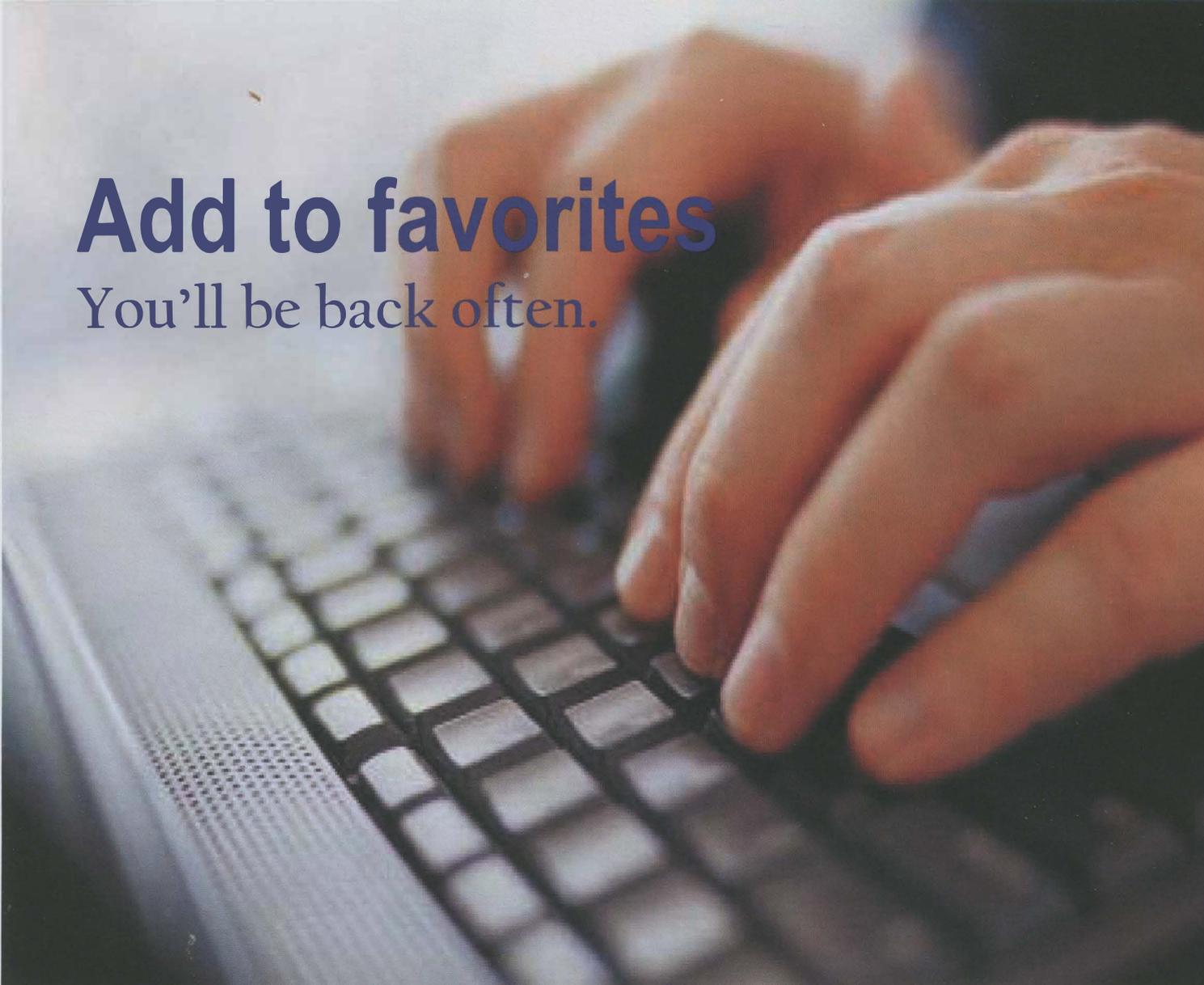


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Worship that Connects



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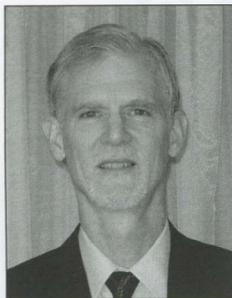
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Rev. Linda Fisher Privitera is a working artist and a consultant and teacher in the area of spirituality and the arts. An Episcopal priest and the former rector of the Church of Our Saviour in Arlington, Massachusetts, she is currently a priest without walls, serving a variety of communities in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada. She is a graduate of Yale Divinity School, Berkeley Divinity School, and the Episcopal Divinity School. **Page 28**

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In an interview, sociologist of religion Nancy Ammerman identified three key components that make up the "glue" of congregational life: worship, religious education, and fellowship.

And, she said, both leaders and congregation members put worship at the top. "If worship is the core task," she concludes, "then there must be an organizational investment in developing that."*

But what if we could find ways to structure that investment so that it connected these three components of congregational life? What if in the course of worship we were also able to find fellowship with other congregants, deepen our spiritual lives, and further our congregational visions? These are the questions that our theme articles explore in this issue.

Nancy Wood-Lyczak and Heather Kirk-Davidoff explore ways that the sermon can model and include faith sharing. Through a series of provocative proposals for including the congregation in the sermon, they outline a way that the people in congregations can become more comfortable talking about their faith in public, which will, I'll add, lead to deeper educational and fellowship experiences.

Brian Paulson leads us through a process for thinking about how a congregation's vision can be shared and reinforced through worship. "When a guiding vision for a congregation has been formed by a structured conversation about God's calling for a particular place and time," he writes, "that guiding vision needs to be voiced in the weekly worship narrative of God's people." Worship is thus connected to the ongoing life of the congregation.

Linda Fisher Privitera writes about how she and her congregation were transformed when they opened themselves to the creativity of art. The art they made allowed them to explore their faith, create new ways of picturing their faith and community, enhance their worship, and deepen their reflection. "I was stunned," she says, "to realize that so many people had lots to say and not much opportunity in community worship to say it."

In other articles, Andrew Warner and Sarah Drummond explore a new way to think about clergy recruitment, John Hudson reflects on the lesson he learned from his sabbatical, and Bradley Hill thinks about the ways a pastoral relations committee can truly support a pastor.

We also explore a number of important new books. In our last issue, we reviewed Barbara Brown Taylor's *Leaving Church: A Memoir of Faith*. Our reviewer, Diana Butler Bass, who is not ordained, wondered how clergy would respond to the book. In this issue, Martin Copenhaver offers one response in which he affirms his own call to the pastoral life and explores the many rewards of that life for those who are called to it.

Faithfully,

Richard Bass
Director of Publishing

*From "Nancy Ammerman on American Congregations" at www.resourcingchristianity.org.

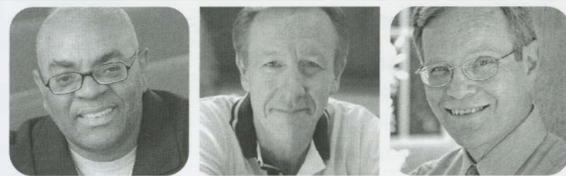


What will make your heart sing?

"O sing to the Lord a new song." — Psalm 96:1

2007 NATIONAL CLERGY RENEWAL PROGRAM

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



The National Clergy Renewal Program, offered by Lilly Endowment Inc., is intended to strengthen Christian congregations by providing an opportunity for pastors to step away briefly from the demands of daily parish life and to engage in a period of renewal and reflection. They are asked:

"What will make your heart sing?" They are invited to plan the steps that will make that happen. The Endowment will provide up to 120 grants of up to \$45,000 each directly to congregations for support of a renewal program for their pastor.

Applications are now being accepted. They must be postmarked by May 15, 2007, and the award announcement will be made by October 2007.



For information: Contact the Endowment's Web site: lillyendowment.org, click on Religion, then on National Clergy Renewal Program, Request for Proposals; e-mail clergyrenewal@yahoo.com; call 317/916-7302, or write to Program Director, Religion, Lilly Endowment Inc. 2801 N. Meridian St., P.O. Box 88068, Indianapolis, IN 46208-0068. *Pictured top:* The Rev. Helen H. Enari, 2003 recipient of a clergy renewal grant. *Above, left to right:* The Rev. Clarence C. Moore, 2004 recipient, the Rev. David P. Schreiber, 2004 recipient, and the Rev. J. Mark Barnes, 2004 recipient.

Resisting Temptation



WITH THE NOVEMBER ELECTIONS BEHIND US, we are on the cusp of the transition from the 109th to the 110th

Congress, and the temptation for many of us is to forget about politics for awhile. The signs along our roadways are gone, the TV and radio ads are off the air, and the pundits have shifted their attention from speculation about election outcomes to other issues. All of us are ready for a break and change of scenery.

But taking a break—especially a long one—may be exactly the wrong thing to do, for several reasons. First, the major issues that divided us and fueled the campaigns have not been definitively settled and they will not go away. We're still fighting a war in Iraq, all the sexuality and procreation issues that have divided us for decades still trouble our cultural waters, and issues about poverty, taxation, social security, health care, a fair minimum wage, immigration, and the environment will not go away between now and the next election cycle two years from now.

Second, the political machines are already retooling, preparing for the next round of American ideological conflict. Hats are being tossed into rings, money is being raised, master plans for candidates and political parties are taking shape as we catch our collective breath. In all likelihood, our nation is preparing for another polarizing, mean-spirited political game that will consume our money, our attention, and our national spirit two years from now.

Is there an alternative? I believe there is, even if it is a long shot and one that may require decades rather than years to accomplish. It is one that requires our religious communities to step up, our congregational leaders to take risks, and our thinking to move from short-term fixes to long-term human and communal transformation.

Those of us who participate in religious communities, whether local congregations or other types, need to do several things—now. First, we need to dig deeply into our religious traditions and recover their moral, ethical, and theological treasures. Our traditions

have so much to say about wealth and poverty, about war and peace, about justice and mercy, but we have lost our bearings. We must resurrect those teachings and practices and release them afresh. The collective silence in our religious communities about war, torture, and welcoming and loving the stranger must end.

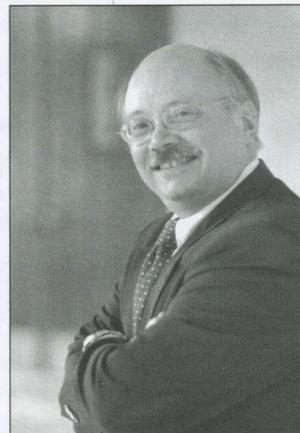
In addition, we must help our religious communities be places where people know what is really going on. I recently attended the Festival of Faiths that the Center for Interfaith Relations puts on each year in Louisville, Kentucky. During that citywide celebration, we spent a day reflecting on the mountaintop-removal mining techniques that are devastating great parts of Kentucky and West Virginia. Most of us know nothing about these terribly destructive processes that are ruining our land in the name of profit for the shareholders of major coal mining companies. There is so much that our people—in our congregations and beyond them—do not know about what is happening in the world. Religious leaders and religious communities have a vocation to tell the truth about what is going on.

Such truth telling also includes the risky business of informing people about what is really taking place in our society, as exemplified in Randall Balmer's recent and hard-hitting book about the role of the religious right in the U.S., *Thy Kingdom Come: How the Religious Right Distorts the Faith and Threatens America* (Basic

Books, 2006). Balmer dares in this book to inform the public about what it does not know about the origins of the Religious Right, the real history of American evangelicalism, and the dangers confronting our American way of life. Not knowing the fuller meaning of the word evangelical or the Baptist history of the separation of church and state puts our country at risk, and most of our citizens do not know it.

The next contribution that our congregations and religious leaders must make if we are ever to have something other than more of the same is to create places where people can talk about the hard things—the things we do not know or want to know, the places where our faith traditions judge our cultural priorities, the places where our lives are at odds with the Creator's intentions—and find common meaning and resolve to act together to heal the world. Creating such places of civic and faithful discourse is one of the greatest challenges of our age and it is our calling.

One more thing we could do to change the political process and conversation in our land—and around the world—is to identify those in our religious communities or on the edges of them who are giving their lives to addressing the great problems and challenges of our age. We need to find them, lift them up, and give them the spiritual and moral resources they need to make justice and mercy something more than religious clichés. Equipping the front-line leaders to be agents of skilled shalom should be at the center of our congregational life rather than at the periphery where it is too often placed. ♦



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



How Military-Style Recruitment Tactics Can Help—or Harm—the Church

ANDREW B. WARNER AND SARAH B. DRUMMOND

THERE ARE ABOUT 70,000 MARINES AND ARMY SOLDIERS WHO are trained for frontline combat; in the language of the Pentagon, they represent the “tip of the spear” in military engagement.¹ Interestingly, there is about an equal number of ordained mainline Protestant clergy. These leaders on the front lines of the Christian religious movement are in many ways the tip of the spear of church.

At first blush, these parallel groups appear as merely an intriguing oddity, but despite the obvious differences between the church and the military, their similarities go deeper than the tip of the spear when one looks at their tactics for recruiting leaders at this time in our culture. Both the church and the military are service-based institutions that use a vocational language that sets them apart from the wider society (clergy and laity, military and civilian). Both church and military institutions are struggling to recruit qualified candidates. Church closings necessitated by priest shortages are but one example of the effects of recruitment failures in the Christian church. Military recruitment problems are so severe that some officers view the Army’s new slogan—“an army of one”—as an ironic prophecy.

“As the church moves into a more aggressive approach to recruiting church leaders, it must be cognizant of the ethical challenges inherent in inviting youth and young adults into a vocation.”

All who encourage new leaders to enter service-related fields are required to work harder to make their professions appear to be legitimate choices than do recruiters from more conventional and lucrative fields, such as business, medicine, or the law. Intentional recruitment programs might be the only way in which an option to serve would even be considered as a practical professional possibility.

The military has pioneered several approaches that may inform those of the church. However, both ecclesiastical and military recruiters must examine their recruitment tactics critically in order to prevent manipulation that might have negative long-term implications both for the recruited individuals and the recruiting institutions. Recruiters seek to activate within the person they have targeted a sense of calling to a higher purpose and servanthood. Despite the obvious differences in the purposes of these institutions—a reality not lost on the authors of this article—the two institutions might have something to learn from one another. In particular, an awareness of the mistakes the military has made in its recruitment efforts may help the church avoid similar pitfalls in its own recruitment processes.

The Cultural Climate

Both the military's and the church's recruitment processes are responses to the same cultural forces, particularly issues related to time and money.

Sarah Drummond, director of field education and assistant professor of ministerial leadership at Andover Newton Theological School and one of the authors of this article, tells this story about recruiting leaders for a campus ministry she served: “It was clear to me from the beginning that

our ministry would succeed only if we had strong, gifted, and charismatic leaders. Students rarely come to the ministry center to see only me. Rather, they come to see one another, and we needed to have leaders here whom other students would want to meet and know. The problem is that our students work an average of 30 hours per week outside of school. That's the average number! That means that many of our students work full-time, and asking them to volunteer a huge amount of time to our ministry would have been asking the impossible. If we relied solely on volunteer leaders, two things would have happened: we wouldn't have gotten the best possible students involved, and we wouldn't have had enough time, energy, and effort from students, because they simply don't have the time. So we created three paid internships and we got great leaders to come on staff. Our participation rates have increased 20-fold since we made this change.”

This illustration points out some of the important differences between the college students of today and those of yesteryear. Many authors have written about the ways in which American colleges have become increasingly diverse in terms of race, religion, and family background. The attribute of the current traditional-aged college student population most relevant to the question of ethical recruitment tactics for ministry is that many of today's college students genuinely need to make money. They need to make money while they are in school in order to pay tuition and expenses; many do not come from families where parents are able to provide financial support. They need to make money after they graduate in order to support their families of origin as well as current and future dependents.

Indeed, many are in college based solely on the promise of higher wages in the future. Whereas American colleges of 100 years ago served primarily as finishing schools for the nation's elite, they today provide a key to an American dream not otherwise available.

One complicating factor in the argument that students “need” to make money, however, is that the concept of need has shifted dramatically. Due to the ready availability of credit cards for young adults, and even more importantly due to the marketing machine geared toward encouraging young people to procure more and more consumer goods, the standard of living of the young adult in college has risen dramatically in less than one generation.

On the campus of Andover Newton Theological School it is not uncommon to meet a college student with a cell phone, a relatively new car, and a reasonably nice apartment who cannot afford to buy groceries. That same student might work 30 hours a week just to pay credit card interest, not recognizing that many of the goods he or she owns would have been considered inconceivable luxuries to his or her parents when they were young adults.

