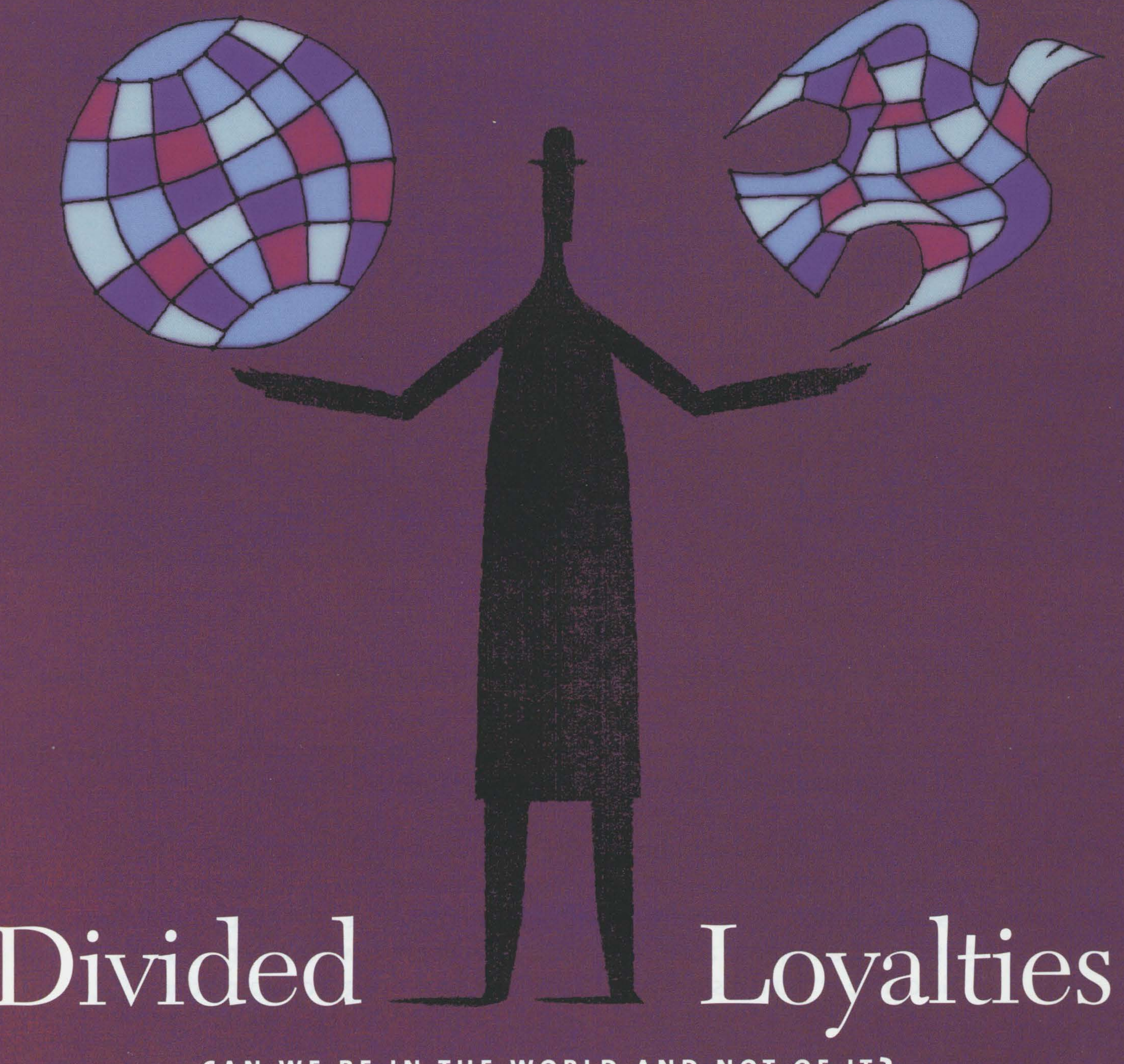
Congregations

LEARNING LEADING CHANGING

FALL 2003



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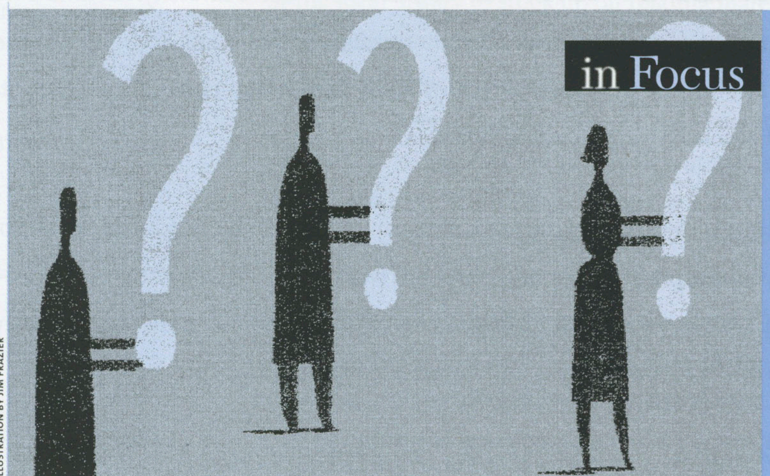

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COVER ILLUSTRATION BY JIM FRAZIER

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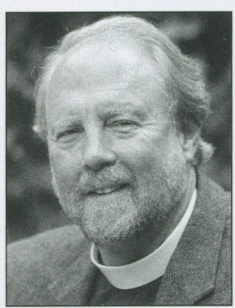
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Rev. Conrad A. Braaten is the senior pastor of Lutheran Church of the Reformation, Washington, D.C. He has 28 years of parish experience, and has worked four years with the church-wide expression of the ELCA as a specialist in congregational public ministry. He also has been a consultant in the areas of conflict resolution and lay leadership development.

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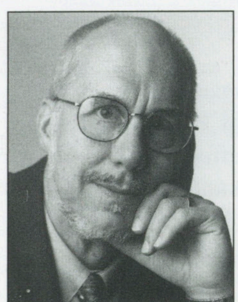
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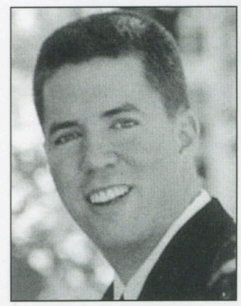
Dr. Larry Rasmussen is the Reinhold Niebuhr Professor of Social Ethics at Union Theological Seminary, New York City. He is the author of *Moral Fragments and Moral Community: A Proposal for Church in Society* (Fortress Press, 1993) and the award-winning volume, *Earth Community, Earth Ethics* (Orbis Books, 1998).


Andrew B. Warner

Rev. Andrew B. Warner, a graduate of Harvard Divinity School, is the associate pastor of Plymouth United Church of Christ in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. In his ministry, he combines a dedication to God with a love of cooking—something he calls "gastro-evangelism." Rev. Warner is co-founder of Christ Clarion Fellowship, an organization of young mainline Protestant clergy (www.christclarionfellowship.org).

A Bias Toward God

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I am a big fan of books on tape. I have a fairly long commute from my home in Northern Virginia to Alban's offices in Maryland, so I make a regular stop at the local library to stock up on reading material for the road. A few months ago, when we were in the process of preparing this issue of Congregations, I picked up Bernard Goldberg's *Bias: A CBS Insider Exposes How the Media Distort the News* (Regnery, 2002). In the book, Goldberg describes how he was essentially blackballed at CBS after writing a *Wall Street Journal* op-ed piece about liberal bias at his network. Initially, I was tempted to dismiss his book as a rant against CBS and Dan Rather, but he won my attention with some concrete examples of how this bias plays out in everyday media coverage of some significant social issues, such as AIDS. But the most important point he made—at least in terms of what I grapple with as editor of this magazine—is how this bias is not a calculated scheme to slant the news, but a subtle and unexamined tendency to frame events in terms of one's own political and moral views.

