman, Samuel G. **Upon This Rock: The Miracles of a Black Church** (New York: HarperCollins, 1993). *Upon This Rock* profiles the ministry of Reverend Johnny Ray Youngblood and the Saint Paul Community Baptist Church of Brooklyn. Samuel Freedman takes us inside Reverend Youngblood's church and gives an "up close" view of how urban ministry works at its best. This book testifies to the transformational power of congregations.

Hopewell, James. **Congregation: Stories and Structures** (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1987). James Hopewell asserts that good narratives combine setting,

character, and plot to define congregational mission. Using literary theory and myth, he develops research techniques to help congregations understand their stories and discover transformational possibilities for practicing faithfulness to the gospel. This book will challenge people to think in new ways about congregational life.

Lischer, Richard. **Open Secrets: A Spiritual Journey through a Country Church** (New York: Doubleday, 2001). Fresh out of divinity school, Richard Lischer finds himself assigned to a small Lutheran congregation in an economically depressed Illinois farming community. He realizes how ill-prepared he is. But through each experience (which he relays with insight, compassion, and wit), he learns about himself, the people he serves as pastor, and God.

Mather, Mike. **Sharing Stories, Shaping Community: Vital Ministry in the Small-Membership Church** (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1989). Mike Mather shows how a small church can be a vital one. Stories of spiritual, cultural, and economic development in his own small parish illustrate Mather's conviction that a vital church expresses three paradoxes: abundance in the face of poverty, hope in the face of hopelessness, and love in the face of hate.

Neumark, Heidi. **Breathing Space: A Spiritual Journey in the South Bronx** (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003). *Breathing Space* chronicles the renewal of Transfiguration Lutheran Church and its surroundings through God's grace and the community of saints in the South Bronx who found hope in the midst of despair. The church developed after-school programs, built low-income housing, and supported one another through tribulations. Heidi Neumark's stories will inspire congregational leaders.

Simmons, Annette. **The Story Factor: Inspiration, Influence, and Persuasion through the Art of Storytelling** (New York: Basic Books, 2001). Noting that a good story always contains some fundamental truth, Annette Simmons examines the potential of stories to touch others in compelling ways. Stories can tell others who we are and why we are here. They can present our visions and values. And they can teach, often in ways that facts cannot.

Getting Clear on Boundaries and Ethics

Q: I understand that you have expertise in the area of boundaries and ethical standards of practice for ministry professionals. Where do you see the need for further work?

A: Most ministry professionals understand that it is unethical (and in some states illegal) to become sexually involved with their parishioners, but there still has not been enough conversation and education about professional ethics on the continuum from gross boundary violations such as assault, abuse, and harassment to the more subtle changes in the nature of a professional relationship—changes that place the relationship at risk and cause (at the very least) discomfort and confusion for our parishioners.

I believe it is time for us to define our uniform “standards of practice” and to educate our congregations more fully on what to expect ethically from their ministry professionals. It is imperative that this more subtle end of the boundaries spectrum now be the focus of our full attention in order to address incidents that could lead to gross acts of abuse, to enhance the professionalism of ministry leaders, and to rebuild our reputation in society.

In my experience as a consultant, a high percentage of my conflict cases also involve more subtle boundary violations. What has become clear is that those clergy who understand the enormous power differential between themselves and their parishioners and are vigilant in protecting the vulnerability of their members are also excellent leaders in many other ways. There is a direct correlation: As a clergyperson, if I understand whose needs are primary in the clergy-congregant relationship, I will separate my needs and be intentional about where

I get those needs met. If I understand that even subtle secrets eventually leak and can leave my members feeling confused and burdened, I will exercise great caution in what I do and say. If I understand that my parishioners will feel caught in a double-bind before I might notice, I will spend more time checking with others about how they are experiencing my words and actions. If I remember who owns their own life experiences, I am unlikely to disrespectfully use what does not belong to me.