What are some of the most noticeable effects of this shifting relationship between young adults in college and money? First, today's college curricula tend to reflect the wishes of tuition-paying students: when allocating funding to departments, most colleges must offer courses they know students will take. At all but the most elite liberal arts colleges, career-oriented fields have fared better in this calculation. Whereas fields like philosophy, religious studies, or sociology might have exposed students to ministry as a possible field for continued study, those departments are shrinking today. Would a student studying marketing find joy in ministry? Perhaps, but that same student likely chose to study marketing in order to earn a higher income than ministry might provide.

Second, because students either need or perceive that they need to make money while in college, the culture of volunteerism is changing. Although more students volunteer today than in

previous generations, structures have been built up around that volunteerism, such as the rapid proliferation of assistant deans for community service, because to give of one's time has become less of a lifestyle and more of a hobby. As a case in point, many students give their spring breaks to Habitat for Humanity, but weekly attendance at most colleges' Habitat campus chapter meetings tends to be low. Students enjoy giving succinct periods of time to others,

the Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) for officers. Meanwhile, in the ministerial recruitment arena, the Lilly Endowment's Programs for the Theological Exploration of Vocation provided grants of over \$1 million to 88 historical Christian colleges and universities interested in creating vocational discernment programs for all students, with a special focus on students considering ministry. Many of these college programs create financial incentives for pre-seminary candidates.

“An awareness of the mistakes the military has made in its recruitment efforts may help the church avoid similar pitfalls in its own recruitment processes.”

but they find themselves too busy to give regularly or to commit to unpaid work. Paid work takes precedence (whether financial needs are real or perceived) among all but the wealthiest students. Therefore, the pool from which seminaries and divinity schools draw applicants has changed in shape and content. Whereas recruiters from such programs might once have focused on liberal arts departments or volunteer groups, these groups are shrinking in favor of career-oriented majors and paid extracurricular work. Something different must be done to reach out to students in career-oriented majors and students who spend their time outside of school working. The military seems to recognize this, and the church has begun to recognize it, too.

Parallel Tactics

Both the military and the church are seeking to recruit young people to a service-oriented vocation without the financial promise implicit in law school or a medical residency, and both are using promises of financial aid as part of their recruitment campaigns. The military's chief recruitment tools are a college benefit for enlisted soldiers and

Both the church and the military are also working to gain access to young people and to create a recruitment pipeline that begins in high school. Recent legislation, such as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, gave military recruiters extensive access to high school students' personal information, including home and cell phone numbers. Meanwhile, several denominations are working with the Fund for Theological Education to create the Pastoral Search Leadership Effort, which would create an online community of youth and young adults interested in ministry and provide personal contact information to seminary and denominational recruiters.

Another similarity in church and military recruitment programs is that both use what might be called “showcase” programming to attract recruits—highlighting what is best (or most alluring) about the vocation. For instance, military recruiters often arrive on high school and college campuses with the latest technology to impress students: Humvees, Black Hawks, Strykers. No one would ever suggest that the church has the latest technology, yet a host of programs rising up across the church—such as intensive weekend experiences and internship

programs—give prospective candidates a sample of what is best and most rewarding in ministry.

Finally, both the church and the military are working to identify and train a cohort of people who can be called into service to fill emergency needs. One of the most innovative solutions to the recruitment needs of the military was the expansion of the National Guard and the Reserves. Together, National Guard and Reserves units account for a significant proportion of the soldiers in the current conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. One wonders if the flourishing lay academies across denominations are the church's equivalent. In many of these programs, lay church members give up one weekend a month for several years and graduate into a specific ministry position, serving in a way that is neither fully clerical nor fully lay. Whether it is the Catholic laywoman administering a parish or the Presbyterian layman who preaches at his 30-member church in rural South Dakota, these ministry-trained laity form what is essentially an “Ecclesiastical Reserves.”

Recruitment Landmines

Given the striking similarities between church and military recruitment, one begins to wonder if the very public problems that have existed in military recruitment will befall the church. Becoming aware of and learning from the military's ethical trouble spots may help the church to ensure that it maintains high standards of integrity in its own recruitment efforts.

For young men and women who are truly called to a military vocation, the enticements and programs of the military can work to benefit both these individuals and the institution. For instance, a young man in author Andrew Warner's congregation² felt a strong sense of call to the Army in high school. He was motivated by a deep patriotism and respect for the rule of the law. In college he was admitted to the ROTC and thrived in its culture of discipline and

dedication. He now proudly serves with the 101st Airborne Division. For him, military recruitment was a matter of matching his gifts and call to the opportunity to serve his country. However, many recruits to the military do not have this prosaic experience of call. In recent scandals, military recruiters were found to have made false and misleading promises to recruits, even assuring them that they would not go to Iraq or Afghanistan. Drummond once worked with a student who enlisted in the National Guard after the recruiting officer promised financial aid for college in exchange for serving a few weekends a year. The student signed up, thinking that, at most, she'd be called up to heroically rescue civilians during a natural disaster, not drive a tank in Baghdad. Indeed, for much of the 1990s Americans became accustomed to thinking of the National Guard and the Reserves more as disaster response teams than as military units. Some recruiters, breaking military policy, continue to sell the Guard and the Reserves on this false premise. In response to this problem, the Pentagon held an unprecedented one-day stand-down from recruiting in May of 2005 in order to retrain recruiters on the ethical boundaries they must maintain.

In addition to the isolated misconduct of some recruiters, the military is facing a financial challenge in the Montgomery GI Bill. As reported in May 2005 in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, many soldiers recruited with the promise of financial aid for college find that the actual benefit is far short of their costs and, because of cumbersome eligibility requirements, only eight percent of veterans ever use their full benefit. Military recruiters are enlisting soldiers on the promise of financial aid that too few see fulfilled.

Many college students are in a financially precarious situation, where the promise of financial assistance might overwhelm a true sense of call. Currently, no denomination offers anything as comprehensive as the Montgomery GI Bill. However, some mid-level judicatories are moving

to offer seminarians debt relief in exchange for a specified term of service in the judicatory. As the church develops more and more financial aid packages, integrity demands that it fulfill the promises it makes and ensures that the call from God is louder than the call of financial assistance.

Recruiting with Integrity

As the church moves into a more aggressive approach to recruiting church leaders, it must be cognizant of the ethical challenges inherent in inviting youth and young adults into a vocation. Dean Hogue and Jacqueline Wenger, authors of *Pastors in Transition*,³ recently conducted exit interviews with many clergy who left their vocations. Strikingly, 27 percent of those interviewed left because of a changing sense of call or dissatisfaction with parish ministry, and another 14 percent left because of burnout related to feelings of inadequacy. This study suggests that a plurality of ex-pastors was recruited into a vocation that was not theirs. This should serve as a warning that church recruitment efforts can suffer the same failings as those of the military.

Integrity in ministry recruitment requires a special vigilance. Recruitment ought to be clear about the gifts required for ministry and realistic about the lifestyle of clergy. This is hard to do. Both of the authors of this article work with college interns in their ministry settings. Sharing the joy of ministry while being realistic about the church is a delicate balance; ministry in its lived form might figuratively mean being called either to sandbag the Mississippi or to drive a tank through Baghdad.

There is much that those involved in ministry recruitment can learn from what the military does right and what it needs to do better. For example, options like the Montgomery GI Bill and the National Guard provide realistic ways in which a man or woman can serve in the military, based on today's cultural norms. These options provide multiple incentives and path-

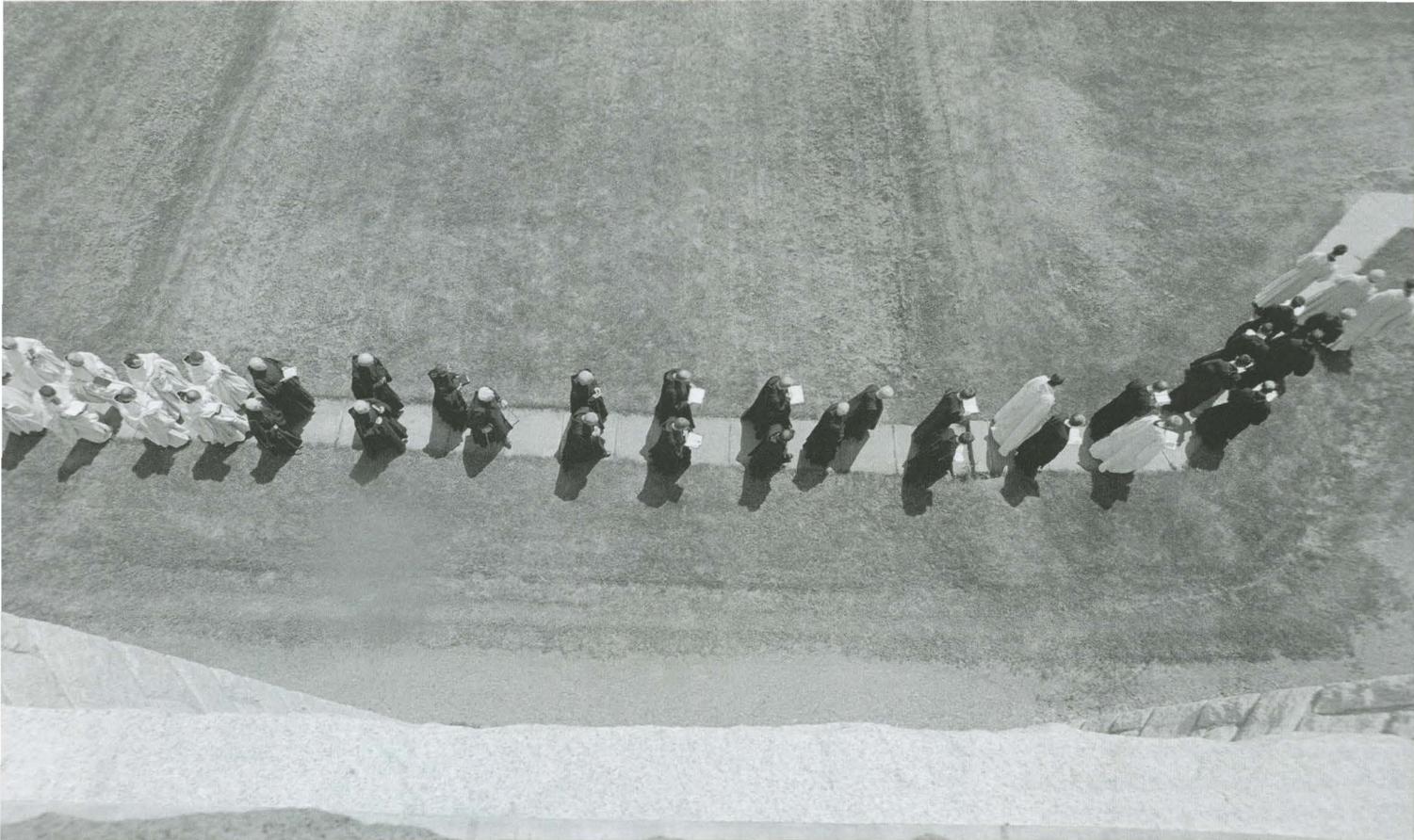
ways, allowing potential soldiers to make a choice that is feasible for their circumstances. Given the financial constraints on current college students and the allure of more financially rewarding careers, it will be important for ministry recruiters to develop multiple recruitment techniques and strategies. At the same time, those committed to strengthening the leadership ranks of the Christian church must be extremely attentive to the disquieting lapses in military recruitment tactics. How today's church leaders describe the vocation of ministry to the next generation ought to be true to fact—wheat and tares together. Its offers of financial aid ought to come alongside true, deep discernment of God's call for an individual Christian's life's work. ♦

NOTES

1. Max Boot, "The Struggle to Transform the Military," *Foreign Affairs* (March/April 2005), 107.
2. Plymouth Church, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.
3. See *Congregations*, Summer 2005 (Hemdon, VA: Alban Institute).

Questions for Reflection

1. The typical population to be recruited into ministry through scholarships and other enticements is young—fresh out of college. Do you think this is what is best for the current and future church? Why or why not?
2. How would you compare a sense of calling to military service to a calling to ministry? Are the two entirely different? What role do Christian teachings about violence play in your logic?
3. How can we share both the joy and reality of our work when we recruit young adults?
4. How can we meet the need for financial assistance without overwhelming or distorting God's call?



Not Sure I Want to Be Back

Thoughts on Returning from Sabbatical

JOHN F. HUDSON

I CALL IT POST-SABBATICAL STRESS SYNDROME, OR PSSS. I have it bad and I'm struggling to figure out just what the cure might be. PSSS struck the day last September when I returned home from a three-month sabbatical, my first extended break and rest after 22 years of local church ministry. Its onset was immediate and intense, a storm-like roiling of my internal spiritual waters unlike anything I've encountered before. PSSS's symptoms are contradiction and confusion. For, after 90 days away and now 90 days returned, this I know: I want to be back again as a pastor in the church, and I do not want to be back in the pastoral life. I love the intensity and the depth of the work I do and I resent the claims that my call demands—the financial, emotional, and spiritual sacrifices that day-to-day ministry expects. I can't see myself doing anything else and I can't see myself keeping up the intense pace I maintained in the first half of my professional life. Like Jacob wrestling with the angel, I struggle in these post-sabbatical days with almost daily questions of just how to do ministry faithfully while also keeping spiritually sane and centered.

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Now, on hearing of my PSSS, some may label me ungrateful, or needing to just be thankful to God and the church I serve for any sabbatical at all. Don't mistake my post-sabbatical blues for ingratitude. I am thankful. Far too many local church pastors are not able or willing to take a sabbatical leave from their work. In pastoral ministry and almost all professions, sabbatical leave is the exception, not the rule. Last spring, when I excitedly told friends, family, and church members about going away, their reactions ranged from enthusiastic support to outright envy. I was blessed to have so much time off last summer to rest, think, pray, play, and reflect. I pray everyone could be given the gift of intentional time away.

Yet, now returned, this respite threatens to radically change how I view myself as a pastor. Sabbatical was both wonderful and troubling because it opened my eyes to an unhealthy truth: the sin of overwork and over-everything on the part of far too many clergy like me. Preachers may preach about the need for Sabbath. We just don't live it. No, instead, we embrace often unhealthy work habits like a badge of honor, even as the hours take their toll on our souls, psyches, and families. Six days a week we work. We're out until 9 or 10 p.m. on weeknights. We're available through cell phones and e-mail 24/7. Unlike most of the rest of the working world, we rarely have two days off in a row. Instead, we hop on board the runaway train that is the church program year on the first Tuesday after Labor Day and often do not disembark for a real rest until our parishioners flee

to their summer homes and vacations at the end of June. When can we take a deep breath and just breathe?

To breathe! When I am asked what the best part of having three months off was, my answer is that. I was able to breathe, just breathe again—step back, step out, and leave behind, at least temporarily, the breathless pace that is modern ministry. The weight of pastoral responsibility that had stuck with me for almost a quarter century was miraculously lifted. My daily thoughts, usually caught up in all the details of church work, uncluttered themselves. I had no sermon to write, no trustees' meeting to

Sabbatical was both wonderful and troubling because it opened my eyes to an unhealthy truth: the sin of overwork and over-everything on the part of far too many clergy like me.

attend, no families to comfort, and no budget to fret over. My hyper-responsibility for the church left me.

Instead, I had space and time to just be. To ride my bike almost every day. To walk on the beach, and to fall asleep at night with the sound of waves crashing upon the shore. To spend precious uninterrupted days with my family and close friends as I had not

since the church first beckoned me in. To read, uninterrupted, all the books I could, for fun and enrichment. To pray with intention and focus every morning and evening, and then fill up my journal with musings and thoughts. In that sabbatical sacred space, I found God again and God found me.

As I flip through the photos and re-read my journal from those sweet days, it almost feels like a dream. God's gift to me then was not a lack of scheduled daily work. The gift was living a more measured, paced, and God-centered life, one with the room for labor and play, thinking and doing, praying and listening, and working and resting. Now back into the race that is my modern urban pastor's life, the memories fade. But the questions my sabbatical provoked remain: Do I want to live this way anymore? Does God want me to live this way anymore? Is the only way to be a "good" pastor to work such ungodly hours and maintain such a scattered life? I don't have any answers yet and my PSSS is still stubbornly sticking around. Maybe it will help me learn a new way to be in ministry. I'm not sure. Writing this reflection in Advent helps. As the

season calls me to yearn for the arrival of the Christ child, I yearn as well for some clarity around this spiritual restlessness that will not let me go. I yearn for a rebirth of my passion for ministry.