This point struck me because it was the very thing we struggled with here at Alban as we decided to tackle this issue of "divided loyalties" to church and state. We knew going in that this would be a sensitive issue that would need to be handled carefully. And so we wrestled with the angles. Do we want to take a stand on American foreign policy? Well, no, that's not our mission. Do we need to give "equal time" to conservative and liberal voices? What exactly are we trying to do here in the context of our goal to provide congregations with thoughtful and practical material they can use in their lives together?

After much discussion, we agreed that we wanted to help congregations unpack this issue for themselves, that too much was at stake to let it be swept under the rug as potentially explosive issues often are. We agreed that we needed to affirm congregations as places where people can bring all of themselves—their spiritual yearnings, their confusion, their differing opinions—to the table and be heard and accepted for who they are as children of God. And so the articles in this issue, such as Katie Day's "Can Congregations Talk about War?" (p. 16), reflect this affirmation. But, to be honest, they also reflect our bias toward the viewpoint that congregations—communities of people united in their desire to know God—need to "lift their eyes to the Lord." For Diana Butler Bass, this means her allegiance to the "City of God" supersedes her allegiance to the "City of Man" ("Broken We Kneel," p. 10). For Conrad A. Braaten, this means acknowledging the seductive pull of civil religion ("The Elephant in the Sanctuary," p. 22). And for Andrew B. Warner, it means challenging himself and his congregation to look deeper within to learn what it means to be a "just peace" congregation ("Defining a 'Just Peace' Vocation," p. 27).

We know that there are other ways in which we "lift our eyes" in tumultuous times. With these examples, we share with you our conviction that congregations are places of power and purpose, where difficult issues can be faithfully engaged. We hope you receive this issue of Congregations in the spirit in which it is given—with honesty, humility, and a genuine desire for connection with our fellow travelers on the spiritual path.

Peace,

Lisa

Lisa Kinney Colburn
lkinney@alban.org

Dealing With Difficult Behavior

I appreciate Rev. Dr. Karen Minnich-Sadler's article "Dysfunction, Unfaithfulness, or Human Frailty?" (Winter 2003), especially her reference to Robert Kegan's "constructive-developmental theory." I certainly agree that moving gently is good, but I wish she had gone further into responses to the various types of behaviors that often wreak greater or lesser havoc on a congregation's abilities to move ahead.

I have served three churches as interim minister, and I would gain from others sharing how they have dealt with people who either "need power" or "need closeness." I have found both in every church I have served, and I wish there were some forum for conversation among pastors about ways of gently and successfully warding off attacks (not always aimed at the minister) that damage trust within the body of the church. I'm not a mathematician, but endangering and derailing numbers of people so that we might not insult or drive off one or two persons seems to deny both the creation of sanctuaries of safety and places where people can express themselves fully and deeply.

Rev. Elizabeth McMaster
Accredited UU Interim Minister
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

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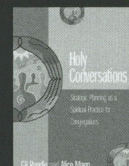

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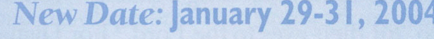

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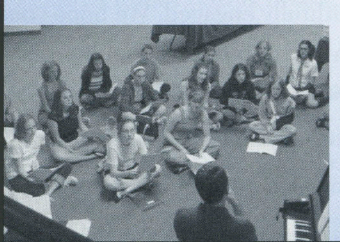

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The Long, Elusive Line

Almost 2,000 years ago, when Jesus answered the Pharisees' trick question about paying taxes with his classic retort "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's" (Matt. 22:21), his questioners, we are told, marveled and then withdrew. For a moment he had ended a debate.

But Jesus' momentary victory did not settle the question of the relation of religion and politics, or of church and state. Instead it set in motion an argument that has continued across centuries, civilizations, and continents. The argument has had its dramatic and eventful moments. One thinks of Constantine's declaring Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire in 312, and of the same emperor's settling church doctrine at Nicea in 325. Centuries later, the balance of power shifted when Pope Gregory VII brought the Emperor Henry IV to his knees in the snow at Canossa, Italy, in 1077. Later still, the balance shifted again as England's King Henry VIII took the Church of England away from Pope Clement VII, shutting down the monasteries (1536) and setting England on what would become, under his daughter Elizabeth I, an Anglican trajectory.

In these and other controversies, secular and religious leaders attempted to settle the relationship between church and state, between God's reign and human kingdoms. Sooner or later, each settlement came undone as power shifted and as history unfolded.

While leaders have struggled to get the relationship right, thousands of lives have been lost as armies sought to enforce one solution or another. It turned out that people could not agree for long on an answer to Jesus' questions. What belongs to Caesar? What belongs to God? The answers were not universally self-evident or permanent.

Yearly Battles over Separation

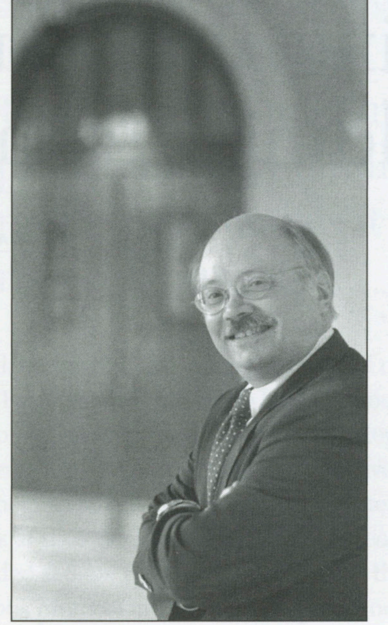
Two millennia later, we still wrestle with Jesus' questions. Notwithstanding the attempts of America's founders to separate church and state permanently, we continue to struggle. Thomas Jefferson thought he had built a "wall of separation" between church and state with our Constitution. James Madison, his fellow Virginian, was more correct when he spoke of a thin "line of separation" that he tried to protect with the First Amendment to the Constitution. Over time it has become apparent that the line can be incredibly thin, and that it moves.

America may not have emperors kneeling in the snow or kings shutting down monasteries. But it does have its yearly battles over crèches in public places or the Ten Commandments in courtrooms. We struggle over issues such as religious apparel in the workplace, tax exemptions, and whether government money can be used to support students who major in religion at secular institutions of higher education. A major debate began when President Bush began his faith-based initiative to move government money (i.e., taxes) to religiously based institutions that wished to provide much-needed social services.

Mixing Patriotism and Religion

Just how difficult it is to draw the line of separation is evident when we look at the mixture of patriotic and religious responses in the wake of 9/11. To seek to separate, to ask, as some did, whether President Bush should have spoken words of public policy from the National Cathedral, can be risky. Just how difficult it is to distinguish matters of church from those of state can be seen in a congregation's debate over whether to keep its American flag in the worship space. More than one clergy leader has lost a job over trying to draw the line by moving the flag.

So long as humans exercise power, we will be struggling to get the relationship right between religion and politics, church and state. On one hand, it seems unfortunate that we cannot get this issue settled. On the other hand, the struggle forces us to think anew whether human purposes equate with God's. Jesus' message and the message of the Christian tradition tell us that those purposes are often not the same. Our best human intentions are always self-serving in some way and have consequences we cannot foresee. So we will draw and redraw the line of separation, always seeking God's purposes, and always missing—at least in part. But each time we draw the line, we can glimpse the importance of the difference between God's ways and our own, and of the necessity to keep pursuing Jesus' questions.



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

Beating Burnout by Building Teams

LYNNE M. BAAB

About two years ago I performed Beth and Steve's wedding ceremony. At that time they were brand new to our congregation. Over the months that followed I watched them get involved in a small group and then begin to serve as Sunday school teachers. Toward the end of their first year teaching Sunday school I had a few minutes to talk to them. "How are you doing?" I asked. "How's it going for you as Sunday school teachers?" "We love it!" one of them answered, and I'd have to use the word "radiant" to describe their demeanor as they talked about teaching Sunday school.

Some months later I went to visit Beth after the birth of the couple's first baby. "Are you getting help?" I asked. She told me that two couples had been bringing them lots of food, and I asked where she and Mark had met them. One couple was in their small group, and they knew the other couple, Mike and Sandy, from their Sunday school team.