A lack of vigilance concerning such boundaries can do a great deal of damage, a sense of which can be gained from the following hypothetical examples: A very popular departing pastor leaves town without paying the charges she accrued at a member’s retail store. The member feels too embarrassed to remind her of this outstanding debt or to mention it to church leaders or the denominational executive. After all, he reasons, “Shouldn’t I just consider it a donation to the church?” But he later quietly stops attending worship because of the disappointment he feels about the previous pastor’s inattention to her debt. In another church, Wednesday morning staff meetings have, over time, become a place for the pastors and staff to unload their feelings about certain “troublesome” lay leaders. The support staff feel as if these meetings have become a waste of time, but they are fearful to bring up their concerns because it’s nearly time for their annual performance reviews.

These are examples of leadership issues as well as subtle boundary violations, but not all clergy and parishioners are able to articulate them as such. There are attempts being made in some of our traditions to develop a set of ethical guidelines and I support these efforts, at the same time recognizing that on the subtle end of the boundary spectrum it is difficult to formulate a set of “rules” that can be applied evenly in every situation. I have been impressed and influenced by those (such as Marilyn Peterson) who have developed conceptual frameworks that provide a set of criteria to evaluate specific incidents in our professional relationships and would like to see more work done in this area. It has been a privilege for me to provide education and training in this area, and I welcome your thoughts and comments (snienaber@alban.org).

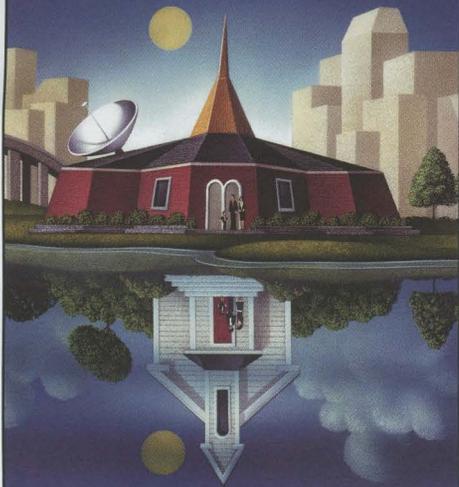


Susan Nienaber is a consultant and seminar leader for the Alban Institute. She previously served as a parish pastor, hospital chaplain, pastoral counselor/licensed marriage and family therapist, and consultant to congregations and denominations. Susan has an extensive background in conflict and crisis management/intervention, mediation, systems theory, personnel issues, professional misconduct, leadership coaching, interpersonal dynamics, and communication skills and dialogue. She leads retreats and workshops for clergy and laity on a variety of subjects and is the co-trainer for the Minnesota Council of Churches’ ecumenical clergy boundaries training.

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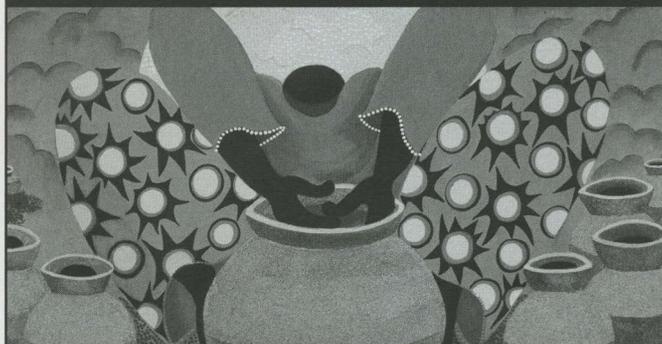


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CONGREGATIONS is a quarterly publication of the Alban Institute, a nonprofit, interfaith membership organization founded in 1974 to provide a comprehensive range of resources to Christian and Jewish congregations. Our mission is to provide clergy and lay leaders with practical, research-based information and ideas for effective ministry as they grapple with an ever-changing environment.