In the weeks after my return I sought counsel and wisdom from mentors and denominational colleagues. Their observations and advice were enlightening but not very helpful. They

The gift was living a more measured, paced, and God-centered life, one with the room for labor and play, thinking and doing, praying and listening, and working and resting.

told me I was supposed to feel this way, that the first few months back were supposed to be hellacious and that my vocational equilibrium would return. I experimented with telling my church and staff about my PSSS, but worried that those not in the “sabbatical club” might mistake my struggles for petulance. Worst of all, many of the bad work habits I had before sabbatical and promised I would reform have started to creep back in. I’ve begun again to over-worry about how the church is doing and egotistically imagine that my faith community’s “success” depends on me alone. I’m attending meetings I really do not have to go to and saying “yes” to another commitment when “no” would be healthier. I’m soaring too high when things go well and crashing too hard when things at church stumble. I fear I am getting right back on board the train.

But still my PSSS hangs on and perhaps this is a good thing, a nudge from God. It’s teaching me that periodically all of us must re-envision, renegotiate, and then re-enter all of the most important commitments and covenants of our lives: marriage, career, love, and parenthood. If every few years an event like a sabbatical does not give us the chance to spiritually examine and renew ourselves, we risk passionless pursuits—going through the motions, walking along all the various spiritual terrains of our lives but not really knowing anymore why we travel or where we are going.

So, grudgingly, I thank God for my PSSS. I know in my bones I cannot be the pastor I was before my sabbatical. I cannot work or live this way anymore. And so I search and pray to God for a cure for my PSSS. My advice for clergy preparing for their sabbaticals is this: Be careful. Enjoy the time away. But know in returning you may never be the same again. ♦

Questions for Reflection

1. If you’re planning a sabbatical, or recently returned from one, who are the professional and personal confidants you can share your post-sabbatical questions with?
2. How might you plan those first few post-sabbatical months to minimize the shock of coming back?
3. If coming back from sabbatical raises deep vocational or personal questions for you, where is God in those movements of the Spirit?
4. How is the God you spent time with on sabbatical still present with and for you?
5. Have you made plans for your next sabbatical?

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The Sacred Responsibility

Supporting the Pastor We Have Called to Serve Us

BRADLEY N. HILL

RESPONSIBILITY FOR CONGREGATIONAL HEALTH LIES WITH congregation and pastor, but many congregations fail to recognize the sacred responsibility they have to the pastor called to shepherd them. Evidence of this failure can be seen in the alarming number of pastoral resignations that occur each year, creating a rolling brown-out in church leadership.

According to Ken Sande of Peacemaker Ministries, approximately 1,500 U.S. pastors depart their pulpits each month.¹ Approximately 23 percent of these pastors are fired or forced out, and in most cases the church never knows why. Similarly, in a *Christianity Today International* article, John LaRue reports that 34 percent of all pastors serve congregations that had either fired or otherwise forced out the previous pastor.²

The Nature of Nurture

Congregations, of course, rightly expect their pastors to nurture them. However, they also have a sacred responsibility to nurture their pastors (1 Tim. 5:17-19). There is a correlation between the health and well-being of the pastor and the long-term productivity of the church. Longer-term pastorates are well-correlated with effective evangelism and sustained church growth and health.³ The losses to a church from rapid pastor turnover are incalculable.

However, the pastoral relations committee (PRC) can play a key role in fulfillment of the congregation's sacred responsibility to nurture their pastor. The PRC is where the agendas of church and pastor meet. When functioning well, the PRC finds ways and means to sustain the excellence of the pastoral staff.

Crisis Management or Care Delivery System?

Unfortunately, many PRCs do not operate this way. They tend to become crisis management teams. In churches with this kind of unsupportive PRC, when the congregation hears that the committee is meeting, the buzz is "What's wrong?" and anxiety levels go up. In these churches, the PRC accumulates grievances against the pastor until pressure forces the safety valve to release it. That is when the meeting is called. The approach is often, "Pastor, lots of people feel... Many people want... We hear from many that..." The committee serves as interpreter and filter of congregational attitude, thus hindering the pastor from direct personal engagement. The PRC thus becomes the third party in a communications triangle. People speak to the PRC about the pastor, and the PRC becomes the vehicle through which the pastor hears the people. Although these roles may need to be performed at certain times, their constant performance only breeds a wariness and a weariness on everybody's part.

I have experienced this kind of dysfunctional PRC and almost resigned

myself at one time. The worship wars, cultural conflict, adversarial agendas, and a sharp decline in attendance had taken its toll on me and on the congregation. But I did not resign. By the grace of God, my church's pastoral relations committee reinvented itself and became a life-giving force for me. They asked, in effect, "How can we sustain the long-term excellence of our pastoral staff?" What emerged from conversations with the church, the council, and the PRC were the following recognitions:

Time is of the Essence

The pastoral task is not about efficiency. Time in the office does not equate to ministry done. Hours reported have little bearing on the Kingdom work accomplished. Personal time is needed: time to grow, time to

exhaustion resulting from long-term cumulative stress—takes it toll. One simply runs out of "gas."

Just as my computer generates an hourglass to tell me it is working on something and that I can just chill in the meantime, so the PRC can serve as the pastoral hourglass. (God is at work, so chill.) To do this, the PRC agenda needs to review the pastor's planner. The tyranny of the urgent and the pressure of the "should" will fill up all available time unless it is designated "sacred time." Long-range planning for time alone, time away, and time with family will help protect "sacred time." The PRC can help the driven pastor to think in terms of daily time, weekly time, monthly and yearly time.

Several years ago, my family and I packed up for a long-overdue vacation. Just as we were about to leave, a

There is a correlation between the health and well-being of the pastor and the long-term productivity of the church.

waste, and time away from the church will benefit the church. For pastors, Sunday is not the Sabbath, but certainly the pastoral task requires Sabbath.

As the work is primarily spiritual, time devoted to personal spiritual pursuits will also bless the church. Pastoring is one vocation that cannot be done by will and skill alone. By its very nature it requires time for meditation and reflection, prayer, solitude, and study. Time is needed to process memories and to enjoy anticipation. Soul care is time consuming.

In a study on pastor burnout conducted by the Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, 74 percent of the pastors who participated in the study reported that they had too many demands on their time.⁴ They operate without adequate margin, and the "general adaptation syndrome"—

long-time church member fell ill. I left my various contact numbers with the church chair. But before we left, he said, "We won't be calling. Take your heart with you." Receiving this grace of time from the congregation was hard but blessed.

Expectations are Made Explicit

The pastor is not the savior of the church. However, congregational expectations often are that the pastor will lead them into their "promised land." The PRC can help prevent an exacerbation of unrealistic expectations.

Churches tend to view themselves as the focus of pastoral ministry. Pastors are called to do ministry among the members: teach, disciple, preach, marry, baptize, and bury. This is "centripetal" ministry: it all devolves

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inward. However, most pastors, knowing that a self-focused church will inevitably be depleted, view their calling as more “centrifugal,” one that spins outward in evangelism, engaging the community at its point of need, and doing global mission. These two agendas end in mortal combat.

Awareness of the congregation’s and one’s own expectations is the first step toward bringing them into alignment. Are the expectations of each party clear from the beginning? Are changing expectations articulated or just simmering? Although the call may come with an explicit, detailed job description that spells out the pastoral duties—preaching, teaching, caring, leading—in some detail, explicit expectations are not the problem. The trouble lies in a host of implicit or hidden expectations that can be camouflaged by the rhetoric in job descriptions. These expectations are held by individuals in the church and by the body itself. They are not articulated but nevertheless form the grid of evaluation: quality of preaching, frequency of altar calls, visitation schedule, availability, warmth, behavior of family, personal and spousal attire, and technical competency.

Given that not every possible expectation can or should be listed in the job description, the PRC becomes the manager of the implicit. It attempts to vocalize what is silent.

An example of how this role can be exercised effectively occurred in my own congregation. I am an avowed “jazzoid,” so I had initiated an invitation to a well-known jazz artist to do a series of concerts at the church with a view to attracting the unchurched from the community. After the publicity went out, a strong oppositional element in the congregation arose, saying, in effect, “If you do this, we will leave.” I was tempted to call them on that! Anger mounted on both sides. It had become a pastoral relations issue for sure. But the PRC bridged the gap. They encouraged the “opposition” to explain their feelings. It turned out that, to them, jazz still carried connotations of smoky bars and sultry singers. It was agreed that the events could be hosted at several larger homes outside the church (and in the end, did more to move the church out into the community than hosting the events at the church building would have).

In this scenario, my explicit mandate was to implement outreach and evangelism. The implicit expectation was that I not trample on “Christian propriety” while doing so.

Trust is Built

A call to pastoral ministry often comes with a job description that compensates for all the faults and mistakes of the former occupant of that position. The search committee thinks, “Now is our chance to make sure that never happens again!” One pastor asked why his job description said he must park in the designated “Pastor Parking” spot. “So we know when you come and go,” was the answer. If the previous pastor/congregation relationship was rocky, the new pastor is often burdened with an *a priori* atmosphere of mistrust. In some ways it is like a second marriage: it begins with hope and anticipation that this time it will go well, but there is a hidden reserve of mistrust and fear.

The pastor/congregation relationship must begin with trust, and more trust will be granted as the relationship matures. Most new pastorates begin with a honeymoon stage where faults and quirks are overlooked. This will not last, of course, but the PRC can leverage this into creating a climate of trust that will prevail when the first fight comes. Trust builds as quickly as the people get to know the pastor, so a nurturing PRC might use the honeymoon period as an opportunity to highlight their new pastor. This can be done with a series of interviews during worship or for the newsletter, PRC-sponsored in-home gatherings, or “body life” events like sports and picnics that put the pastor in a less formal setting. Events like these, as well as lifting the pastor up in prayer, can be keys to building trust.

Also, if the PRC becomes aware of certain needs in the pastor’s life, these can be shared—with permission—in appropriate settings for care and prayer. It may seem counterintuitive, but trust also grows where there is vulnerability and admission of need. The bust of the walk-on-water pastor may be temporarily displayed on a pedestal, but lurking underground is the suspicion that “it’s too good to be true....” And it is. Then the head rolls.

Balance is Maintained

The pastor needs to model a healthy life for the congregation. If he or she is a driven, compulsive workaholic, any other modeling of or teaching about maintaining a healthy balance in life is negated. However, churches often expect this level of consecration from their pastors. At other times it is the pastor who brings this level of expectation and applies it to church volunteers and staff. The PRC can help structure right balance. A balanced tire will run better, smoother, longer, and more safely than an unbalanced one.

Accountability for the pastor’s well-being is crucial in establishing balance. This is more “health reporting” than what is often thought of as accountability. When the PRC comes along and says, “Reverend Elise, we would like to

review your time spent, how you use your hours. Frankly, we see you pouring almost endless hours into counseling, which is appreciated and needed, but you are often too exhausted to lead us into the areas of biblical discipleship. We want to see how we can help.” If the PRC said that to me, they’d have my time sheet asap!

lots of results! If I find 10,000 ways something won’t work, I haven’t failed. I am not discouraged, because every wrong attempt discarded is often a step forward.”⁵

An example of this occurred in one of my own pastorates. I had wanted more prayer in the church, so I created various prayer opportunities: Sunday

The pastor must be allowed to fail...
To hit the home run... the pastor must be encouraged to explore, to be adventuresome, and run some risks.

However, accountability is often a cover for controlling or a synonym for oversight. Sometimes this is needed, to be sure. Pastors need shaping, correction, rebuke, and discipline. But accountability needs to be more than that; it needs to be offered as congregational care to the pastor as well.

Many businesses offer “comp time” to their employees—time off from work that compensates for a period of prolonged work. This is one way to help keep life in balance, because there are times and seasons when we must respond to huge demands. Pastors rise to the occasion, but once risen they cannot simply stay there. They need “comp time” to regain strength and perspective. The PRC can help ensure that comp time is taken.

Humanity is Allowed

The pastor must be allowed to fail. She or he is not without fault or flaw, is still being sanctified. We are not speaking of gross moral failure but of accepting the imperfections and even enjoying the idiosyncrasies of personality. If the church wants its pastor to be a bold visionary and a courageous leader, then it must also expect enormous and repeated failures. Babe Ruth had 1330 strikeouts. Thomas Edison said, “Results? Why, man, I have gotten

night prayer service, midweek prayer service, special “days of prayer”; prayer wheels, prayer cells, prayer chains. Most of these efforts produced minimal results with maximal sustained effort, which is code for failure. What did work? A once-a-month prayer breakfast and teaching committees to do more than just open and close in prayer but to actually pray.

Pastors may fail at leadership training or evangelistic programs. The pastor may fail to revitalize a congregation or prevent a split. Of course, “failure” is hard to measure because there is always some element of good within every effort.

However, to hit the home run or turn on the bulb, the pastor must be encouraged to explore, to be adventuresome, and run some risks. The supportive PRC again comes alongside the pastor and says, “You are called of God. We encourage you to go with the vision that God gives to us all. We are with you on this!”

How many PRCs have ever said, “Pastor, we think you need to take more time for study, for family. We’d like you to take some courses on postmodern worship”? Probably not too many. But Dr. David Kersten, executive minister of the Board of Ordered Ministry for the Evangelical Covenant Church, says pastors tend to minister out of spiritual deficit. They give out more than they

The 10 Commandments of Sustaining Pastoral Excellence

1. The PRC will meet at least quarterly regardless of any crisis to serve as a support team for the pastor and not just as a crisis intervention team.
2. We will be system-centered. Though the pastor plays an important role, the well-being of the church does not rest on the pastor's shoulders alone. We are all in this together!
3. We will pray for our pastor, that he or she hear clearly from God and continue to uphold the whole family in prayer.
4. We commit to establishing appropriate boundaries between church life and the personal life of our pastor.
5. We will encourage our pastor to be in community outside the church—for example, a peer-accountability group or a lectionary study group.
6. Included in the letter of call will be an annual, mandatory four-week vacation and a three-month sabbatical after five years of service. We will accept a weekly "Holy Sabbath" rest for our pastor.
7. We will require a general report of time spent but more with a view to assuring normalcy in the work week than critiquing how it was spent.
8. We will find ways and means to be inclusive of the pastor's spouse and not be intrusive in his or her life.
9. We resolve to give our pastor "double honor" (1 Timothy 5:17).
10. We will speak the truth in love. We recognize that, in the past, we have often spoken brutal truth with little love. It is also true that we have tried to be gracious and forgo the truth. We need to both be gracious and speak the truth.

take in. They run depleted. They run to the edge of the margins. The PRC that helps pastors help themselves will ensure a longer, richer pastorate and will thereby deepen and bless the congregation. ♦

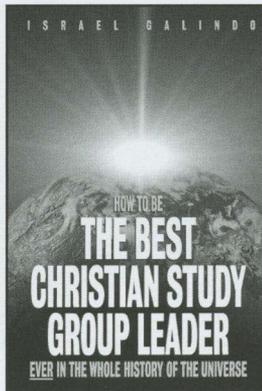
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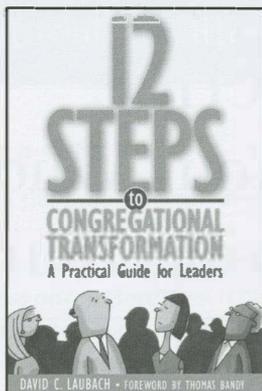
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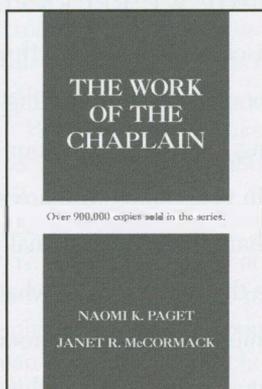
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Preaching as Practice

Techniques to Help Your Whole Congregation Share Their Faith during Your Sermon

NANCY WOOD-LYCZAK AND HEATHER KIRK-DAVIDOFF



AT A WORKSHOP WE RECENTLY LED AT A NATIONAL GATHERING of UCC and Disciples women, we threw out a number of questions to get a conversation about evangelism rolling. Our questions were sincere, but somehow they got the room laughing. “Are people in your congregation comfortable sharing their faith?” “Would you like to grow in your ability to share your faith?” “Does your church do a good job training its members to share their faith?” Finally, a woman in the front row burst out, “They don’t want to share their faith! That’s what they hired the pastor for!” There were hearty laughs and nods of agreement. We all understood how we can easily make evangelism the job of “the professionals.” But as problematic as this idea can be, it doesn’t come out of nowhere.

What if our preaching reinforced values like conversation, honesty, and vulnerability instead of values like passivity, distance, and the importance of “experts”?