Later I asked Dianne Ross, our children's ministries director, about the Sunday school team that Beth and Steve had served on. "I set up that team intentionally," Dianne told me. "Mike and Sandy

When people perceive that they are working with others who are enjoying the sense of camaraderie, they are able to work longer, harder, and with greater joy.

are well connected here at church, have experience in teaching, and have a deep personal faith. I wanted them to be teamed up with a couple who were learning to teach Sunday school and who were newer to church and perhaps even newer to the Christian faith. Beth and Steve fit the role perfectly. I asked Mike and Sandy to take Beth and Steve under their wing, to invite them over for dinner and pray for them, that kind of thing. I added two single people to that team, and I watched them all connect and become friends."

Since I had the impression that on Sunday school teams the two couples and the singles took turns teaching, I asked Dianne how the two couples would get to know each other if they were always teaching on different Sundays.

"I have the whole team teach together the first two weeks," she said. "That way the kids can get to know all the teachers and the teachers can begin to get to know each other. Then, after they start teaching on alternate Sundays, they usually need to talk most weeks to tell the other team members what happened. I try to match up people on teams who I think will enjoy getting to know each other and might become friends. We have quarterly events for our Sunday school teachers. Often our teachers are glad to come to the training and appreciation events because they will get to see their teammates."

Dianne said Beth and Steve's team members became close friends. She described seeing them talk intimately with each other at teachers' functions and at the end-of-the-year party, and said she could see their tender care for each other.

Dianne also described one large Sunday school class for which she recruited a group of couples and singles in their twenties. The eight of them rotate teaching and have a growing friendship. For the nursery team she recruited mothers with very young children so they would have something in common as they served together and found their "place" in the church.

For Beth and Steve, teaching Sunday school became a place where they could serve God together and grow in friendship with another couple and the singles who were on the team. I could begin to see why they seemed so radiant as they described their experience in serving. Burnout was the furthest thing from their experience.

The Example of Alpha

A similar pattern has emerged among the members of my church who have participated in Alpha, an 11-week introduction to the Christian faith, complete with weekly dinners, videos, and small-group interactions. In my congregation, we are just finishing our third Alpha course in 18 months. This course is one of the most labor-intensive programs we have ever provided. I expected that it would require a lot of work and that the benefits would be worth it, and both of these expectations have been met. Participants have grown in faith and become connected to each other, and Alpha has proved to be a very good thing for us to do, just as I expected. However, I didn't expect that one of the sweetest blessings would be the deep relationships formed among the Alpha team members.

The Alpha team for each course consists of 10 to 12 people: the leader, the administrator, three small group leaders, and one or two helpers for each small group. Before each Alpha course starts, the team meets on two Saturday mornings for training. Those Saturday training times begin with a solid hour of sharing of personal concerns and prayer. The leader asks, "How are you feeling about being involved in this ministry? Are there things going on in your life that you want us to pray for?" and the group then prays for each other and for the many needs and concerns members have expressed about the upcoming Alpha course.

On each of the 11 nights that Alpha meets the team gathers 15 minutes before dinner to share concerns and pray for the evening. People have the opportunity to briefly mention their personal concerns: "I'm still job hunting." "My boss is still pushing me to work too many hours." "My mom's chemotherapy is going better than expected." The group then prays together.

Alpha originated at a church in England and has spread around the world, along with plenty of training opportunities for learning the accepted wisdom of what makes an Alpha course work. The Alpha trainers emphasize that the most important team meeting is the one that occurs at the end of each evening, when the team gathers for 15 to 30 minutes to debrief on how the evening went.

In our increasingly fast-paced society, people are experiencing more isolation. Demographic studies show that more people are living alone. Even for people who live in families or with friends, our frantic pace makes it challenging to nurture caring relationships.

I served as a small group leader for our first Alpha course and I strongly resisted this idea of meeting together at the end of each evening. On Alpha evenings I often arrived at church at five o'clock to help set tables. We would gather as a team to pray at 5:45. Dinner was at six o'clock, followed by the video and small groups, which ended at 8:45. By that time I was more than ready to go home, but Alpha protocol insisted that we gather one more time as a team.

I'm now convinced that those late evening gatherings are one of the keys to the success of Alpha. In that debriefing time the team members share frustrations with each other: "In my group one person dominated the conversation." "Someone asked a really hard question and I didn't know how to answer." They also share joys: "A woman in my group said she read the Bible every day this week and she's starting to learn to pray." They discuss logistics for the next week: "The room was too cold tonight and people couldn't concentrate. Can we have the heat higher next time?"

> The significance of building teams is rooted in who we are as people. This is the theological reason why teams work.

Our Alpha leader told me that the debriefing process has an incredible bonding effect on the team. "I don't have to prod people to stay late and meet together," he said. "They are eager to hear what happened in the other groups." In order to gather to debrief, the team members have to detach themselves from their conversations with participants. Placing this priority on talking with team members demonstrates that the team matters, that the members are serving with a group of people who are engaged in this ministry and committed to each other. In addition, the debriefing helps the team members gain perspective when their small group has not gone very well that evening. In such a labor-intensive ministry, a discouraging evening can make a team member feel that it is just not worthwhile to work so hard, but listening to someone else talk about the fruit that God is bringing through this ministry helps the members regain perspective. There is a shared excitement that is infectious.

Why Teams?

A practical, functional argument can be made as to why team building works to prevent burnout and to provide satisfaction in serving: When people perceive that they are working with others who are enjoying the sense of camaraderie, they are able to work longer, harder, and with greater joy. When I conducted interviews for my book on burnout among volunteers, *Beating Burnout in Congregations* (Alban Institute, 2003), I heard again and again that people are happiest serving when they are relationally connected to the people around them. One rabbi called it "flipping pancakes while talking with people."

One woman I interviewed talked about the high level of burnout in many areas of ministry in her congregation, but described two ministries that never seem to lack for volunteers and where people seem to enjoy serving and don't experience burnout. Those two ministries stood out among all the others for one specific reason: The volunteers gathered to share personal needs and to pray together before launching into their evening's work.

In our increasingly fast-paced society, people are experiencing more isolation. Demographic studies show that more people are living alone. Even for people who live in families or with friends, our frantic pace makes it challenging to nurture caring relationships. The desire to "flip pancakes while talking with people" reflects a deep need for connection: to serve others while being in relationship.

The significance of building teams is rooted in who we are as people. This is the theological reason why teams work. We were created by God both for relationships and for meeting the needs in our world. Truly we are God's hands and feet in our world, called to show God's love in a world that desperately needs it. However, we are called to make God's love known as a community, not as isolated individuals. Sometimes the most significant way God's love is shown is through the way we love one another. As we serve we can't grow in love with our fellow servers unless we take time to get to know each other, to listen to each other, and to pray for each other.

Committees into Communities

In my interviews I heard over and over that boring committee meetings are a surefire road to burnout. I also heard time and again about the importance of transforming committees into communities, places where people can get to know each other and support each other personally, as well as tackle tasks together.

"We don't have time for personal sharing," committee members often object. "It takes us two hours just to get our business accomplished. How can we add in some sharing time?"

> I heard over and over that boring committee meetings are a surefire road to burnout. I also heard time and again about the importance of transforming committees into communities, places where people can get to know each other and support each other personally, as well as tackle tasks together.

Committee business often takes a long time because people have a high need to be heard, so they talk at length about the issues at hand. Beginning committee meetings with a check-in time, where people can talk about personal needs and pray for each other, can help the business get accomplished much more quickly. This applies to church board meetings as well.

In one of our recent board meetings we had a discussion

among the elders about their satisfaction level in serving. Some elders expressed contentment and joy in serving and others said they sometimes feel isolated and bewildered in their role. Some of our elders chair committees and some serve on teams with other elders. I noticed that all the elders who felt a bit uneasy in their roles are the chairs of committees, and that most of those who expressed contentment with their roles serve on teams with other elders. I concluded from this small sample that serving on teams with other elders helps the elders experience peer support in their roles as congregational leaders. I meet monthly with the administration team, which is composed of the elders for building and grounds, personnel, and stewardship. We spend about an hour and a half talking about administrative issues, then we share prayer requests and pray together. We pray for each other and for the administrative issues of the congregation.