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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Congregations of the Future

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- Redefining preaching as spiritual and theological listening



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nities being born inside the walls of the church for persons to plug in and serve, but what about giving toward ministry and mission outside of those walls? After much prayer and discernment Cornerstone decided to become a mission-giving church. Ten percent of all the gifts received every Sunday would go directly to mission. This proposal was met with some resistance. After all, Cornerstone was a new congregation and was barely making it on her own. The process took several months before all members of the church council agreed that this was the direction God was leading. So Cornerstone began giving 10 percent, off the top, to those serving and reaching out beyond the walls of the church. Where did this practice take its shape? At the Eucharist table, in which God's divine economy is shared with all who would receive it—a free gift of grace offered without price.

In its fourth year Cornerstone began reflecting on what it meant to be a full participant in the life of the church. It appeared that God was more interested in disciples than members, so the process of discerning what intentional formation might look like began. With the help of several leaders in the congregation, a 28-week Christian formation class was written. The class would be required of anyone desiring to “become” with us at Cornerstone. “Sojourners Class” was born and to date we have offered over 15 of these classes. With each class, participants are asked to give public affirmation, enter into covenant relationships with God and each other, pray together, and be consecrated into a ministry of the church. This intentional formation process has discouraged some, frightened many, and blessed God's church. Where did this practice take shape? At the baptismal font as the church celebrates dying and rising with Christ. As people are initiated into the community of faith and welcomed on the journey. If worship is intentional, formative education should be taken just as seriously.

Just this year Cornerstone has embarked on a new adventure. Last summer Cornerstone had the privilege of having its first Haitian intern sent

from Duke Divinity School. Louis came to serve and brought many Haitian families to church as a result of his presence. Louis went back to school to finish his last semester, but when spring came around, God had planted a vision of ministry that would present a whole new mindset for the church. Louis was appointed to launch a Creole service through Cornerstone. What is so different about this is that we are not seeking to start a Haitian church out of Cornerstone but to bring the Haitian culture and people to Cornerstone as one united body. First, in order for this opportunity to work, the church must be open to all God's people. Second, those involved in launching this new opportunity must be able to see beyond the cultural divisions that exist in our world today. Most denominations do very well at starting ethnic churches for ethnic people, but bringing the cultures together is often scary. Where did this opportunity take shape? In worship as the community was called to hospitality, welcome, and invitation. It is not about us or those we want to see in church. It is

all about God and who God wants to see in the church! This requires a complete surrender of self as Cornerstone gathers to do the work of worship and participate in the narrative that moves those participating outside the box.

“This stuff is way too churchy!” Yes, it is! Praise be to God, who has offered the gifts and grace to be the church. In working together, Cornerstone is still becoming and participating in God's grand narrative, which brings the community beyond the limitations of self and sets those practicing the faith free to worship outside the box. During the nine years that Cornerstone has been in existence we have found that it is not slick marketing or homogenized targeting that makes a new congregation work but rather the genuine participation with God, through the practices that transcend time and culture: opening the doors for creative expression and welcoming hospitality. ♦

NOTES

1. From the *New Revised Standard Version of the Bible* (NRSV).

Questions for Reflection

- Does your congregation consider itself “becoming” or “established?” In what ways would using the language of “becoming” facilitate decisions made at your church?
- Whom do you see when you look out over your congregation? Would God celebrate the diversity of the people and gifts represented there?
- What is the image the community has of your congregation?
- How are individuals seeking membership formed in your congregation? Is the work of formation intentional or accommodating?
- What are the primary practices that form and give your congregation its identity? Where are those practices celebrated?
- Is worship the central activity of your congregation? Does your worship lead others out into mission and ministry in the world?
- Does your congregation find worship itself to be a primary means of evangelism?
- What things stifle the breath of the Holy Spirit in your community? What practices or traditions based on human needs or agendas exist that stifle such breath?
- What are the stories in your congregation that give testimony to God's Kingdom breaking through?