Many ministers do a great deal to reinforce their congregation's sense that ordained clergy should do the talking about faith and the people in the pews should shut up and listen. After all, that's what they're asked to do for 15 to 30 minutes every Sunday during the event that lies at the heart of most of our worship: the sermon.

But what if our sermons modeled faith sharing to our congregations? What if sermons even gave our congregations the opportunity to practice sharing their faith with others? What if our preaching reinforced values like conversation, honesty, and vulnerability instead of values like passivity, distance, and the importance of “experts”?

Sermons can do all of this and more. The key is to find ways to make them more interactive. If you take a few steps to make your sermons less like a presentation and more like a conversation, not only will your preaching improve, your congregation's willingness to share their faith beyond the pews of your sanctuary will grow significantly!

Reward the Risk-Takers

One word of warning: when you invite your congregation to interact with you and with each other during your sermon, you're suggesting to them that they are experts too. They have insights into life, intuitions about scriptures, experiences of God that are key to understanding God's word to us this day. You're also making it quite clear that you are not going to do all the work for them. This may not always feel like good news.

So every step you make toward more interactive preaching has to be accompanied by lots and lots of affirmation and praise. “Wow, you all have a lot of

good insights!” “Thanks—those were hard questions to talk about, weren't they?” “Man do I appreciate you taking that risk!” “I really learned something from you all today!”

Four Steps toward Interactive Preaching

Here's a step-by-step guide to inviting your congregation to be part of your sermon. We start off very gently, but even the first step we recommend opens up possibilities that will be hard not to pursue once you've begun.

Every question becomes a gentle reminder to the congregation that their lives and their stories are keys to deeper insight about things that really matter.

1. Take a vote.

From the time we were in preschool and someone asked, “Who here likes ice cream?” we knew to raise our hands high to express our preferences. This comes so naturally for many of us that we will raise our hands if a waitress asks, “Who'd like a refill?” With that conditioning it's no big stretch to get your congregation to do just this—raise their hands in answer to a question that you pose in your sermon. “Who here doesn't like snakes?” you ask as you begin to talk about Genesis 2, almost as an aside. “Who here has ever been rock climbing?” you ask, as if you're checking to see if at least someone will understand the metaphor for the spiritual life you're about to use.

You can begin this way—checking in with your listeners here and there

during your sermon as if to see if they're following your point. If you not only pose the question but actually ask for a show of hands in response, you're beginning to challenge your congregation's understanding of a sermon as exclusively your work, your words. You're expressing to them in a gentle way your expectation that they will be working and thinking right along with you. A sermon, you'll suggest, is something I need you with me to do.

If it seems like only some people are “voting” you can give them a little push—“Go ahead and raise your hand—I'm really curious!” “Really? Only 10 of you? Anyone else?” Take it one step further and give the congregation two options and ask them to vote their preference. On Transfiguration Sunday we asked, “Where would you rather be with Jesus: on the mountaintop or in the valley?” “If you could only have one, would you rather have Christmas or Easter?” “Would you rather live in

a rural area like Galilee or in a big city like Jerusalem?” Begin a sermon on the Beatitudes by asking, “Would you rather be rich or poor? Well-respected or reviled? Joyful or mourning?” Then ask everyone how Jesus would have voted.

You can have some fun as you survey your responses: promise that the debate will continue at coffee hour or at the next meeting of the church council.

2. Ask a “warm up” question.

It's only a small step to go from taking a vote to asking individuals to explain their vote. You can ask, “Who here has ever ridden a horse?” and take a vote. Then ask, “Do you remember what it felt like the very first time?” See if anyone nods, smiles, leans over to whisper to their neighbor. Then ask, “Does anyone

The kinds of questions we seek to ask are ones that build a sense of community between the preacher and the congregation, and among the members of the congregation.

have a story they'd like to share about the first time they were ever on a horse?"

Or you can ask for a vote and then notice someone who's voting differently than you expected. "Gladys, have you really been rock climbing? Good for you! Care to tell us about it?"

When done well, this is one of the best ways we've ever found for getting our congregations connected to the topic of our sermon. Just about any sermon suggests a "warm up" question. Here are just a few of the many that we've used:

- ❖ What's your favorite part about the Christmas season?
- ❖ Have you ever discovered a talent you didn't think you had?
- ❖ What do you do when you're worried about something?
- ❖ Have you ever had a dream come true?
- ❖ Have you ever had to leave something precious behind when you moved or traveled?
- ❖ Can you think of a time when you had just enough of something—neither too much nor too little of it. Can anyone tell a story about that?

Our questions are often fun to think about, and they provide occasions for people to share a funny story. In this regard, they take the place of those warm-up jokes about Little Johnny in Sunday school. They get people engaged and often get people laughing.

But we never ask a question that is just an invitation to share funny experiences. Every question has a deeper side

too, and that part is usually the lead-in to our sermon. Thus, every question becomes a gentle reminder to the congregation that their lives and their stories are keys to deeper insight about things that really matter.

For this reason, we never ask a question where there is clearly a "right" answer. Questions of that sort ask the congregation to play a bit part in the preacher's show. The kinds of questions we seek to ask are ones that build a sense of community between the preacher and the congregation, and among the members of the congregation.

The first time you realize that coffee

—this kind of interaction works best when our congregations have really bought into the idea of working together as a community to reflect on God's Word and respond.

hour is abuzz with people talking about their best teachers or their secret talents, you may feel a bit miffed that people paid more attention to your question than they did to the rest of your finely crafted sermon. Don't go too far down that road! Instead, congratulate yourself for prompting some honest sharing, and be sure to note your observation, with lots of approval, at the start of your next sermon. ("I loved hearing you talk about your teachers last week!

You know, when you tell a story like that to someone else, either here in our sanctuary or even downstairs at coffee hour, you take a risk. Thanks so much for taking that risk!")

3. Invite an action at the conclusion of the sermon.

We come from churches that do not have altar calls. But we have to confess that sometimes we have altar-call envy. Our preaching is propelled by our conviction that God can change people, so we are constantly on the lookout for creative ways to invite our congregation to respond positively to that invitation.

There are scores of ways to invite your congregation to do something at the end of a sermon to indicate their willingness to accept the challenge, make the commitment, or engage in the question that was the focus of the sermon. Even churches that have occasional or regular altar calls might want to try one of these variations to approach that tradition in a fresh way. In every case, be clear that each one of these activities is optional. Extend an invitation and then let there be some open

time in the service, perhaps accompanied by music, when people can choose to respond. Some examples are offered below.

◆ On a Sunday before the beginning of Lent, preach a sermon about making a Lenten commitment that would help each person take the next step on their spiritual journey. After giving some examples of commitments of this sort, pass out footprints cut out of poster

board along with black markers. Ask everyone who feels comfortable doing so to write his or her Lenten commitment out on the footprint and then to bring it to the altar to be blessed. Later, post these footprints all over the walls of the sanctuary, or in the hallways, or in the room where you hold coffee hour. Leave them up for all of Lent. They will be powerful reminders to take the commitments seriously.

◆ On a Sunday focused on Jesus's call to Peter and James to leave their nets, preach about what we have to leave behind to follow Jesus. Inside each order of worship that week include a small boat simply folded out of origami paper. At the conclusion of the sermon, ask everyone to write what they need to leave behind onto the paper boats. Then sing the hymn "You Have Come Down to the Lakeshore" ("O Jesus, I've abandoned my small boat. Now with you, I will seek other seas..."). As the music continues, invite people to come forward and leave their boat on the altar. There will be very few dry eyes in the congregation.

◆ Explore ways in which your communion service might flow directly out of your sermon. Then asking the congregation to come forward to receive communion becomes an invitation to grow in their intimacy with God and their capacity to live out their faith in the world.

4. Ask a question and invite the congregation to share their answers in pairs.

The questions we use as openers are ones that people can share without a great deal of thought, or without needing to tell particularly long stories. Not all questions are suited to this kind of sharing. Some questions are important to consider, but they require more time or more intimacy to answer. We don't shy away from those questions, but we make more room for them. And we don't start here—this kind of interaction works best when our congregations have really bought into the idea of working together as a community to reflect on God's Word and respond.

Be sure that everyone has someone with whom to share! You might want to ask some lay leaders in advance to be "rovers," looking out for those who don't have a partner. Be sure to encourage everyone to pair not just with the people next to them in the pew but also those who are in front of them or behind them.

Here are a few examples of questions we've used in this way:

- ❖ What's your favorite line in the 23rd Psalm. Why? (You can use this question for just about any well-known scripture passage.)
- ❖ Have you ever caught a glimpse of heaven?
- ❖ Describe a "holy moment" in your life.
- ❖ Describe a time when you felt like you were "outside the gate" (for a sermon on Acts 16).
- ❖ Share your image of what it might mean for God's Kingdom to come.
- ❖ Share a favorite Christmas memory. Then share something that is hard about Christmas this year (for an Advent sermon or for a sermon on the Sunday after Christmas).

Ready for Lift-Off

We've been using these techniques with our two very different congregations for a few years now, and we're starting to see the fruits of this practice. Not only is preaching more fun for us and for our congregations but, increasingly, people in our congregations are comfortable speaking about their faith in public, using experiences and real-life stories, with humor and grace, and often with great insight.

A couple of Sundays ago, I (Heather) asked my congregation, "Have you ever had an experience that changed the way you saw the rest of the world?" People talked about the birth of their first child, trips to foreign countries, the death of a parent. Then I simply wondered aloud what it might mean to say that faith can conquer the world. Is there some way in which the experience of faith is like these experi-

ences, so that once we have faith the world no longer "rules" what we see and feel? While that conversation began in worship it continued for many of us into the following week. A scripture passage that seemed like a cliché became a truth that we could tell to one another in language of our own.

One of my parishioners later wrote this to me: "The conversations we have at [our church] seem to stay with me as company through the day, when I'm alone, when meeting a colleague, when visiting with my dad as he lives the last years of his life, and when meeting a patient in chronic pain. These conversations help us take our experience of Jesus beyond us, out into the world in many ways."

When we receive mail like that, we know that faith-sharing is no longer our job alone. Thanks be to God! ◆

Adapted from *Dare to Dive In! Strategies and Resources for Involving Your Whole Church in Worship* by Heather Kirk-Davidoff and Nancy Wood-Lyczak ©2006 Abingdon Press. Adapted by permission. ◆

Questions for Reflection

1. Are most people in your congregation comfortable sharing their faith? Are you?
2. What keeps you from sharing your faith more easily or more often? Could those barriers be addressed in worship in some way?
3. Are there times in your congregation's life when people model and practice faith sharing? How could you do this more often, or more intentionally?
4. Do you think your congregation would be open to some of the ideas suggested in this article? Which suggestion would be the easiest to implement?

Worship as a Vision-Building Work of God

PASTOR BRIAN PAULSON EXPLORES THE KIND OF WORSHIP THAT CONNECTS, CHALLENGES, AND INSPIRES THE PARTICIPATION OF GOD'S PEOPLE IN THE WORK OF THE SPIRIT

BRIAN PAULSON

Spiritual vitality and newfound creativity are natural outcomes when God-centered congregational vision finds expression in worship. Over the years, my worship planning with colleagues would wander and weave through holy texts and themes with only an occasional nod toward local projects or plans. Admittedly, this deficit in local focus was often deliberate. Perhaps I was afraid to sully the eternal purposes of God with the pedestrian plans of parish ministry. At times, we neglected the formative potential of vision simply because our structure and content for weekly

Worship is able to provide a framework of health and well-being in which a divine challenge can be placed.

worship planning was driven by inherited local or denominational design. Lately, however, I have come to understand that when the guiding vision for a congregation has been formed by a structured conversation about God's calling for a particular place and time, that guiding vision—

a God-centered vision—needs to be voiced in the weekly worship narrative of God's people. After all, since worship is always a local encounter with the God of ages, why would I, or any spiritual leader, choose to exclude a confirmed and articulated path that a congregation has deemed to be of God?

In fact, worship is the most consistent and powerful way a congregation experiences God in its life together. Sometimes these transforming experiences defy easy explanation. Perhaps this is because worship can somehow push our sensibilities with a profound and often inchoate kind of force. However, worship also provides a kind of “sense making” for our life together. It is able to create a patterned framework by which we come to understand what God is doing in our midst.

Maxine Dick, a faithful octogenarian from the congregation I served in Arizona, once described the meaning-making power of worship for our life together. There was one line in a prayer offered when concluding the Lord’s Supper that shaped her experience: *You have given yourself to us, Lord, now we give ourselves for others.* “In communion,”

peoples of the world who are claimed by God’s eternal embrace. Like faith itself, our worship of God is a gift to be treasured. Yet that gift is not to be claimed as a tool of personal privilege. If a local vision is to be effectively woven into the worship life of a congregation, that vision must reflect rigorous and prayerful discernment such as Gil Rendle and Alice Mann have described in *Holy Conversations: Strategic Planning as a Spiritual Practice for Congregations* (Alban Institute, 2003) or Roy Oswald offered in *Discerning Your Congregation’s Future: A Strategic and Spiritual Approach* (Alban Institute, 1996). When vision is faithfully discovered, it is never detached from a wider view of God’s people and purposes.

So, then, if a congregational vision is prayerfully discovered in structured

Picture a pastor taking an infant in her arms and speaking the following words with love to the child:

“It was for you that Jesus Christ came into the world;

It was for you that he conquered death;

Yes, for you, little one, you who know nothing of it as yet.

We love because God first loved us.”

One of the great gifts we share in worship is the opportunity to remember who we are and how we are called to live. Worship strengthens our sense of identity and purpose. This spiritual strength is shared through explicit articulation as well as by means of gestured demonstration.

Sometimes our focus on individual experience in worship distracts us from ways that God steadily forms a congregation over time through prayer and praise. My research into the worship life of congregations has consistently discovered ways by which worship builds mutual identity and purpose within a congregation. A number of dynamics reinforce the self-awareness of a congregation through worship.

For instance, common identity grows in proportion to a sense of belonging. This sense grows from the moment a congregant first encounters familiar or friendly faces in the parking lot of a church. Our most basic human connections are created between individuals whose conversations frame the personal daily realities of life. People rarely begin common journeys out of a vacuum with a disembodied set of ideas. Common direction is best cultivated when there is a shared sense of belonging. Cindy Dunn, another member of my Arizona congregation, told me about the way she chose to return the kindness she had received when she had lived through a painful divorce:

There was a lot of bad stuff going on back then. Yet, at church, people were nice to me. People spoke to me and I felt good. So now I usually speak to people on Sunday. If I haven’t seen some person for a while, I usually either touch them or give them a hug.



When the guiding vision for a congregation has been formed by a structured conversation about God’s calling for a particular place and time, that guiding vision—a God-centered vision—needs to be voiced in the weekly worship narrative of God’s people.

she said, “I remember the dedication, love, and sharing of those I’ve known through the years in church. Then I think about all of our own doing and teaching and helping. All of those things are reinforced for me in worship. Those are things that we dedicate ourselves and rededicate ourselves to do.”¹ For Maxine, worship was an anchor of vision—of dedication, love, and sharing—for the common course we shared by faith day by day.

Although this article is about worship as a vehicle to promote local vision, a cautionary note is useful when treating this subject. While worship gives spiritual voice to local stories, it is nonetheless our holy bond to all

conversation, the worship life of a church can promulgate vision in a number of ways: it can strengthen our sense of identity; it can challenge and change our perspective; and it can help to connect our personal and congregational stories to the larger story of God’s work in the world.

We Love Because God First Loved Us

Since congregational identity plays an important role in developing vision, worship naturally strengthens vision because identity is routinely formed by the weekly content and patterns of worship.

I feel like that's just part of Sunday morning worship—to be with the ones you love and care about. I do this because I remember [that] many people are just hoping someone will ask them about the events of their life.²

Cindy claimed a vision of the church and her role within it because she knew it was a place where she belonged to others.

Another way a congregation builds its sense of identity is by the repetition of simple phrases and gestures. Often these simple repetitions are the frequent object of criticism from those who claim worship is dry or rote. Yet every time I speak to a child the ancient words of scripture and Huguenot baptismal practice, “We love because God first loved us,” my congregation listens with an intensity rarely displayed at other points in the service. Repeated phrases and actions shape the soul with vision. Words or gestures will be devoid of meaning only when we fail to place the imprint of personal concern into our leadership in worship.

Of course, another way the identity of a congregation grows is by the way a leader judiciously and intentionally incorporates themes of local vision into the proclamation and meta-narratives of worship. A spiritual leader is called to pay attention for the congregation. This means a leader articulates any perception of local purpose and vision in texts or circumstances that are addressed in worship. When a congregation affirms a narrative set of phrases as the outcome of spiritual discernment for vision, worship leaders should be on the hunt for opportunities to voice those phrases throughout the weekly narrative of worship.