Our personnel elder has a particularly heavy load. She chairs the personnel committee, which meets monthly, and she also meets monthly with the administration team and the whole board of elders. Her term as elder ends in about a year, and she says she will enjoy being free of all the responsibility but will sorely miss the three groups of people who have supported her personally. She knows she will have to find a new support structure. Her comments tell me that we truly have been building teams and fostering community in our committees, on our board, and in our administration team meetings. I really liked hearing that she views her three monthly meetings as places where she gets support personally.

Forming Teams

Based on my interviews and my observations in my own congregation, I have a few suggestions for forming and nurturing teams:

- When you have the opportunity to influence who serves on a specific team, as much as possible choose people who have something in common and might grow close to each other.
- When you pick leaders of teams, make sure they are committed both to achieving the task at hand and to nurturing relationships among team members. Make sure they understand that the hard-driving CEO model simply is not appropriate in congregations. All team leaders need to provide opportunities for people to grow together, as well as the logistical help and support for team members to get their jobs done.
- In all gatherings related to achieving tasks, set up structures for expressing personal concerns, such as a sharing time at the beginning, middle, or end of a meeting. In large gatherings, break into groups of two, three, or four to share personal needs. Don't neglect the significance of debriefing times after a task is finished, asking, "How did it go for you? What can you share that might encourage the rest of us?"
- Pray together both for personal needs and for the ministry you are working on together. In large meetings, break into smaller groups for prayer. Praying out loud is great, but if there are people who aren't comfortable praying aloud, offer times of silent prayer as well, and provide instructions for silent prayer, such as asking each person to pray for the person to his or her left or asking ahead of time for volunteers to pray silently about specific issues related to the task you are trying to achieve.

Perhaps the most significant suggestion I can offer is to remember at all times the unique character of congregations. We are called to perform tasks and nurture relationships in community. We are not a business with its highest priority on achieving tasks. Every gathering in a congregation that is focused on a task should also include an opportunity to build and nurture relationships. ◆

Suggested Reading

Hestenes, Roberta. **Turning Committees into Communities** (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1991).

Olsen, Charles M. **Transforming Church Boards into Communities of Spiritual Leaders** (Bethesda, Md.: The Alban Institute, 1995).

Clergy Spiritual Life and Leadership: Going Deeper

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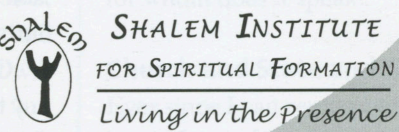

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Broken We Kneel

DIANA BUTLER BASS

Even though I am an Episcopalian and my tradition allows for it, I do not often confess my sins to a priest. I guess I am too much of a Protestant to feel comfortable with purple stoles and the spiritual intimacy of the confessional.

One morning in late fall 2001, however, my tender conscience got the best of me. In the upstairs hallway of the church where I worked as Director of Faith Formation, I told one of the priests on our large staff what I had done. I had taken the "United We Stand" sign—complete with the American flag—off the church's side entryway door. I was guilty.

"Yes, I did it. I just couldn't stand it anymore. I have to walk through that door every day." I told her. "I took it down."

I thought she would be proud. That she would agree with me and my furtive act of Christian rebellion. After all, I was standing up for the separation of church and state, for the clear witness of God's people as peacemakers, and for the church being in the world but not of it. Maybe if we actually had been in a confessional, she would have admitted to agreeing with me. As it turned out, however, she did not know I was seeking absolution for my trespasses. She was not expecting a confession.

"You can't do that," she said. "You can't do that." She worried, I think, about angering some congregants.

"I can't?" I asked. "Well, I did. I took it down. It doesn't speak for me. It doesn't speak for the whole church. I'm not united, and I'm not standing with the parishioners who put up that sign. Some people around here want revenge for September 11. I can't stand the thought of starting a war because of revenge."

"You can't do that. You work here. They put the sign up. It is their church."

Their church? *Their* church? Never have I been more stunned by something said by an ordained person. Since I was a little girl in Sunday school, my teachers and ministers had taught me one thing: the church is God's. We are God's. It is God's church.

"No, it is not," I replied angrily, "it is God's church. And if we don't speak for God around here, who will?"

Her pastoral side rallied as she gracefully asked, "This really matters to you, doesn't it?"

"Yes, it does. It matters more than anything else in the world. 'United We Stand' is an excuse to commandeer the church for a military campaign against Afghanistan. I can't stand seeing all the flags hanging off the church. Hanging flags on churches feeds into the terrorists' hands. It mixes the symbols of church and state and makes us religious nationalists—not much different from the Islamic fundamentalists. It is spiritually and politically confusing. The United States and Jesus Christ. I'm angry and worried. I can't stand that sign."

"But it is their church," she insisted.

"No. It is God's church. If we keep those flags up," I threatened, "I'm going to put up my own signs. Alternative signs. Something about prayer, humility, and repentance."

I stopped for a moment, recalling an incident that had happened just a few days earlier at the grocery store. While loading groceries into my car, I noticed that the young man helping me was an Arab immigrant. I asked if he was alright, if anyone had been mean to him since the attacks. He did not answer immediately. Instead, his eyes misted as he slowly rolled up his shirt sleeves. I saw bruises and band-aids. He stretched out his arms, pointed to the marks, and said, "I give my blood for the people of New York. My blood for New York." I stood shocked—in awe of the unanticipated theophany. He almost looked like Jesus! Submission to God, the humility of the cross, the blood of Christ, the unity of all people. No minister had ever preached the gospel better, and I felt my knees go weak.

That's it, I thought, as the vision pulled me back into the conversation. "I'm going to start the 'Broken We Kneel' campaign. Not a flag. Flags are about victory. A cross. After all, that is what the New Testament teaches. Love our enemies. Pray for them. Pray for forgiveness of our own sins. Broken we kneel."

My passionate rhetoric did not convince her. "You can't do that," she told me. "If you put up signs like that, it will start a war in the congregation."

Maybe, I thought, this congregation needs a good argument over war. I went back to my office and closed the door. I reached into the box where I had hidden away the plastic stick-on "United We Stand" sign with the flag emblazoned above the words. I unfolded it and looked at the familiar stars and stripes. Sighing, I put it on my desk, turned my chair, and looked out the window. "Broken We Kneel" seemed a much more fitting slogan for Christian citizens—recognizing the limits of the earthly city, humbly bowing before God's wisdom, repenting of our lust for revenge, and forgiving our enemies.

> "Broken We Kneel" seemed a much more fitting slogan for Christian citizens—recognizing the limits of the earthly city, humbly bowing before God's wisdom, repenting of our lust for revenge, and forgiving our enemies.

On the windowsill sat an icon of St. Francis and St. Clare of Assisi. I thought of Francis' prayer, "Lord, make us servants of your peace; where there is hate, may we sow love; where there is hurt, may we forgive; where there is strife, may we make one." The healing blood of Jesus Christ, the mission of the church: peace, love, forgiveness, reconciliation. How hard it is to live as a Christian in a world that seems to be going exactly in the opposite direction.

I love my country—its ideals, its land, its history, and its people—but I love my God and my church more. My nation did not seem to be calling for peace, love, forgiveness, and reconciliation. It was mobilizing for war. Were we being forced to choose between the two? Was I the only Christian in America feeling tension between loyalty to my nation and loyalty to the reign of God?

That morning, I felt alone with St. Francis and St. Clare, alone in my worry and concern about the loyalty of the church amidst terrorism and war and my growing sense that September 11 had opened a door for the church to be clear and powerful in preaching and praying for peace and reconciliation. I thought about the priest's comments: Whose church is it? Whom does it serve? And for whom does it speak?