Lifting Our Eyes Higher

Vision in the life of a congregation often generates change, so worship becomes a primary means by which we expect God to intrude upon and challenge our routines.

I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills.
From whence cometh my help?
My help cometh from the Lord,
which made heaven and earth.

—Psalm 121

Repeated phrases and actions shape the soul with vision. Words or gestures will be devoid of meaning only when we fail to place the imprint of personal concern into our leadership in worship.

A vision from God often comes in surprising ways. When I have listened to my congregation's dream about God's future, I routinely discover opportunities I had never imagined before. Sometimes the vision requires the challenge of course correction or adjustment for a congregation. Worship is able to provide a framework of health and well-being in which a divine challenge can be placed.

I should caution that this dynamic of vision in worship needs to be treated with great care. A manipulative or even abusive application of driven purposes by we who offer spiritual direction can injure or weaken future constructive opportunities to cast local vision. There are some helpful preventive measures that I have learned to employ in order to ground my worship leadership in God-centered vision. The most important of these is to remind the congregation of the spiritual discernment process that established its vision. This doesn't require a dissertation. It can be as simple as a prefatory remark mid-sermon or a reminder such as, “When we prayed our way toward this vision...” Likewise, any printed or posted material that is acces-

sible during worship ought to include some reference to shared vision and the process that developed that vision.

Another preventive for the leader is to cultivate an authentic and relatively non-anxious worship presence. Sometimes leaders can obscure God's vision when their personality or ego strength is too wrapped up in the successful implementation of vision. I have learned to wrap any “vision speak” or “project talk” in worship with a healthy dose of honest humility. Sincere speech needs to reflect authentic

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Worship is able to provide a framework of health and well-being in which a divine challenge can be placed.

attending to God's leading, with words such as, "We are trusting that God will guide our ministry ..." If preventives such as these are borne in mind, the spiritual vision of a congregation can appropriately challenge a people through worship together. God's future can surprise us in specific acts of worship, such as prayer, proclamation, and sacrament.

The biblical foundation my current congregation claimed for its vision included the phrase from Luke 5:11, "They left their nets and followed him," so I began one recent prayer with the words, "Jesus, when you asked us to follow you, did you mean today?"

The act of prayer places our particular projects in direct dialogue with the Divine Author of a grander narrative. Through prayer our ministries are put into the steady and refining presence of God. Prayer allows honest public assessment of a congregation's sinful confusion or misdirection. It centers our strongest yearnings and hope in the trustworthy hands of God.

This element of worship is perhaps the most practical way our corporate spiritual life connects with the personal spiritual prayers and dreams of each individual congregant. It creates stakeholders in the congregation's vision. Prayer helps people understand that the challenges they undertake are intimately connected to the heart of God.

I regularly pray for the right words to speak in worship. So, in preparation for Christian worship, I pay careful attention to the way Jesus spoke to the people he met. His speech routinely startled listeners' imagination into action. The primary means for this challenge was Jesus's use of parable. Scholar C. H. Dodd wrote that a parable is "a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise appli-

cation to tease it into active thought."³

This is what good proclamation is able to accomplish in the midst of worship—it arrests us and teases us into action. The so-called "crisis theology" of Karl Barth used larger words to describe a practical reality that good preaching affirms in weekly worship: the Word of God is disruptive and creative in its character.

Admittedly, sometimes the overly dramatic can distract us from the workings of God. Yet there is a quality of vision that is almost always disruptive. A vision-inspired sermon can effectively pound upon the spirit to wedge us out of periods and patterns of stagnation.

Consider the words regularly shared in the Eucharist: "This is my body, broken, for you" or "Their eyes were opened, and they recognized him." In my tradition, a sacrament stands

sation through which our local story is woven into the fabric of God's larger narrative.

I love to tell the story, for those who know it best,

Seem hungering and thirsting to hear it like the rest.

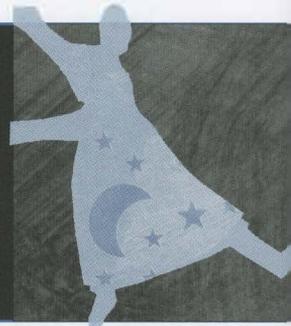
And when, in scenes of glory, I sing the new, new song,

'Twill be the old, old story that I have loved so long.⁴

A God-centered local vision gathers new projects and discovers the way these dreams are carefully woven into a familiar story of God's saving purposes. Worship leaders are called to stand within a spiritual breach, bridging heaven and earth. In our attempts to fill that intermediary role, we regularly structure holy conversation in the way we arrange the order of worship, select texts, and announce the activity of God in our midst.

In our church, at the close of every infant baptism an elder calls upon a child to bring a Bible to the parents of the newly baptized. The elder tells these parents that we hope their child

A vision-inspired sermon can effectively pound upon the spirit to wedge us out of periods and patterns of stagnation.



in necessary relationship to the Word proclaimed. If preaching articulates something broken that God's local vision can mend, sacraments can intensify a congregation's spiritual focus to help them discover a new future God intends. Sacramental activity in worship engages a congregation in gesture and repeated phrases and, through a larger narrative, disrupts daily routine to establish new patterns for life together.

I Love to Tell the Story

Worship life is critical to vision because worship is the structured weekly conver-

will come to discover the way in which his or her story is a part of God's larger story of love for the world. This is an intentional yet unobtrusive reminder that our congregation is a narrative community where our lives are linked through conversation, faith, and experience.

We make choices about patterns for worship in frequency and sequences that transmit the character of our common life and project the vision we prayerfully believe God intends. Indeed it is possible to mangle the holy things we touch and structure if we create disjunctive intrusions of slogans or gimmicks. Yet our calling is to confidently craft the participation of God's people in the

work of the spirit. Thus we kindle vision according to the way we arrange the order of worship.

If you look at my Bible you will see that the edges of the gospel pages are worn more than those of Leviticus or other ancient texts. Yet when my Arizona congregation envisioned a rejuvenation of its worship life and a consequent renovation of our sanctuary, our stewardship consultant told me I needed to turn to 1 Chronicles, chapter 29. I couldn't find 1 Chronicles in my lectionary resources, but we were in need of David's challenge to the commanders of hundreds and thousands: "Who, then, will offer willingly, consecrating themselves today to the Lord?"

While preachers must always be on guard against the dangers of eisegesis, perhaps we should recognize the fact that certain occasions demand the voice of particular texts. We recently completed a season preaching through a "vision path" of actions connected to our local vision. The lectionary did not lend itself to this timely focus in our congregation, so I departed from it but disciplined and restricted my text selections to Jesus stories from the gospel of Luke (much in the way the lectionary follows a particular book for a season). As the season progressed, congregants began to voice the way the vision we had affirmed was becoming more practical and explicit every day.

Perhaps I was beginning to follow the advice of the Rev. James Meeks, who leads the mammoth Salem Baptist Church in urban Chicago. He recently

told an assembly of pastors that they needed to "preach the announcements." Too often the weekly press to add "just one more" announcement in worship crushes both leader and people into a dulled stupor of uninspiring detail. Yet if we are attentive to text, occasion, and structure in worship, the activity of the church can be articulated in a range of enticing and meaningful ways. "Preaching the announcements" requires a spiritual conviction that our ministries are indeed a visual reflection of the call that God holds for our life together. If we are attentive to our people and God's leading, the work of worship is a spiritual craft that weaves our stories into a larger fabric of faith.

Seeing Worship and Ministry in a New Way

A God-inspired vision for our congregations should freely flow through the worship life that we share. There may be necessary cautions along the way to keep us from petty personal preferences in the great work of leading God's people in praise. However, a spiritual vision that has been embraced to guide a congregation forward will be most powerfully embodied if it finds expression in the worship of God's people. Vision in worship builds identity, faithfully challenges, and shapes the narrative of all that God can do. I pray that your congregation will discover the vitality my congregations and I have found in sharing vision through worship. ♦

NOTES

1. Maxine Dick, interview by author, Phoenix, Arizona, January 14, 1999.
2. Cindy Dunn, interview by author, Phoenix, Arizona, January 18, 1999.
3. Charles Harold Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1961), 5.
4. From the hymn "I Love to Tell the Story," the lyrics of which are based on Arabella Katherine Hankey's poem "The Old, Old Story" (1866).

Questions for Reflection

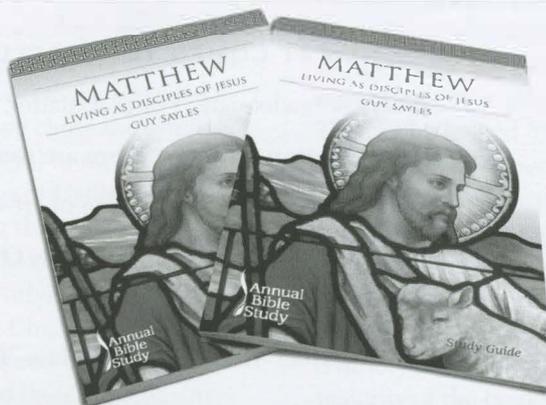
1. In what ways have you framed and integrated language that reflects a clear, concise, and consistent spiritual perspective into conversations regarding the projects and plans of your congregation?
2. If your congregation has articulated a common vision for ministry, how is that vision articulated in your worship life?
3. In what ways does your worship lay the foundation of a common identity for shared vision and direction?
4. What are some healthy ways to let the dynamics of worship challenge the status quo of your congregation in order to open a new future?
5. How are you inviting your congregation to participate in the development of a new vision-inspired narrative through worship?

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Restoring Our Contemplative Gaze

Congregational Transformation through the Arts

LINDA FISHER PRIVITERA

“WHEN IT COMES TO SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE, WORDS ARE OFTEN woefully inadequate. For that matter, neither do images or any of the arts fully convey the Great Mystery. Even so, there are some practices that improve our chances. When we open ourselves to the intrinsic value of art—its vast array of styles and techniques—we open ourselves to being met by the Holy One who speaks in unexpected ways.”

—Lois Huey-Heck and Jim Kalnin, *The Spirituality of Art*¹

According to Robert Wutlnow and others who study the life of congregations, parishes that are vibrant and growing are making use of the arts in many forms to revitalize and strengthen their faith communities.² The hope of this article is that churches might be willing to risk new practices, to continue to expand the ways in which people can appropriate the symbols and practices of worship, and to provide additional ways through which members can share their faith. The arts invite response, reflection, and attentiveness. Creativity and imagination affect church systems, including our worship.

Not so long ago, a parish I served in a community near Boston was transformed, and so was I, when we chose to embrace a model of what C. Kirk Hadaway calls “transformational community,” a faith system that is open-ended, permission giving, nurturing and growing, and one that embodies its purpose, transforming its people.³ This model moves people into new ways of seeing themselves, each other, and God. Undergirding the transformative work we undertook based on this model were several beliefs that form the basis for my consulting work and ministry: I believe in the priesthood of all believers, in a shared power through our baptisms. I believe that we are called to offer the gifts we bring in a spiritual democracy marked by radical welcome and open hospitality. I believe that the liturgy is the work of the people of God and that the whole space is a container for the sacred. And I believe the arts offer us a way to make a spacious container for difference.

Creativity demands, or perhaps implies, an attitude of openness to discovering new things, experimentation, imagining new possibilities, and taking risks. The opposite pattern can maintain tradition, safety, and conservative patterns. A creative approach allows conflict as a healthy part of congregational life when it exposes difference; the other works to avoid it. As a small Episcopal parish, we wanted to embrace mission and a future, not maintenance and a holding onto just our past. We imagined what God might be yearning

to call forth in our midst. We had grown and our growth included many of the rich and complex demographics of a Boston suburb; we wanted to find ways to deepen our level of community within the richness of our diversity.

We chose art as a means for our transformation, discovering that creativity and imagination, the gifts of the people of God, impacted our systems—our ways of doing the business of the church. The new projects we undertook changed our understandings of racism and multiculturalism, moved us toward new vehicles for healing, developed deep community, and helped us reshape our liturgies.

“I believe that creativity includes the art of life itself. It is about the way we

their mosaics in the worship space for a season and were pleased to hear the comments: “You made those? When is there another workshop? They add some brightness to the space.”

Next we transferred the mosaic style to the Easter side of a large five- by eight-foot cross on which we had placed an icon for Good Friday. Those who worked on the icon portion were only five in number, but the Easter mosaic involved the whole parish on Sunday mornings; even the youngest child could add some tiles. Comments from participants included thoughts of being more a part of the Holy Week events. “I thought of my own life as I added those pieces of tile, what was it about me and Easter in this place.” The children in particular

We have lost the contemplative gaze,
the mystery of God that comes through images
and through each one of us, that is
expansive and a wonder.

live and work, what we risk and why,” writes Ted Loder in his book *The Haunt of Grace: Responses to the Mystery of God's Presence*.⁴ I agree with this statement and I believe in the power of this artful way of life to move me. I was amazed, however, at the changes this work brought forth in us as individuals and as a congregation.

These changes did not happen overnight, of course. We began slowly, learning to do mosaic depictions of church symbols as our first project. Our leader for these workshops provided the patterns and we chose the symbols that were meaningful to us, such as the boat on the sea of Galilee or the dove representing the Holy Spirit. One woman designed her own symbol, a combination of symbols representing her Buddhist and Christian household. People were delighted with the projects and expressed their individuality in terms of color and balance. We hung

could hardly wait for the turning of the cross from the Good Friday to the Easter side at the Easter Vigil.

The Good Friday/Easter cross became an important part of our worship after September 11th and at funerals too. What began as a simple task to replace a short cross that was too small for our space and our proclamations became resymbolized for us; we had a hand in this work as God also has a hand in our lives. Those who laid the cross on their shoulders for the Good Friday liturgy were joined to it in an embodied way. Those who helped me turn the cross on Holy Saturday remembered times when their lives had turned around as well.

Next we began a series of art credo projects—projects reflecting the artists' beliefs—in which parishioners were invited to depict their faith through a variety of artistic mediums. For the majority of the credo projects, I supplied the 18-inch-square wood panels on

which members of the congregation created their works of art. Once the subject for reflection was decided upon and announced, everyone in the parish was invited and encouraged to sign up for one of the boards. We had placed some nails in the walls on the sides and at the back of the church, which gave us a reasonable number of places to hang the work.

tion sat, I hoped that the experience of the events of that week would come closer to my people. I wanted to know how they made connections in their own lives, placing their own stories next to the stories of the text. I was in awe of what came forth. And, I think, so were the artists as they reflected on what was going on within themselves, in their faith worlds, in each other, and

For example, the mother of an adolescent placed the cry of the forsaken one (Jesus) in a graffiti city street with the words, "Why have you forsaken me?" (see image below). In the reflection time when the artists gathered, she spoke about why she had chosen this station and what it meant in her own life. She said that as she walked to work through the city's streets she noticed and was affected by street youth and the graffiti on buildings, which, she said, invited notice and response. Some, in response to her work, suggested that we neglect our youth.

Another artist, an adolescent young woman, pondered the fashion industry and its pattern of masking and unmasking our bodies in the station she chose, Jesus being stripped of his garments. Her work was a combination of images drawn from fashion magazines aimed at young women (see image, page 31).

A lawyer, reflecting on the then-current debate in the state legislature about the death penalty, drew a courthouse and created a collage of newspaper headlines about the debate for his station, Jesus being condemned to death (see image, page 32).

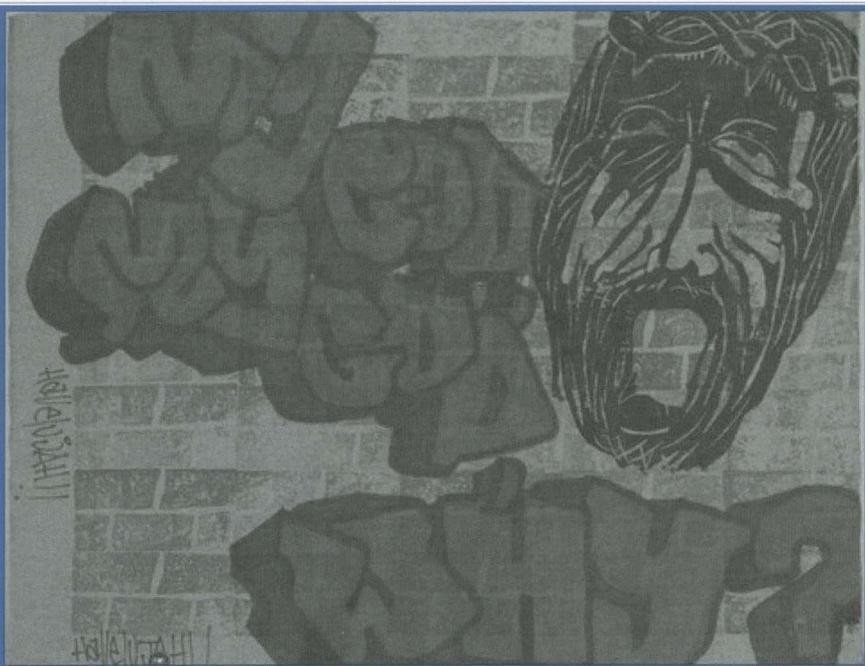
As we took these images in, we began to look at what others thought and prayed about, and these images began to accompany us in worship. They reshaped our prayers, inviting the congregation to think more deeply about the concerns that are living in others. And, since the images remained in our space for a time, the concerns remained as opportunities for reflection and action.