Church and State and Terrorism

Ever since I can remember, two passions have framed my life—religion and politics. These twin passions have never sat easily with one another. There always seemed to be some tension, or some conflict, between my two interests.

I had the uneasy feeling that Christians trusted the sword of the state more than the peace of Christ—or that they equated the two.

When I was a girl, my mother actually taught me that in polite company one should never discuss either.

But growing up in the Methodist Church in the 1960s, it was hard to avoid talk of religion and politics. Conflict between flag and cross created intense debates as we grappled with both the Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War. When I was very young, my church simply went along with both segregation and the war. By 1967 or so, new clergy pushed us to question these stances. Would Jesus treat black people the way Bull Connor treated them in Birmingham, Alabama? Was it right for soldiers to kill civilians in Southeast Asia? Was the United States always on God's side? Was God on the United States' side? The theological debates in mainline Protestant churches formed me in faith and citizenship.

Mainline denominations failed, however, to deal with these concerns in ways that made sense to American churchgoers. They vacillated between supporting the government and attacking it. Indeed, the lack of clarity around these issues drove many mainline Protestants away from church—raising questions about the role of religious belief in the public square. Does the Christian church bless the political order? Or does the church challenge it? Should Christians obey authority or should the faithful protest injustice? In the 1960s, mainline churches never really answered these questions. They just waited for them to go away.

The relationship between church and state, between God's kingdom and the nations in which God's people live, is one of the oldest questions in the Christian tradition. For two thousand years, Christians have argued about the relationship between church and state, redefined it, and reinterpreted it. Entire denominations, like the Baptists, Mennonites, and Quakers, were founded on the theological belief in the separation of church and state. And social and political movements, including the American Revolution itself, were shaped by the ways in which Christians understood the spheres of government and faith.

Although the tradition is long and the questions were pointed during my childhood, they have slumbered uneasily for the past 30 years. September 11 changed that. The horror of the attacks, the threat to our security, and the feeling of the world's hatred toward America all galvanized citizens who started flying flags and trumpeting patriotic slogans—many of whom pressured their churches to support the decisions of our government in this perilous time. I had the uneasy feeling that Christians trusted the sword of the state more than the peace of Christ—or that they equated the two.

Despite my loneliness on that autumn morning as I stared at St. Francis and St. Clare, eventually I discovered a host of Christian brothers and sisters who also were troubled by the admixture of church and state that had arisen in American congregations. And, contrary to the priest's concern that my "Broken We Kneel" campaign would split the congregation, I also discovered that nearly every clergy person I knew—including her—was struggling during this time to preach God's good news of love, forgiveness, and reconciliation in meaningful, compassionate, and relevant ways to their congregations. But many of them, strangely enough, felt threatened by preaching peace.

Back in my office that day, I looked at Francis and Clare and I asked them, "Why struggle? Why not simply wave the flag and sing *God Bless America*?" After all, patriotism and the flag seemed to be helping millions of Americans summon courage. Why not enlist the church in the moral defense of the homeland? Why shouldn't I equate our cause with God's? I laid the "United We Stand" sign at St. Francis' feet.

I thought of some other words—words I had read long ago in graduate school—written by the Episcopal Bishop of Ohio, Charles P. McIlvaine, to his congregations during the American Civil War, a time when political leaders almost completely appropriated the church for their own ends:

> Let not the love of Country make your love to God . . . the less fervent. Immense as is this present earthly interest, it is only earthly. The infinitely greater interests of the soul and of the kingdom of God remain as paramount as ever.[1]

Part of the call of the church after September 11 was to serve grieving families, to give hope to the fearful, and to pray for peace . . . But the Christian task was not to proclaim or even imply that our nation is blameless, morally pure, and God's righteous nation.

The kingdom of God. Where was that elusive kingdom of God? Certainly, part of the call of the church after September 11 was to serve grieving families, to give hope to the fearful, and to pray for peace, with its attending values of liberty and freedom. But the Christian task was not

to proclaim or even imply that our nation is blameless, morally pure, and God's righteous nation. Love of country is a lesser love than love of God's kingdom. American Christians are called to be servants of God's peace and, as the earliest believers of Jesus believed, to live as citizens of an *altera civitas*, another city, a better realm.[2]

The City of God and the City of Man

Christians often forget that they are citizens of two cities, that which St. Augustine called "the City of God" and "the City of Man." The City of God has as its goal the love of God; the City of Man has as its goal self-love. The City of God recognizes its dependence on God, seeks wisdom, surrenders itself on a lifelong pilgrimage, and worships God. The City of Man, in contrast, believes itself to be all-powerful, lusts for domination, covets money and possessions, and worships its own glory. The end of the City of God is a *telos* ("consummation") of communal joy with God and the saints; the end of the City of Man is destruction, its own death.

"In truth," writes St. Augustine, "these two cities are entangled together in this world, intermixed until the last judgment effects their separation" (*The City of God* [New York: Modern Library, 1950], Book I, 35). Sometimes the City of Man honors the City of God and its virtues; other times, the City of Man will not. Depending upon the circumstances, Christians may live in harmony with the earthly city or in opposition to it. Or, some of the time, we live with a realistic and limited sense of the earthly city's benefits. And some of the time the faithful will be deluded by the earthly city, enticed by its deceptions, and enthralled by its power. But, for those who follow Christ, their true home is God's city—always truer, purer, and more beautiful than any earthly one.

St. Augustine developed his theology of the two cities in the midst of the greatest crisis in Roman history. In 410, the barbarian Alaric and his Goths sacked Rome, the symbol of immortal civilization, the cradle of the Christian church. "Eternal city," bewailed St. Jerome, another ancient theologian, "if Rome can fall, what can be safe?" And as the monk Thomas Merton would write many centuries later, "The fall of the city that some had thought would stand forever demoralized what was left of the civilized world" (*The City of God*, Introduction, ix).

> When possible, Christians should avail themselves of the good will of the earthly city, but they must always remember that the earthly city and the heavenly city are fundamentally at odds. Each worships its own God—itself or the God of the Bible.

Many Roman citizens fled across the Mediterranean Sea to the North African city of Hippo, where St. Augustine served as bishop. As a pastor, he looked out over his fearful congregation of refugees, men and women who had once lived at the center of power, in the most important city in the world, and he began to preach about war and peace, time and history, death and life.

The problem, Augustine proposed, was that Christians—comfortable with imperially sanctioned faith—had forgotten their true citizenship. Rome had been too alluring; Christians had confused its fortunes with God's providence. When possible, Christians should avail themselves of the good will of the earthly city, but they must always remember that the earthly city and the heavenly city are fundamentally at odds. Each worships its own God—itself or the God of the Bible. The two cities may share some hopes and interests, but as St. Augustine states, "the two cities could not have common laws of religion. Here the heavenly city must dissent and become obnoxious to those who think differently" (*The City of God*, Book XIX, 17).

Augustine makes his case clear: no matter the glories of Imperial Christianity, the Christian Emperor and all his bishops, the state-supported clergy, the beautiful basilicas celebrating the mass, *no human city can ever—in history past or yet to come—be equated with the heavenly one.* "The heavenly city," he insists, "while it sojourns on earth, calls citizens out of all nations and gathers together a society of pilgrims of all languages . . . in its pilgrim state the heavenly city possesses peace by faith; and by this faith it lives" (*The City of God*, Book XIX, 17).

For the United States, September 11, 2001, was Alaric's sack of Rome. When the outsiders smashed into the centers of power, the unthinkable had happened. Many things went through my mind and heart as I watched the second plane hit the World Trade Center, but St. Jerome's words struck me once again: "Eternal city, if you can fall, what can be safe?" The peace of the earthly city of the United States had been destroyed; maybe it had been an illusion all along. And now, as St. Augustine's flock once had, American Christians faced the press of history "like an olive press." I wondered what oil would come from this harvest.

The Marvelous Paradox

Of Augustine on the collapse of civilizations, Yale church historian Rowan Greer writes, "The practical implication of Augustine's view is that what matters is to endure. The Christian can be neither fully involved in his society nor fully withdrawn from it. Instead, he must keep his sight on the pilgrim's path."[3] Augustine taught that life in the earthly city:

> Must be taken seriously . . . We must be citizens. Nevertheless, our

During times of horror and chaos, congregations need to be challenged by the cross and see that it calls Christ's people to live as citizens of God's city.

experience is that of a pilgrim or a convalescent; it takes on its true meaning only when related to our destiny in the City of God. And so we are aliens.[4]

During his press of history, Augustine concluded that Christians were *civitas peregrina,* "resident strangers" or "alien citizens." The ancient Epistle to Diogenes (5:4-8) refers to Jesus' followers as "strangers" and "sojourners" to whom "every foreign country is their fatherland, and every fatherland is a foreign country." Greer calls this the "marvelous paradox" of being a Christian.

Americans are not a paradoxical people. Practical and pragmatic, yes. Paradoxical, no. Since the state has been largely friendly to the church throughout American history, the state usually engenders Christian loyalty. Many Christians simply equate the goals of the state with the goals of the church without question. A few, more skeptical of the American government's historical record with the gospel, reject or challenge the demands of earthly citizenship. Thus, American churches tend to divide along these lines during times of crisis, "for" or "against." As historian Mark Noll writes:

> The dominant pattern of political involvement in America has always been one of direct, aggressive action . . . Americans have moved in a straight line from personal belief to social reform, from private experience to political activity.[5]

Obey the government. Protest its directives. Whichever one chooses, both assume "a straight line from personal belief to social reform."

But what if it is not a straight line? What if it is an olive press, the press of history, a turning wheel of chaos and suffering? What if it is a paradox, two seemingly contradictory ideas that are both completely true? What do "alien citizens" do when their society has been attacked, when their earthly peace has been disrupted, when the barbarians are at the gates? How does one live in a paradox?

Augustine's biographer Peter Brown says, "The members of the *civitas peregrina* . . . maintain their identity not by withdrawal, but by something far more difficult: by maintaining a firm and balanced perspective on the whole range of loves of which men are capable."[6] For St. Augustine, alien citizenship meant having a different vision than those around him—and being able to appropriately order one's loves according the way of life taught by Jesus. It meant rejecting the earthly city's temptations of wealth and power in favor of the virtues of God's city embodied in the practices of hospitality, peacemaking, fidelity, hope, and charity. It meant being able to see past the earthly city to the parallel, sometimes difficult to discern, and alternate commonwealth.

Not everyone in the ancient world agreed with St. Augustine. And not everyone could see as he saw. Two cities? Alien citizenship? Even after its sack, many Christians wanted to rebuild the earthly city of Rome, to increase its political power, and to enlarge its reach around the Mediterranean world. Build the walls of the city thicker, higher, and safer—because it was God's will. Loving Rome was the same as loving God's city. Enforcing Christ's kingdom by might and law was the right thing to do.

But history proved that the quest to rebuild Christian Rome was a difficult one. In the centuries since, many earthly cities have come and gone, but Augustine's vision of God's realm has remained sure: "God himself, who is the Author of virtue, shall there be its reward . . . He has promised himself. That city shall have no greater joy than the celebration of the grace of Christ, who redeemed us by his blood" (*The City of God,* Book XXII, 30) One may love an earthly city, but the love of God's city is the all-consuming vision of the *civitas peregrina,* living as God's people in this world.

A Pilgrimage of Vision

I took down the "United We Stand" sign because it obscured my vision of that other city. And, I believe, it obscured the vision of the congregation I served. It revealed that the congregation had disordered loves. They either loved their country more than God's kingdom, or they equated the two. But it was hard see the "marvelous paradox" of alien citizenship because congregants drew a straight line from their experience to a political stance and action. Most wished for swift, aggressive action against their enemies. Rather than sojourners, they preferred to be soldiers. They believed the City of God and the City of Man to be coterminus, not co-mingled.

They failed to see something basic to a Christian way of life. Theologian Barry Harvey describes it as, "There was from the beginning, however, one major difference between the pilgrim city of Christ and all others. This parallel *polis,* unlike every other city, had no walls, for it had no territory to defend."[7] The citizens of God's city may be found in every earthly city. They are scattered among the nations. Their unity in Christ transcended the divisions of ethnicity, class, and nationhood and constituted a new people who embodied God's reconciling peace. According to biblical witness, Christian citizenship is fundamentally at odds with violence on behalf of the state's political and economic division of humanity.

During times of horror and chaos, congregations need to be challenged by

the cross and see that it calls Christ's people to live as citizens of God's city. The flag may comfort them, making them cry and their hearts swell with pride, but its symbolic power—of territory, walls, and national defense—equally obscures the biblical story and Christian virtues according to which God's people are called to live. "United We Stand" symbolized the earthly city's attempt to rebuild its walls and strengthen its fortresses.

And, from the perspective of classical Christian theology, "United We Stand" seemed full of hubris, replacing the human city and its intentions with the love and justice of God's city. In the weeks following September 11, I found no comfort in the flag. Rather, every time I saw it fly, I remembered that I was a citizen of another city—one bound in the blood of Christ and the waters of baptism to millions of other alien citizens in all the world's nations, people striving to practice their faith in the face of violence, division, oppression, hatred, and poverty.

For me, living in Washington has been a test of faith. Every day, amidst terror threats, war-making, and political division, I have to think about what is means to be a *civitas peregrina*. It has not been easy. Fighter jets roar over my office as I write; I am learning to endure as a Christian. To live paradoxically. To embody peace, love, and hope, and to live in this city and believe it can make a difference. To know that I am a citizen of a better city, one whose virtues and end differ from those of my nation. To look beyond the earthly city's travails to the peace of the city that is harder to see.

And, as I have learned, sometimes the view is clearer from your knees. ◆

NOTES

1. Charles P. McIlvaine, "Bishop's Address," *Journals of the Diocese of Ohio* (1861).
2. Barry Harvey, *Another City: An Ecclesiological Primer for a Post-Christian World* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press, 1999).
3. Rowan Greer, *Broken Lights and Mended Lives: Theology and Common Life in the Early Church* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1986), 205.
4. Ibid., 158.
5. Mark Noll, "Lutheran Difference," *First Things* 2 (1992), 37.
6. Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1967), 325.
7. Harvey, *Another City*, 25.

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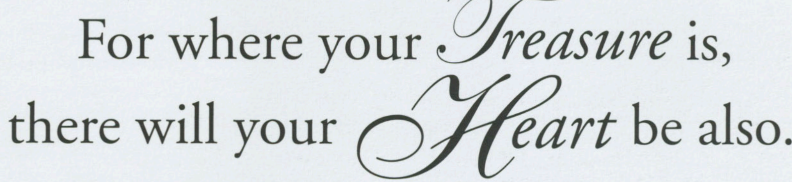

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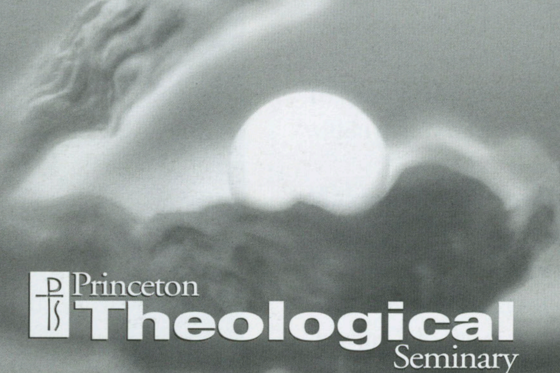

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Can Congregations Talk about War?

KATIE DAY

The topic of the week for the congregation's popular adult forum was Jonah (post-whale). At the worship service, the minister departed from the appointed lectionary text to follow up with a sermon on God's faithfulness among all kinds of people, often transcending our limited perspective. Her children's sermon also fit the theme: the kids got to talk about grumpiness and how silly it can be in light of God's purposes. The prayers of the people covered the usual range, from hospitalized members to those (unnamed) who "struggle today with fractured relationships and broken lives." The prayers concluded with a fervent petition for God's presence with U.S. troops in a faraway land, as well as with their anxious families stateside. The verbal bulletin board of announcements at the end of the service reminded the flock of upcoming meetings, a denominational gathering, and the youth car wash.