As a communal social act, the liturgy must be in touch with both the lives of its individuals and with the wider sorrows and joys of the world. The mediator of these worlds is often the priest, but artists can stand in the liminal place as interpreters too. If we welcome artists and encourage those who can offer their own creativity, if the use of imagination is freely encouraged, our parishes may experience liberation, releasing the yearning and longing for a new humanity and even a new way of being a community of faith.

If the use of imagination is freely encouraged, our parishes may experience liberation, releasing the yearning and longing for a new humanity and even a new way of being a community of faith.

Our first project involved depicting the traditional stations of the cross. I wanted to extend the Holy Week experiences into the worship space, into the nave. The large cross we had made the previous year was situated near the altar. In placing these stations close to the congregation, on the walls near the pews in which the congrega-

tion sat, I hoped that the experience of the events of that week would come closer to my people. I wanted to know how they made connections in their own lives, placing their own stories next to the stories of the text. I was in awe of what came forth. And, I think, so were the artists as they reflected on what was going on within themselves, in their faith worlds, in each other, and



Perhaps if we can acknowledge that we have made words a central beauty in our prayer books and that rationalism and the dissection model of coming to the texts is our norm, then we will be able to admit that we have lost the contemplative gaze, the mystery of God that comes through images and through each one of us, that is expansive and a wonder. Through sharing the work of our hands in a new way, we deepened our community. This was a new form or recovery of the offertory action, a handing over of ourselves in the midst of the gathered faithful.

Our present worship service patterns do not include much time for reflection. At my church we would acknowledge that our Eucharistic worship moves us steadily toward communal action and we have little opportunity for changing the scripts or the forms. In this parish, we initially impacted our gazing, our noticing, as we began to move the signals for the liturgical seasons toward the community, over their heads or on the wall, not just in new colors for vestments or altar. By inviting parishioners to create art for each of the liturgical seasons, the work of the community became the signal for each rotation. Hundreds of peace cranes were suspended overhead when Pentecost inside met war in the world, and a tree branch invited us to think about the tree of life. Placed near our baptismal font, it reminded us of



A man and a woman?” Advent one had the figures they created, life-sized and made of flexible aluminum tubing, at the entrance of the church, one with a candle in hand and the other pointing toward the altar. Week two had them seated in the pews with their hands over their ears as John the Baptist shouted to the brood of vipers. Week three found them suspended overhead from the beams, the scrolls of the prophets hanging from their arms. “Go tell John what you see—the blind receive their sight, the lame leap for joy...” Week four found them approaching the altar, and on Christmas Eve they had an infant

to look around and see what they might have been missing. One of the biblical texts for the season said, “Keep watch.” In using the Advent figures, we made room for another new expression of the gospel texts.

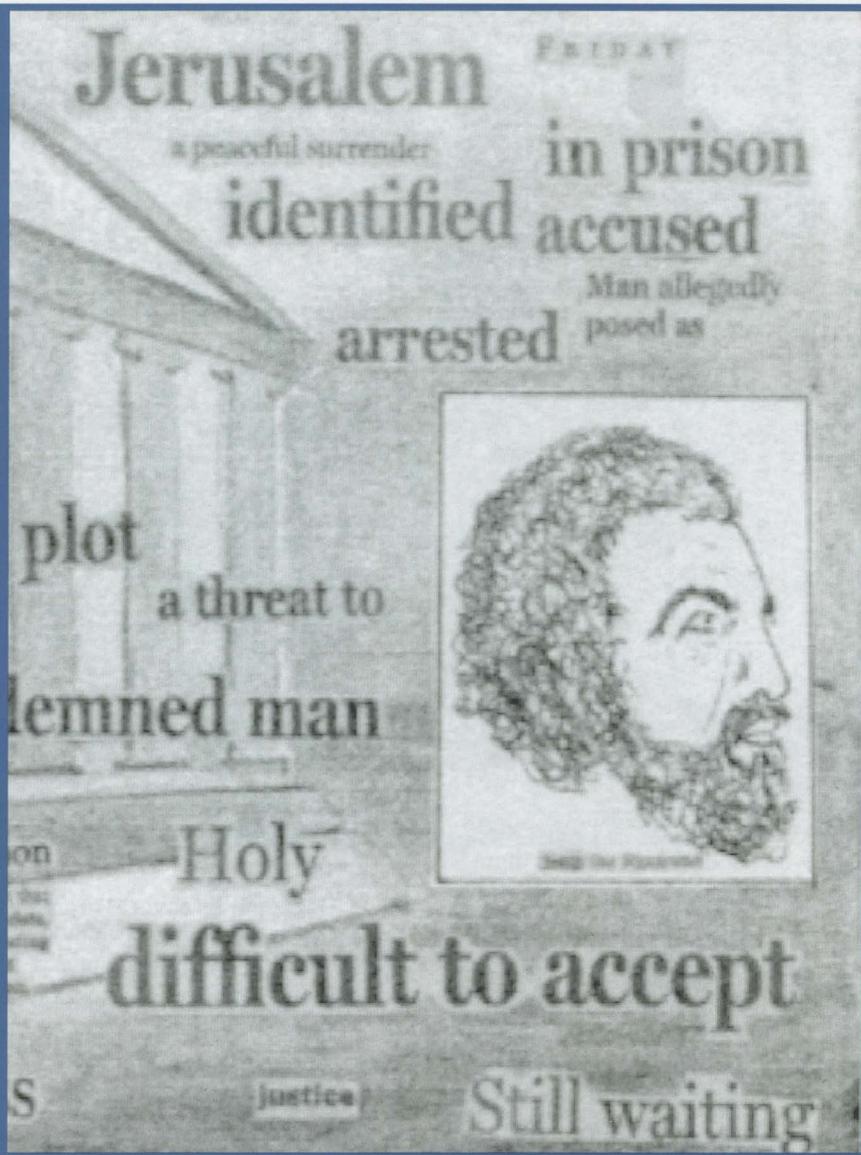
A letter from one visitor made this evidently clear. “As a recent visitor to the Church of Our Saviour, I’ve had what I would consider one of the most uplifting liturgical experiences I have had in quite some time,” she wrote. “It is the very first time I have been in a church where I noticed all of the art is ‘homemade’ and not produced by a religious products company... First, they are the living signs of the community, life manifested by the Word. Your stations, as well as other artwork, spoke volumes to me about the kind of community the Church of Our Saviour is, a community filled with joy and care and a commitment to another’s well being. You truly see yourselves as gifts to one another. Second, they are objects made by your loving, human hands and the presence of the Holy Spirit... As a visitor I have been transformed by them as well... Lastly, I found them to be signs of your call to a shared journey of faith. And I am grateful to have been in their midst, to have been witness to your call.”

“When I came through the door and saw all the art, I knew that something was happening here, that this parish was alive,” another visitor commented.

Creativity demands, or perhaps implies, an attitude of openness to discovering new things, experimentation, imagining new possibilities, and taking risks.

the roots and branches of the community of faith. One year I handed the Advent gospels to a creative couple. “I need for you to find a way to embody these texts for us each week,” I told them. “Can you give me some figures?”

in their arms and all had stars as halos. Initially the figures were greeted with surprise and some confusion; as they were present each week they became more a part of us. This movement of the figures in the space encouraged people to get their heads out of the books and



I was stunned to realize that so many of my people had lots to say and not much opportunity in community worship to say it. So the credo projects continued. We learned from the “stations of vocation” about each other’s satisfactions and struggles at work. We commissioned a set of multicultural banners to reflect the increasing diversity in our congregation and in the connections with others in our neighborhood and in the world. Our nearest elementary school had over 30 languages spoken in the homes of its families and we, too, had more to represent than a white Jesus with white children in a pastoral scene complete with sheep. Initially, our parish had no imagery of welcome in the multicultural neighborhood. Twelve watercolor-on-silk angel banners of various ethnicities helped us reflect on infrequent depictions of the

location of the Holy (see image, page 28).

After the completion of each project, I gathered the artists together in a small group where they could share their stories of faith, why they chose the particular images and sentiments, and how doing the art was a prayerful act for them. I found these reflections to be so helpful that I began sharing them in the parish newsletter, at sermon time, and in notebooks accompanying the seasonal art offerings.

The images and mutual reflections also helped me as priest and preacher to attend to the concerns of my parish through my sermons. I opened up the sermon time for comments and questions from the congregation, and sometimes I incorporated the art in my preaching, having been inspired by it. All of us were affected by these offerings.

Clergy play a primary role in encouraging the arts in church settlements, especially in visual forms. Our forms may vary, but we are continually invited to go deeper, explore more, connect with something and someone different than ourselves, and risk transformation. Through our art we made room for difference, for faith to be met in a variety of color, shape, and form. We made an expansive container for our worship. ♦

NOTES

1. Lois Huey-Heck and Jim Kalnin, *The Spirituality of Art* (Kelowna, British Columbia, Canada: Northstone Publishing, 2006).
2. Robert Wuthnow, *All in Sync: How Music and Art are Revitalizing American Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).
3. C. Kirk Hadaway, *Behold I Do a New Thing: Transforming Communities of Faith* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2001).
4. Ted Loder, *The Haunt of Grace: Responses to the Mystery of God's Presence* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 2002).

The Rev. Linda Fisher Privitera is the former rector of the Church of Our Saviour in Arlington, Massachusetts, where the spiritual practices in visual theology described in this article are still ongoing.

Questions for Reflection

1. What areas of church life would welcome the addition of creativity and imagination? What areas might be exempt from it?
2. What might your communal body of faith choose to enact symbolically in new forms?
3. Are there ways that personal spirituality could be integrated in the worship life of your congregation, where experience as a way of knowing does not find itself in the text-driven frame?
4. How might this form of visual theology be a way to extend our experience of the Holy in our midst?



Staying in Church

MARTIN B. COPENHAVER

BARBARA BROWN TAYLOR WAS NOT THE FIRST OF MY FRIENDS to leave pastoral ministry and she has not been the last, but she is the first to write a book about her decision to leave. Her memoir, *Leaving Church*, is such an eloquent and engaging account of her decision to leave that it has prompted me to consider again why I remain in pastoral ministry and why, in many ways, I still cherish this vocation.

I have been in pastoral ministry for 26 years now—surely too long to dismiss the challenges. Like most pastors, I can readily identify with many of the sources of Barbara's frustrations: the sense of confinement, the relentlessness of the role, and especially the press of needy and quarrelsome people. I also recognize that some of the reasons she gives for leaving are, with the slightest turn of the kaleidoscope, some of the same reasons I am staying in pastoral ministry.

I have found that there are ways in which the pastoral vocation confers an extraordinary amount of freedom, if I am willing to claim it.

It is clear that Barbara experienced pastoral ministry as a kind of confinement. She felt hemmed in by the demands of the role and the needs of those around her. She remembers one bishop discouraging her from being ordained because lay people can minister anywhere, whereas priests “choose a smaller box.” Elsewhere Barbara likens wearing clerical garb to wearing the black and white striped outfits worn by prisoners. Her decision to leave pastoral ministry becomes a flight for freedom. It is an image that is captured on the cover of the book, which depicts a dove escaping from a wrought-iron cage.

To be sure, there are ways in which a pastor's life is developed in confinement. It is anchored in text, font and table, and in a particular community of faith. Also, one can feel hemmed in on all sides by the range of expectations people have regarding what a pastor should be and do. As Garrison Keillor once observed, when you are a pastor people are always reading you literally.

Nevertheless, I have found that there are ways in which the pastoral vocation confers an extraordinary amount of freedom, if I am willing to claim it. Perhaps no other vocation allows for the kind of freedom in the use of one's time as does pastoral ministry. My wife is an attorney, so her vocational life is measured out in 15-minute segments of “billable hours.” She is confined to an office, limited to a comparatively narrow set of responsibilities, with very little discretion over how her time is used—it is used in any way the paying client wants to use it.

By contrast, pastors do not need to think in terms of billable hours, quotas, or the number of patients seen or the amount of goods produced. To be sure, we must meet certain expectations and

even perform routine tasks, but there is nothing approaching the constraints on the use of time found in other professions. Pastors who fulfill basic expectations are given remarkable freedom to interpret their own sense of call.

That is why the schedules of no two pastors are alike. How each pastor spends time can reflect, in part at least, that person's unique gifts. So I have known pastors who have integrated their own interests into their ministries by writing hymns, producing plays, reading Calvin, or even making pottery. People in other professions can imagine having that kind of freedom only when they retire.

It is true that, in order to exercise that freedom, a pastor has to master the diplomat's art of having a thousand different ways of saying “no.” It also requires the kind of clarity that does not confuse people's diverse expectations with a job description, which means that it requires being willing to disappoint people.

I have been helped by the reminder that Jesus was a pastor who was always running away from his congregation. That is, Jesus's life and ministry were marked by times of intense engagement with others in rhythm with times away, either alone or with his most trusted friends. Henri Nouwen often talked about the importance of a “ministry of presence.” But certainly there is a “ministry of absence” as well, not only for the sake of the pastor's own health but also for the bracing reminder that God can be at work even when the pastor is not present. For reasons I don't fully understand, there are more pastors reluctant to exercise that freedom than there are congregations unwilling to allow it.

In whatever ways that freedom is exercised, however, there still is no escaping the pastoral role. As Barbara so clearly testifies, the pastoral role follows you

around relentlessly. Anyone who has spent time in pastoral ministry knows what it is like to covet the “off duty” sign of the cab driver or the established office hours of the therapist. The pastoral life is lived in the round. In a term used in the theater, there is no “blind side,” no side where there is not an audience. And to be sure, there can be something exhausting about always having to be “on.”

Even though this characteristic of the pastoral life can be a source of stress, it also can contribute to an integrated life. The church I serve is in a suburban town in which many people live remarkably fragmented lives: they have work lives, social lives, family lives, church lives. Those various lives may overlap somewhat, but more often they are each lived out in separate locations among different people, with little integration among them. Many of the parents in my congregation have to participate in “Take Your Child to Work Day” just so their children will have some notion of what they do with most of their waking hours. They long to have their lives gathered up into a more coherent whole.

It is telling that the old English term for person, parson, came to be used to describe a pastor, as though the person and the vocation were so completely integrated that they had become synonymous. Today we may not refer to “the legal life” or “the medical life,” but we can still speak of “the pastoral life,” because even in our time it is a way of life that can be more fully integrated.

Not being able to escape the pastoral role means particularly not being able to escape the people. William Willimon says he worries when seminarians report that they are going into pastoral ministry because “I just love people. I want to work with people.” Willimon responds by asking, “Have you actually met any of these people?” Saint Benedict, the same one who wrote about the blessings of community and gave instruction on how to live in community, also said, “Community is my penance.”

I appreciate the candor with which Barbara reports that when, in the baptismal service, she asked the congregation, “Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as



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with each other. The California condors make no demands of the living. The rollicking streams offer only comforting words. There is no need to raise money for a sanctuary roof because the blue sky has already supplied it.

To me, the affirmation that God can be found outside the church has never seemed like much of a claim. The true wonder is that God can be found inside the church, among quirky, flawed, and broken people who may have little in common and yet are bound to one another. What an unlikely setting in which to

encounter God! But the Christian God seems to like to surprise us by showing up in the most unpromising places, like a Jew from Nazareth and in a motley gathering of people known as church.

God throws us together in the church

they are the same person. Living in community is an essential Christian practice because it gives us such ample opportunity to learn how to receive the stranger and practice forgiveness. If we can practice the art of reconciliation long enough with one another, then we have a chance to let reconciliation mark our relationships with others as well. The church, like the family, is the place where we learn to live with people we are stuck with. And when we stick together, it is a living reminder of the God who is stuck with us all.

As a pastor, I am expected to care about people I may not particularly care for. It is assumed that I will act with compassion even when I may not feel at all compassionate. I am expected to forgive, when on my own I would be inclined to hold a grudge. Obviously, Jesus enjoined all of his followers to act in these ways, but in most congregations the expectations of a pastor in this regard are particularly high. And I am grateful for that. It is not easy to "seek and serve Christ in all persons," of course, but even attempting to do so has enlarged my capacity for compassion.

When, for instance, a church member who has been particularly critical of my ministry is seriously ill in the hospital, it is assumed that I will

Living in community is an essential Christian practice because it gives us such ample opportunity to learn how to receive the stranger and practice forgiveness.

and says, in essence, "Here is where you get a chance to learn how to live with other people, to forgive, and even come to see God in one another. After all, if you can find God here, you can find God anywhere." It is not coincidence that Jesus said love your neighbor and love your enemy, because often

go and pray with that person. It is not something I would naturally choose to do on my own, but it is something that is expected of me by virtue of my vocation. Yet when that prayer is offered, the petitions for healing—which one might expect to ring hollow under the circumstances—can be filled with

"My spiritual life and pastoral leadership have been profoundly influenced. And I have not changed so much as become more deeply and genuinely myself..."



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yourself," she had to stifle her protest: "How could I possibly seek and serve Christ in all persons? Did the author of that [liturgy] have any idea how many hungry, needy, angry, manipulative, deeply ill people I saw in the course of a week?"

Throughout her memoir, Barbara reports in a variety of ways that her most frequent encounters with God are in the natural world. Given the demands of being in community with people, this should not be surprising. It is telling that the settings that we tend to describe as "peaceful" are invariably places with few, if any, people. So it's not hard to offer an "amen" to Barbara's elegiac testimonies to the immanence of God in nature. In fact, it's downright easy, perhaps too easy.

A few months ago I spent several days hiking in the interior reaches of the Grand Canyon. To me it is a holy place, the most vaulted of natural Gothic cathedrals. It is not hard to feel close to God there, not only because of what is present, but also due to what is largely absent—the demands of living in community. The buttes don't quarrel

power, and something in my own heart can be healed in the process. It used to surprise me when that happened. Now I look for it.

It doesn't always work that way, of course, but it does often enough that I now think I understand why Jesus tells his followers to act in particular ways, regardless of how they feel at the time. He says turn your cheek, pray for your enemies, pray then like this. He focuses on actions, not because interior dispositions are unimportant but because most often we act our way into a new way of thinking and feeling rather than the other way around. So I am grateful that the pastoral vocation requires that I act in ways that seem beyond me.

Barbara seems particularly drawn

theological grounds, of course, but in addition, as Barbara discovered, it is simply too exhausting to think of oneself as a parent to a congregation. The challenges of parenting my own two children are demanding enough without adopting the hundreds of parishioners who are a part of my congregation.

Instead, I have come to view my role as more like that of a midwife, someone who is trained to assist in the birthing process. A midwife performs her role in a whole range of ways, sometimes by coaching the parents and other times by providing some direct assistance, and often, when little needs to be done, simply by standing by in wonder and awe.

We pastors assist people in "giving birth" to a new or deepened relationship

presence, as if for the first time. Or a young person returning from a church service project will tell the congregation what it was like to encounter Jesus Christ disguised as one of the poor. Or someone will tell me that my prayers at his hospital bed provided ongoing comfort because, when I departed, it was as if I left God with him. Or I will conduct a funeral and the congregation will be so obviously hungry for whatever word might sustain them that they resemble a flock of baby birds with beaks open wide. To be able to offer the words of promise that their souls are aching to hear at such a time feels like a privilege beyond deserving.

In each of these instances I am very aware that I did not make anything happen. My role, like that of a midwife, is limited. Nevertheless, something I did not provide, something clearly beyond me, that "something" called the presence of God, is at work. On those occasions I feel like a wick that is in awe that it can be used by a flame.

So, much of the time, I feel like an invited guest to special places where wondrous things happen. I am not invited because I am a special person, or because I have a particular set of skills, or because I have greater faith than anyone else does. Nevertheless, I am invited to those places in people's lives because I have accepted God's call to do this holy work.

I will also stay in pastoral ministry because the church is still the place that nurtures and forms people like Barbara Brown Taylor. She is quick to acknowledge her debt to the church, but she hardly needs to. Her prose is soaked through with images drawn from the church's book and the church's liturgy. One of the reasons that she can write like an angel is that, in some sense, she was taught to speak and write by the church. She did not learn the language of faith by sipping Assam tea on her front porch, as she says she now does many Sunday mornings. The birds that seem to flock everywhere in her memoir did not teach it to her. She did not learn it in the religion departments of her alma mater or of the college where she now teaches. She learned it in church, which is still the wellspring

We pastors assist people in "giving birth" to a new or deepened relationship with God. We are not the center of the action, or even key players in the drama. Like midwives, our role is limited but can be quite important nonetheless.

to images of motherhood to describe her own ministry in the parish. She is the brooding hen, the single mother of a large and demanding family. At one point she says that her "breasts fairly leaked" when she would encounter people in need.

One does not have to be from a tradition in which the priest is called "Father" to find some resonances of the parental role in pastoral ministry. A pastor nurtures, feeds, guides, and teaches. There is a special bond between pastor and people. The pastor is charged with caring for the people in every circumstance, in and out of season.

Nevertheless, parenthood is not the most apt, or certainly not the most healthy, image for the role of the pastor. We could take issue with the image on

with God. We are not the center of the action, or even key players in the drama. Like midwives, our role is limited but can be quite important nonetheless. We perform our role in a variety of ways—for instance, by teaching, leading worship, and visiting the sick. We tell the Christian story, coach and encourage, listen and pray. What unites all of these roles and activities is that each provides an opportunity to encounter God.

It is a joy simply to be present at a birth. It is something even more—a real privilege—to play a role, however small or incidental, in that birth. Actually, in my work as a pastor, often I am not aware that anything so momentous is taking place. But then someone will report, fresh from a kind of birth, that a particular worship service helped her experience Jesus Christ as a living

of the Christian tradition.

The Christian God is not confined to the church, of course, and the church is not the only setting for ministry. But other Christian ministries—including the ministries of teaching, writing, and speaking that now engage Barbara—are derivative of what happens in the church. And if the church can form and nurture the work of someone like Barbara, then I am sticking with it.

A few years back I wrote an article that argued that the pastoral life is a form of the good life. I commended pastoral ministry as a uniquely rewarding way of life which, indeed, I have found it to be. I showed the article to a friend who is a pastor, who had only one comment: "Well, it is a good life, if you are called to it." And of course he is right. Pastoral ministry is a job laden with challenges and in certain ways it seems to get more difficult every year. So it is not the kind of job anyone would likely pick out from the classified ads or at a job fair. Then again, if it were a job, I probably would have quit long ago.

That is why the reasons Barbara gives for leaving pastoral ministry do not need to be challenged or defended. Rather, her book can be placed alongside other witnesses that may differ in key respects. My friend's comment on my article captures an essential reason why people can have such different experiences of pastoral ministry. It still comes down to the matter of call. So I am able both to affirm Barbara's decision to leave pastoral ministry and to reconfirm my own commitment to pastoral ministry.

On the occasion of his retirement, Harry Emerson Fosdick said, "If I had a thousand lives to live in this century, I would go into parish ministry with every one of them." That is perhaps the strongest affirmation of a call to pastoral ministry that I know. I'm not sure I could go quite as far as Fosdick did. If I had a thousand lives to live in this century, I might use one or two to do something else, like become a jazz pianist or an NBA point guard. But, with just one life to live on this earth, I am grateful that God called me to be a pastor. And I am staying. ♦

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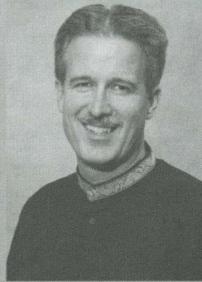
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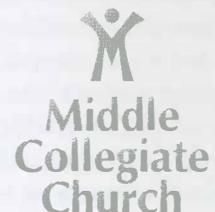
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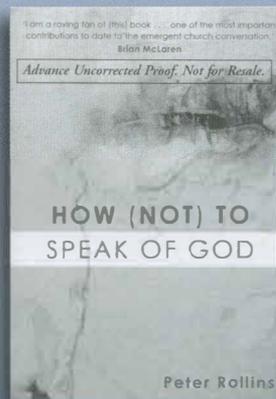


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How (Not) To Speak Of God

Peter Rollins

Orleans, MA: Paraclete Press, 2006



review book

This title invites the reader to think in a new way, both how to speak of God and how not to speak of God. It reflects “both/and” thinking—the kind of thinking where one is open to options and possibilities more than either/or thinking, which implies limited options. When Peter Rollins concluded his introduction with these words, I knew this book would be worth reading: “The territory I thought I was helping to chart was actually discovered a long time ago by my ancestors. It is both frustrating and comforting that no matter how fast I run, those who have long since died have already arrived at where I am attempting to go.”

This tension of discovering something new and yet realizing that it is grounded in something old continues throughout the book. The challenge is how we speak of God in ways that touch the hearts and minds of a new generation and yet learn how not to speak of God in ways that place God in a box. When God is placed in a box, too often we present to the world a God that is shaped in human

form, almost able to be managed and controlled by humans, instead of a God that is greater than human understanding.

On the one hand, the author is walking in new territory in this area that has come to be called the emergent church. He addresses many of the issues and challenges that others have discussed, yet he grounds the work in the history of the faith. As indicated in the introduction, this is not the first time the church has been at a place where a new understanding was emerging. Rollins argues that in 2007 the church cannot answer the questions of who God is and what it means to be Christian in the same manner that it has in the most recent past. Yet at the same time he says we can still learn from the practices of the past. He contends that much of our worship is devoid of power and we are in need of a theology of worship that transforms us.

This transformation comes through a deep level of love for God, which then leads to a deeper level of love for others.

In the first part of the book, Rollins presents the theory behind his belief, and in the second part he puts feet to the theory by sharing worship experiences held by Ikon, the worshipping community out of which his experience has come. Ikon is a movement that tries in many ways not to define itself. As its Web site, <http://www.ikon.org.uk>, states, “Ikon does not view itself as having reached some final destination/destiny but rather as being on a journey toward that which forever transcends us... We would prefer to call ourselves a community becoming Christian rather than a community of Christians.”

The emerging church is not just a term to describe a new movement for congregations that are just beginning; every congregation should see itself as emerging into the next stage of its journey, and this book will be an important tool on our journey as we think of how we speak or do not speak of God in this time in which we live.

Rev. Marsha Brown Woodard

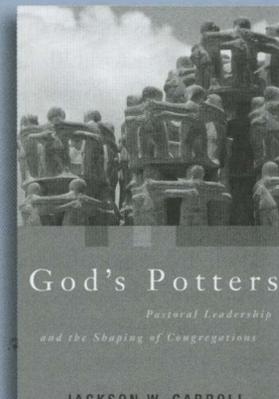
Palmer Theological Seminary
Wynnewood, Pennsylvania

God's Potters

PASTORAL LEADERS AND THE SHAPING OF CONGREGATIONS

Jackson W. Carroll

William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006



review book

For more than a decade, Jackson Carroll and a team of researchers from Duke University Divinity School have compiled 10 research projects and seven books relating to pastoral leadership in the United States. Now, Carroll has taken this research to “paint a broad, descriptive portrait of today’s clergy...” Using data from over 81 denominations and faith traditions, 23 focus groups, and a national survey of congregations, he seeks to discern who America’s clergy are, what they do, how they are faring, and what excellence in ministry looks like, as well as how to nurture and sustain excellence. Carroll uses the descriptive term “God’s potters,” based upon 2 Corinthians 4:7, to emphasize that pastors have as their primary role the shaping, glazing, and firing of congregational clay jars so that they can reveal God’s power in the practice of their faith in their lives.

This is a very thorough volume and Carroll’s evaluation is laid out methodically. In eight distinct chapters he

examines the setting of pastoral leadership: the “social world” in which it takes place as well as the personal characteristics of those who are doing ministry, such as age, gender, and ethnicity. In chapter 4 he offers an effective discussion of clergy as “producers of culture.” In chapter 5, quite possibly the most important of the eight chapters, he gives significant attention to pastoral leadership, the focal point of the book. In subsequent chapters he examines clergy stress and coping as well as health and support issues. Interestingly, Carroll focuses some distinct attention on “excellence” in ministry, something other researchers have not considered quite so essential. Good and faithful ministry, he suggests, must be measured normatively and contextually. Carroll closes the book with suggestions for strengthening leadership and nurturing and sustaining excellence in pastoral ministry.

I deeply appreciate the lines of reasoning Carroll presents in his examination of the multiple points of data collection in this massive research project. His long-standing tenure as a researcher and his expertise in Christian ministry commend themselves well in this book. For example, he writes that “dispirited, drained clergy foster dispirited congregations, whose energy for ministry and mission is likewise drained. And the reciprocal is also true: dispirited and contentious congregations increase the likelihood that a pastor’s commitment and satisfaction with his or her work will flag.” This kind of honest and blunt assessment comes from years of asking the right questions, listening, and developing impartial conclusions.

Rev. Dr. R. Wayne Hagerman

Prince George, British Columbia, Canada

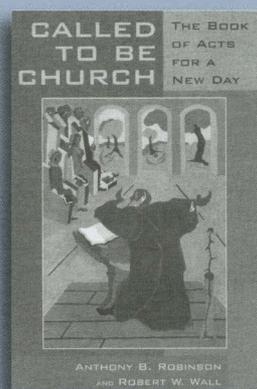
Called to Be Church

THE BOOK OF ACTS FOR A NEW DAY

Anthony B. Robinson and Robert W. Wall

Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans

Publishing Company, 2006



review book

When did you last read the book of Acts and ponder its relevance for the 21st century? This lively biblical account of the activities of the early church may at first appear to have little to say to Christians today. But in *Called to Be Church*, Robert Wall and Anthony Robinson argue persuasively that Acts is an invaluable resource for our post-Christendom time: “For a culture that has perhaps drunk too deeply at the wells of reason and rationality, Acts offers intrigue, adventure, and the church as a place and people of mystery and magic,” they write.

The two authors have complementary backgrounds: Wall is a biblical scholar and a professor at Seattle Pacific University, whereas Robinson is a teacher and pastor in the United Church of Christ. As a result of their differing denominational and vocational experiences, their writing has a broader perspective.

Their book discusses 12 selected passages from Acts. After two introductory chapters, each subsequent chapter is divided into two parts. The first provides a careful interpretation of one of the chosen passages, and the second considers its application to churches

today. For example, the chapter on Acts 2 interprets Peter’s Pentecost sermon and then considers the significance of modern sermons: do they involve the preaching of platitudes or are they provocative calls to life transformation? The authors argue that the best sermons dare to boldly reframe people’s perceptions, just as Peter’s did.

A particularly helpful chapter discusses one of the most well-known biblical stories, the call and conversion of Saul (Acts 9). The interpretation includes an explanation of the literary convention of using a double vision to add emphasis—both Saul and Ananias experience visions—and also links back to the Old Testament to compare Ananias’s response to God to that of Samuel. Then the application section raises the question of the meaning of conversion today: does it always consist, as it did for Saul, of a period of disorientation leading to a breakthrough? There are actually two conversions in this passage, and the account of Ananias shows that conversion is not just for unbelievers. This leads to the intriguing idea that conversion in America today may involve a deliverance from self-centeredness. Certainly all conversion involves some degree of transformation and, as the authors contend, “Paul’s conversion remains a powerful narration of a turning, of an enemy who becomes a friend, of apparent breakdown that really does become a breakthrough.”

Each chapter concludes with a handful of thought-provoking discussion questions, making *Called to Be Church* particularly appropriate for small-group study. This book provides an enlightening analysis of the relevance of Acts today. The interpretation is both accessible and based on careful exegesis. For example, to help explain the significance of a particular word choice, the Greek word from which it originated is often provided. And the authors don’t shrink from addressing difficult issues, such as homosexuality, while they avoid offering simplistic solutions.

Pastors, small groups, and thoughtful individuals will find much that is eye-opening in this worthwhile book. Like the life-changing preaching that it calls for, *Called to Be Church* is bold and provocative.