Members and a few visitors schmoozed at coffee hour, greeting each other warmly and exchanging tidbits of personal news. A few days later, the national government of these citizens would attack the land of ancient Nineveh. On the Sunday-morning talk shows that day, the grounds for attacking Iraq were debated, but among this gathered community of Christ, the topic did not come up.

Silenced Congregations

My hunch is that this Protestant church was not so very different that week from many other congregations. While discussions in the public forum were lively, those who identify themselves as the people of God did not, for the most part, engage the topic—even among themselves. Seldom was a "faith perspective" heard as the country prepared for a war that most nations of the global community opposed. Few communities of faith waded into the topic, beyond extending support for troops and pastoral support for their families. What was going on? Perhaps we felt we would appear unpatriotic by questioning the war effort or, worse, unsupportive of the thousands of Americans who would risk their lives in armed conflict. Or we believed that we did not have sufficient information or expertise to offer a considered opinion. Maybe we thought that entering public dialogue "from a faith perspective" sounded naïve or fundamen-

talist. Such assumptions may have silenced us from talking even among ourselves.

Of course the discomfort was even more complicated for clergy. Speaking about public issues—particularly an imminent war—is a homiletical minefield. The stakes are high. Preachers risk alienating individuals or whole chunks of the congregation if they bring a critical perspective to a public issue. Besides being subject to the conversation inhibitors cited above, those in the pulpit are particularly sensitive to the appearance of a God-on-our-side theology or arrogant eisegesis. Outright advocacy is seldom heard unless the prophet is preaching to the proverbial choir of kindred spirits. In the crassest sense, the bottom line can be—well, the bottom line. That is, disgruntled members, like disgruntled stockholders, can withdraw their investment if they disapprove of the leadership. The minister, therefore, carries an additional layer of professional vulnerability.

However, the real bottom line is finally not economic. The loss to those who avoid engaging in difficult conversation is not financial but more profound:

- The people of God fail to draw on the resource of their faith to understand complex issues.
- The public witness to God's justice and mercy is not heard as decisions are made determining the fate of millions and the course of history.

What does the sovereignty of God mean if the voice of the church has been silenced not by coercion but by the church's own inclination to muffle itself?

The cultural reasons that the faith perspective is not heard nearly enough in public dialogue—not to mention the dearth of discussions of public issues among people of faith—are many and complex. But let us not get hung up on simply analyzing this dynamic. As Martin Luther King, Jr., reminded us, analysis can be paralyzing. That is, we can become so fascinated by trying to understand ourselves that no time, energy, or impetus remains for change.

Top Ten Trust-Busters in a Congregation

(or How to Kill Meaningful Conversation)

- **Betray a pastoral confidence.**
- **Use a recognizable situation in the congregation as a sermon illustration.**
- **Fail to follow through on a commitment.**
- **Report a decision that has been made by elite leadership, rather than encouraging congregational participation in decision-making.**
- **Respond to an expressed opinion with condescension, judgment, or ridicule.**
- **Neglect to develop opportunities for interaction both in and outside worship.**
- **Leave all the visiting to the pastor.**
- **Assume that positions others hold are clear, well formed, and non-negotiable. When possible, project stereotypes.**
- **Fear conflict.**
- **Ignore the possibility of the Holy Spirit's working to heal, transform, and create.**

Framing the Dialogue

Let's assume that your congregation is similar to the one described above and that you would like it to become, instead, a community in which difficult conversations are not merely tolerated but encouraged. Imagine gathered people of God who take seriously their role as public citizens and want to explore what their faith in Jesus (or Yahweh or Allah) brings to the policy decisions made on our behalf. What qualities might mark a congregation that explores issues, looks for ways that faith commitments inform public deliberation, and honors the diversity of perspectives? More critical is this question: How can we become that kind of congregation?

Although the war in Iraq was proclaimed to have ended in May, the situation is still messy. "Low-intensity warfare" continues, with soldiers on both sides and Iraqi civilians dying. How then can we frame dialogue not so much to define a "just war" as to wrestle critically with the meaning of a "just peace"? The issues at stake are weighty and complicated, yet profoundly theological. What does it mean for a state to be sovereign? Who should define the restructuring of a nation, and why? What is a just use of national and global resources in assisting Iraq to recover economically, reorganize politically, and heal as a society? To whom are we in our nation accountable? To the people of Iraq? To our international allies? To the poor within our own borders? To God?

Making Use of Resources

Americans tend to shy away from issues if they feel overwhelmed by complexity. (Perhaps our biggest leap of faith is "leaving it to the experts.") People of faith are no different. The first step in cultivating rich dialogue within a congregation is to encourage people to learn as much

Creating a Trusting Environment In Your Congregation

Of course, "trust" cannot be programmed. But here are some steps that will give trust an opportunity to grow in your congregation:

- **Whenever possible, break the congregation into smaller modules in educational and social activities, or for administrative tasks. As long as the groups change membership periodically, they will provide an easier context for most people to get to know each other, as well as more opportunities to speak and listen to others.**
- **Encourage all small groups, whatever the task, to take time to set ground rules for decision-making, confidentiality, and process.**
- **Leaders should model trust and trustworthiness. Speak honestly about perspectives and questions. We instinctively trust those who not only say what they believe about an issue, but also articulate their unanswered questions, the loose ends, and troubling contradictions they see.**

about the issue as possible. Make resources like newspapers, books, Web sites, and magazine or journal articles accessible; ensure that references to these sources are a natural occurrence in all aspects of congregational programming, from sermons to youth meetings to coffee hour. One does not need a graduate degree to read political journals or to watch serious news commentary. It is not only 20- and 30-somethings who can surf the Web. Many denominations have devoted large portions of their own Web sites to global issues, especially since 9/11.

Of course, raising the knowledge level of a congregation can and should be accomplished in more structured ways. Bringing in speakers for a Lenten series, adult forums, or special services can be enlightening. Often, however, planners fail to provide for stimulating dialogue. Not wanting to "offend" members, planning committees may bring in several "experts" representing a variety of viewpoints. The assumption is that after hearing "all sides" of an issue, individuals can then follow the leading of their own consciences.

This notion is not entirely misguided—we do need to explore all positions in a debate and to honor the various conclusions members reach. But absent in this approach is an opportunity for members to engage the issue with each other. Such an encounter requires a level of trust in the congregation, that one will not be judged as being too conservative or too liberal, ill-informed, heretical, unpatriotic, or worse. Listening to experts can be intellectually stimulating, but ultimately disempowering. People of faith need a context in which to explore divergent perspectives, try on new ideas, and ask the often-troubling questions posed by our faith without the threat of being judged or silenced. If we cannot find this sort of trust among our sisters and brothers in the faith, where then can we find it?

A Trusting Place to Disagree

Experiencing a safe place to engage in robust, if difficult, dialogue builds other types of trust—in ourselves and in God. If we listen only to experts, a kind of powerlessness sets in. We stop trusting our own instincts and voices. "Who am I to speak to this issue? What could I possibly contribute to this discussion? Better to sit and listen."

A trusting environment begets trust in ourselves. Yet we risk hearing a cacophony of newfound voices weighing in on issues. We could disagree with each other—out loud! Conflict is not a bad thing, we know in our heads; yet somehow we spend much energy avoiding it in the church. Yet imagine such a conflict. What is the worst thing that could happen? Such pre-thinking often diffuses the fear. But it also gives us a chance to plan strategically for a variety of scenarios.

A Witness to God

More important is to imagine the best outcomes—that people of faith will wrestle with issues, asking where God can be found in this dilemma; that they will dust off the Bible and try hard to listen to its wisdom. Disagreement is to be expected, but so is increased respect for each other. If the legacy of Pentecost means anything to us today, it is that somehow, out of our differences, the Spirit can create a unity that passes understanding. Finally, although we may not speak with the same accent, a powerful language binds us.