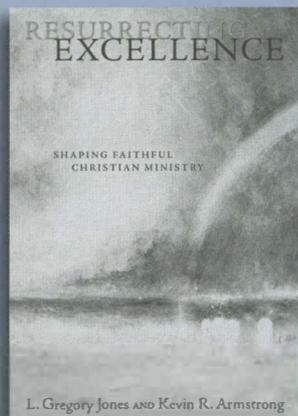
Dr. Julie Falkner

Waterloo, Ontario, Canada

Resurrecting Excellence

SHAPING FAITHFUL CHRISTIAN
MINISTRY

L. Gregory Jones and Kevin R. Armstrong
Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006



review book

For a long while now, we've heard plenty about what's wrong with the church in general and with ministry more specifically. And while there are serious matters for concern, complaining in and of itself does not give us much of a way forward. In this context, however, the extraordinary body of work emerging from various Pulpit & Pew projects is proving useful. Among other things, we now better understand much about ministry: levels of satisfaction among clergy, how much they are paid, what their congregations expect, whether and what they read, and how they interpret their vocation.

One Pulpit & Pew project took into consideration all such sociological studies and then pressed things even further by convening a multi-meeting Colloquium on Excellence in Ministry. Many papers presented in that study are available online and are all invariably worth careful study and reading. In this book, two of the participants, Gregory Jones, dean and theology professor at Duke University Divinity

School, and Kevin Armstrong, United Methodist pastor, reflect theologically on what will help clergy and congregations prioritize the vocation of pastoring as "a life well lived, a life of creativity, intellectual engagement, and imagination, a life that asks the best of us."

For some time now, the Lilly Endowment (which also funds Pulpit & Pew) has pressed its constituencies to ponder whether one can meaningfully speak about "excellence in ministry." This is not without some controversy. In my own Mennonite tradition, with its emphasis on humility and suspicion of hierarchy, such terminology sets off numerous alarms. Jones and Armstrong ably identify numerous problems in the use of such vocabulary in various Christian traditions. But they rightly refuse to abandon excellence language, unwilling to settle for what John Wimmer perceptively called "mediocrity masquerading as faithfulness." Jones and Armstrong keep helping us see that there are countercultural understandings and implications of excellence that we can all appreciate and appropriate. And they show us that there is no one-size-fits-all exemplary form; rather, excellence emerges in the partnership between pastor and congregation.

I am not aware of any other book quite like this one. It examines a host of issues that one regularly encounters: power, office, call, professionalism, collegiality, ordination. Happily, it does so in fresh ways. It also explores the concept of "pastoral imagination," a term initiated by Craig Dykstra of Lilly and deservedly taking more prominence in church circles. Jones and Armstrong are clear that, ultimately, pastoring is about discipleship and faithfulness; it deals with the "ordering of desires." They consistently bring careful theological exploration to their ponderings.

While Jones and Armstrong are all for savvy skills and education as a necessary part of pastoral formation, their view of this vocation is much richer too. They are fully aware of tragedies and shortfalls in how ministry is often prac-

ticed, but continue to hold forth a vision of a well-lived life for pastors. Between the stories they tell, the testimonies they report, the theological themes and biblical texts they explore, it becomes hard to imagine why there are not many, many more people clamoring to be pastors or why congregations do not treat this vocation with more care and respect. After all, a 2001 Pastor & Pew survey showed that the vast majority of clergy found this a profoundly satisfying vocation. That's very good news about those who centrally help the church proclaim and live out the Good News.

I shall use this book often and well in my seminary teaching, commend this to clergy colleagues, and hope it is embraced by judicatory officials as well.

Rev. Dr. Arthur Paul Boers

Author of *Never Call Them Jerks: Healthy Responses to Difficult Behavior* (Alban Institute, 1999)

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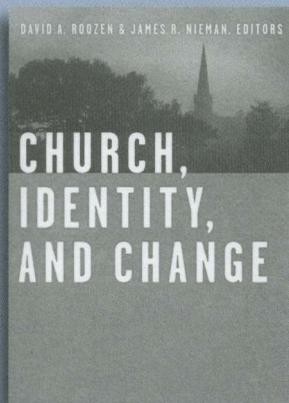
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Church, Identity, and Change

THEOLOGY AND DENOMINATIONAL STRUCTURES IN UNSETTLED TIMES

David A. Roozen & James R. Nieman, Editors

Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2005



review book

In *Church, Identity, and Change*, editors David Roozen and

James Nieman explore a number of provocative questions, such as: How are theology and denominational structures affected in times of change? In the midst of theological crises and dwindling membership, are the days of denominations numbered? How can denominations think anew about God? Have denominations relied too heavily on structure and lost sight of identity?

The introductory chapter of the text presents a brief review of the literature on American denominations. This historical backdrop offers a starting point for a subsequent in-depth examination of the current reality of eight denominations in this time of turmoil and transition. Although the editors' own experience and expertise are impressive (Roozen is a professor of religion and society at Hartford Seminary and director of the Hartford Institute for Religion Research, and Nieman is a professor of practical theology at Hartford Seminary and an ordained minister in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America), they recruited an interdisciplinary group of scholars to present an historical overview, a sociological case study, and a theological essay for each of the denominations examined. The eight denominations were also selected with care, representing a wide diversity in terms of theology, polity, scale, ethnicity, and history. They include the Assemblies of God, the Association of Vineyard Churches, the Episcopal Church, the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, the National Baptist Convention, the Reformed Church in America, the United Church of Christ, and the United Methodist Church.

The primary focus of the book is how denominations can "bear their legacies faithfully and effectively into a changing future." The editors state that their intent is to "generate critical but appreciative reflection that provides grounded, comparative, and multidisciplinary

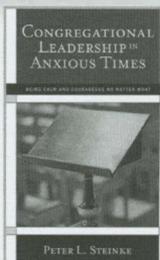
insights for both scholars and practitioners who care about how denominations seek to embody God's work." Some of the most insightful, reflective questions raised include: "What makes this organization, what it does, and the way it does it, Christian? What happens when you put together the broad and pervasive social-cultural transition to postmodernity with national organizations that are intrinsically segmented, theologically compromised, voluntary, and political?"

It would be to the advantage of every denomination to have serious conversation on the issues this text raises. For instance: What is the purpose and identity of a denomination? What is the future of oldline denominations? What can denominations learn from one another? Are there ways to network denominations to more effectively accomplish a common purpose?

This text carries a profound respect for history, narrative story, theology, national structures, social issues, global concerns, and leadership on both local and national levels. Although it raises more questions than it answers, *Church, Identity, and Change* offers brilliant insights and thorough processes. This text is packed with courageous conversation starters that can carry healthy leaders to new spaces.

Nancy T. Foltz
Consultant
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

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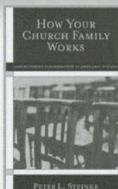


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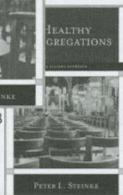
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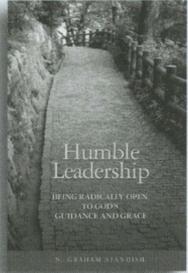
New & Noteworthy

Humble Leadership: Being Radically Open to God's Guidance and Grace

N. GRAHAM STANDISH

AL326; \$18.00

Humble leadership, grounded in the teachings of Jesus, means recognizing that what we have and who we are is a gift from God. It requires us to be radically and creatively open to God's guidance, grace, and presence in everything. When we lead out of such openness, God's power and grace flow through us. The path Standish proposes is not easy. Humble leadership can be personally dangerous, exposing our weakness, powerlessness, fear, and anxiety. Our cultural need for strength infects Christian leaders with a pride that causes them to ignore biblical teachings on humility. But a humble leader says to God, "I'm yours, no matter where you call me to go, what you call me to do, and how you call me to be. I will seek your will and way as I lead others to do the same."

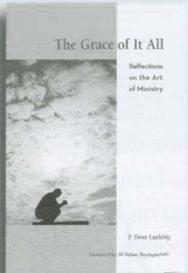


The Grace of It All: Reflections on the Art of Ministry

F. DEAN LUEKING

AL322; \$17.00

This book is an invitation to a conversation on the pastoral life from one of America's most respected clergy. A lively storyteller, Lueking writes as the wise friend and colleague every pastor would hope to have. He gives life to a truth many congregational leaders will recognize: a congregation never stands still but is at once new and old, vexing and inspiring, lively and dull. Lueking writes out of gratitude for the colleagues in ministry who over the years offered him a listening ear and an understanding heart. His words affirm what pastors are already doing, while sparking dialogue about his suggestions and provoking new insights and understanding.

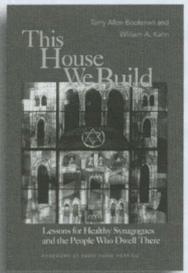


This House We Build: Lessons for Healthy Synagogues and the People Who Dwell There

TERRY BOOKMAN AND WILLIAM KAHN

AL323; \$20.00

This one-volume guide to a healthy congregation combines the wisdom of a rabbi with the expertise of an organizational development consultant to demonstrate the power of positive relationships and show how to avoid some of the common traps that can lead to serious conflict. Using the life of the synagogue as its central illustration, this book gives vital lessons for congregations of any faith on how to be a healthy community of believers. *This House We Build* enables both clergy and members to learn more deeply about creating and sustaining communities of faith in the course of inevitable transitions and everyday challenges.

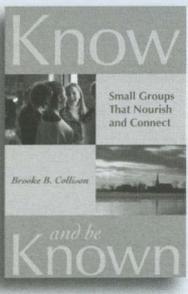


Know and Be Known: Small Groups That Nourish and Connect

BROOKE B. COLLISON

AL325; \$17.00

People yearn for a sense of belonging. Congregations become places of belonging when people find ways to make connections, form relationships, and share their personal stories. That's hard to do in the hasty comings and goings around the typical worship service. It's even hard to do in a choir, committee, or ministry group. In *Know and Be Known* Brooke Collison looks at the element missing in most group dynamics today: intentionality about relationships. Counselor, educator, and long-time leader and participant in small groups, Collison knows the power of small groups to create meaningful bonds of friendship and support. Collison's rationale for developing a small group program in a church is simple: as small groups nourish personal relationships and connectedness, they also nourish churches.



RESOURCES ON WORSHIP FROM THE CONGREGATIONAL RESOURCE GUIDE

Chaves, Mark. **Congregations in America** (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

What do churches do? Drawing on a national study, sociologist Mark Chaves asserts that they do “social services, civic engagement and politics, worship, and the arts.” Surprisingly, his study shows that congregations’ greatest cultural impact is through the arts. It also shows the roles that religious tradition and theological thought play in congregational life.

Ewan, Dorothea, et. al, editors. **Making Liturgy: Creating Rituals for Worship and Life** (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2001). What happens when the language, symbols, and space of the church no longer make sense? According to *Making Liturgy*, they need to be recreated and reclaimed so that the larger worshipping body can be engaged. The editors examine liturgical themes, music, and settings. They also offer sample liturgies and resources for writing liturgies.

Gilbert, Marlea, et. al. **The Work of the People: What We Do in Worship and Why** (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2006). This book explains the structure of worship, the actions and words used in liturgy, the environment in which it happens—in other words, what we are doing and why. It will help congregational leaders create worship that encourages participants’ spiritual growth, welcome new participants into faith, and send people out as agents of transformation.

Hadaway, C. Kirk. **Behold I Do a New Thing: Transforming Communities of Faith** (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2001). After presenting other congregational typologies, Kirk Hadaway explores the “incarnational community.” Such a community understands what it means to provide leadership for transformation. Becoming fully alive and growing, Hadaway maintains, will lead the church into the real work of changing people. He also discusses sermons, transforming worship, and formation in a faith community.

Hoffman, Lawrence A. **The Art of Public Prayer: Not for Clergy Only** (Woodstock, VT: Skylight Paths Publishing, 1999). Lawrence Hoffman believes that too often, public worship fails because it does not evoke the presence of God as perceived in the community. Examining the ways congregations use

space, words, symbols, and music during worship, he concludes that we must question why we do what we do. Excellence in worship requires action, care, and creative risk.

Kirk-Davidoff, Heather and Nancy Wood-Lyczak. **Dave to Dive In! Strategies and Resources for Involving Your Whole Church in Worship** (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2006). The authors ask readers to imagine church participants who begin worship with the expectation that “something will happen here that will change my life.” Believing that such an expectation is both realistic and faithful, they offer practical and immediately usable suggestions and resources for creating life-changing worship that is participatory, multisensory, and thematic.

McClure, John. **The Roundtable Pulpit: Where Leadership and Preaching Meet** (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995). John McClure introduces readers to the “roundtable pulpit”—composed of a rotating dialogue group that meets with the pastor to brainstorm the preaching text. This communal approach discerns and speaks the truth of the gospel in order to “engage in and influence the ways that a congregation talks itself into becoming a Christian community.”

Ramsey, G. Lee, Jr. **Care-full Preaching: From Sermon to Caring Community** (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2000). Lee Ramsey argues that “pastoral preaching forms communities who care for the world with the love of God.” Such preaching details three interacting issues in the human condition: human nature and sin, human responsibility and God’s grace, and freedom and limitations. It also stresses the presence of Christ within and among the church.

Wuthnow, Robert. **All in Sync: How Music and Art are Revitalizing American Religion** (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003). Using data from the 1999 Arts and Religion Survey, Robert Wuthnow examines the arts as elements of religious practice and experience. Imagination is essential to artistic expression, and Wuthnow offers examples of how imagination can help renew and sustain personal and communal religious life. He also discusses the tensions between art and religion. ♦

Talking about Staff Firings

Q We recently fired a long-tenured staff member for lack of performance. The attorneys advising our process have advised us not to discuss this issue with congregational members. Many people are up in arms over the firing, and our inability to talk about it is making things worse. How should we handle this situation?

A The lawyers advising you are protecting the legal interests of the congregation by discouraging conversations that could be referenced later in a court of law. However, the legal needs of the congregation are only one set of needs to be considered at a time like this. Congregational leaders must also consider congregational members' need to trust the actions of their leaders, to act with personal and communal integrity, and to care for members of the staff team, all of which are crucial in sustaining congregational health. Leaders must carefully consider how they can talk about an employee dismissal in a way that avoids the risk of legal exposure but satisfies the community's need to know that their leaders have acted appropriately.

The key to achieving this balance is understanding the difference between maintaining confidentiality and keeping a secret. We are keeping secrets when we fail to tell people crucial information that they have a right to know. Secret-keeping builds mistrust and creates barriers within a faith community.

In the presence of secrets, anxiety levels rise. As people become anxious they look for information to appease their anxiety. In the absence of information, they begin to speculate, and what they invent to fill the information void is almost always worse than the reality.

Confidentiality, on the other hand, appreciates that some things should not become communally known—that it is often in the best interest of the individual(s) involved in the situation and/or the congregation to protect facts that might be hurtful, misunderstood, or misused if shared. When congregational leaders treat employee dismissal information confidentially, they talk about the dismissal in ways that protect the reputation of the employee, minimize the legal risk to the congregation, and satisfy the congregation's need to know that their leaders have acted appropriately and ethically.

Here are a few simple guidelines that will help congregational leaders treat employee dismissals confidentially without creating a culture of mistrust.

Talk about process, not content.

If congregational leaders handled the employee's dismissal appropriately, a process was followed to examine the charges against the employee and to engage a disciplinary process leading up to termination. Congregational leaders can talk openly about the congregation's progressive discipline policy, assuring them that these steps were followed, but they should keep information about the employee's behavior confidential. The congregation has a need to know that its process and leaders operated with integrity, but they do not need to know the details of the dismissal.

Although an attorney would never endorse this, I believe it's also important to acknowledge any mistakes that were made by the leadership during the dismissal process, and to talk openly about the regret felt about those errors and the corrective actions taken to miti-

gate their impact. A congregation is a covenantal community that requires transparency in its process, even at the risk of some legal exposure.

Talk about the values of the congregation and how those values were honored in your process.

Leaders can stress the attempts they made to preserve the core values of the congregation in the decisions that were made. They can also talk about the struggle they engaged in while making this difficult decision, without sharing the details of the employee's situation.

Talk about the leaders who were involved in the decision.

Acknowledge which congregational leaders had access to the details of the decision, not so the congregation can pump them for information but so they know that trusted members were involved in the situation. In particular, emphasize the checks and balances and multiple levels of review used to insure that the employee was treated fairly.

Help people grieve and talk about their relationship with the terminated employee.

This is particularly important for the long-term or much-loved employee who is dismissed, or the employee who is also a congregational member. Help people explore the changed nature of the relationship. Talk about what they should say and do if the employee seeks them out to complain or gossip about the situation. Whenever possible, talk with the dismissed employee about how their departure will be communicated to the congregation. Fired employees are more likely to operate in the best interest of the congregation when they have been consulted about how their exit will be presented.

Susan Beaumont is a senior consultant for the Alban Institute.



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

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