And to what end—so that we may merely appear "drunk" as at the first Pentecost, or look strange within our own culture? The ultimate expression is a witness to God—a God who desires peace and justice among all people. As our nation engages in wars and rumors of other wars that do not clearly fit neat categories of good versus evil, such a witness belongs not just in our assemblies but also in the public forum. To proclaim publicly and seriously God's love for all people—in Baghdad and New York, Palestine and Israel, Monrovia and Monmouth, New Jersey—will be to change the terms of the dialogue.

First we must learn to engage in difficult conversations among ourselves, so that we can, with integrity, discern what God intends for all people. ◆

How to Talk About War

1. **First, encourage people of all ages to share their own experiences of war—whether they learned through direct participation, media consumption, or even video games.**
2. **Hold an educational forum on war and conflict in the Scriptures. What seemed in these texts to be legitimate or questionable motivations for taking up arms? How do we know? How was Jesus affected by ethnic conflict? Does the New Testament present a different perspective on war than we find in the Hebrew Scriptures?**
3. **Organize a film series on war. Often our views on war are passionate, our opinions so deeply held that it is difficult to engage in direct discussion. A film draws us into an experience outside ourselves. By discussing it, we can better understand the feelings of others as well as our own perspectives.**
4. **Demythologize the authority of the "experts" by making information about war accessible in and around the congregation. Many times we are silenced by our fear that we lack sufficient knowledge. Use speakers, bulletin inserts, links on your Web site—whatever it takes!**
5. **Invite groups of various ages to work on a letter to the editor that they may or may not send. Putting the focus on developing a singular expression of "this war from our perspective of faith" can be clarifying and educational. (Really, how many op-ed pieces have you seen signed by a youth group?)**
6. **In all these efforts, encourage members to look at the issue from the perspective of those-they-are-not. How does the Middle East conflict look through the eyes of Palestinians? Israelis? How does a "hawk" understand the war in Iraq? From what perspective does a "dove" view the war? If we could learn to turn our judgments about others into curiosity—asking questions more than making statements—we would go far in understanding international conflicts and perhaps planting the seeds to avoid future ones.**

The Congregation: Moral Convener in a World House?

LARRY RASMUSSEN

In 1968, the year he was assassinated, Martin Luther King, Jr., published an essay titled "The World House." It includes these words:

> Some years ago a famous novelist died. Among his papers was found a list of suggested plots for future stories, the most prominently underscored being this one: "A wisely separated family inherits a house in which they have to live together." This is the great new problem of mankind. We have inherited a large house, a great "world house" in which we have to live together—black and white, Easterner and Westerner, Gentile and Jew, Catholic and Protestant, [Muslim] and Hindu—a family unduly separated in ideas, culture and interest, who, because we can never again live apart, must learn somehow to live with each other in peace.[1]

Congregations, as local expressions of the world church, might serve as moral conveners; that is, diverse peoples, nurtured by faith, can address vexing issues amid community ties.

As early as 1944, Reinhold Niebuhr had made a similar observation: "The world community, toward which all historical forces seem to be driving us, is mankind's final possibility and impossibility."[2]

Does the world church have responsibility for moral formation appropriate to a "world house" or "world community"? How do we "learn somehow to live together in peace"?

One concept is introduced here: congregations, as local expressions of the world church, might serve as moral conveners; that is, diverse peoples, nurtured by faith, can address vexing issues amid community ties—exactly the idea King and Niebuhr both drew upon and strove for.

Looking to Church History

What wells of inspiration would congregations as moral conveners draw from, and what directions might they take? First, consider some lessons from church history.

"World church" was never meant as a triumphalist tag. "World church" does not mean "imperial church." Nor does it mean Christianity as the carrier and defender of "civilization." By and large, Christians have gone badly awry when they have invested their hopes in a head of government *as a Christian* and have identified a given nation as the bearer of divine mandates. The difference between being "a witness to the nations"—Israel's calling as a people of God, as well as the church's—and being identified *with* the nation is critical. "World church" identifies a global people serving as a witness from *among* the nations *to* the nations, in the interests of a world community seeking to live in peace.

This critical difference—a witness *to*, not *of*, the nations—arises from a continuing tension, present since the very events that created "church." Initially for Jews, and then for those Jews and Gentiles who became Christians, the fundamental loyalty was to the *faith* community as the locus of the moral life, rather than to the *civic* community (most Greeks and Romans chose the latter). The church portrayed in the Acts of the Apostles was utterly straightforward on this question, and apparently incapable of nuance: "Jesus is our Caesar" (*kyrios*, Lord). Paul was capable of some nuance; yet he too regarded this new community as beyond the *ethnoi* (the nations), a people *from* the *ethnoi* yet not a "we" defined in contrast to a "they," the enemy. Paul and Peter dared even to call this community a new race, a new humanity, a "peculiar people" beyond Jews and Gentiles, bond and free, male and female. Since Christian congregations in those formative years took shape on three continents simultaneously (Africa, Asia, and Europe), and since collectively they were multiethnic, multiracial, multilingual, and multicultural from the outset, Paul's congregations—while utterly human in all the usual, exasperating ways—were not out of the picture as a new "world." At least we have to admire their chutzpah! Somehow they moved, as we note in the postresurrection accounts of the gospels and in Acts, from being a band of frightened followers in a dangerous place to becoming a little community that knew itself to be possessed by a Spirit and power against which the gates of hell would not prevail (and didn't).

The Imperial Church

The apostles' successors made their own faith life and moral life difficult, however, by changing the basic formula and accepting the Christian emperor as Lord (*kyrios*). Now, in effect, Caesar is our Jesus! Constantine's own megalomania is nicely captured by his burial arrangements. The emperor's bones were laid dead center in a circle of 12 pillars, representing the 12 apostles. Even the newly imperial church eventually found such symbolism excessive, however, and it subsequently demoted Constantine from the Christ figure to the 13th apostle! But that action didn't move him from the center to the periphery. The result is the Christian legacy of looking to kings and presidents, nations and cultures, as vessels for enacting God's will "on earth as it is in heaven."

Nor is this legacy claimed only by "state churches." Churches legally "disestablished" in democratic societies, yet culturally established, have sought the good graces of the mayor, governor, president, and parliament, or the captains of industry and philanthropy. In practice, "rulers" still count more than ordinary members and citizens, despite theological disclaimers. Evangelist Billy Graham, for example, made his way to successive occupants of the White House, just as White House incumbents returned the favor and made a point of attending successive National Prayer Breakfasts or services at the National Cathedral in Washington.

"World church" identifies a global people serving as a witness from *among* the nations *to* the nations, in the interests of a world community seeking to live in peace.

Each congregation is an embodiment of a world church that needs to conduct itself in a manner worthy of a world larger than its own civic surroundings.

Convening a Fractured House

Yet our world is neither that of the ancient church nor of the church of self-identified Christian empire. It is portrayed well by scholar Diana Eck in her account of how a putatively Christian country became the most religiously diverse nation on earth.[3] Los Angeles is now the world's largest and most complex Buddhist city. Eck has even quit using phrases like "Islam and the West" because Chicago, New York, Flint, Phoenix, and Cedar Rapids are now important parts of the Islamic world.

In short, we find ourselves with another chance to be moral conveners in a fractured world house. And while our "house" is quite different from that of churches in the earliest Christian centuries, it is nonetheless a version of the same notion: each congregation is an embodiment of a world church that needs to conduct itself in a manner worthy of a world larger than its own civic surroundings.

To be the world church in each place is the task. Yet we do not qualify as moral conveners on the assumption that the church is a community that "knows better." It may or may not know better, from a moral point of view. Rather, the church knows "other," because of other loyalties, resources, and peoples. Those other perspectives, resources, and voices are desperately needed for responsible civic discourse in a contracting and dangerous world. The world church in each place thus holds proxies for those who cannot be heard in a given place at a given moment. Other members of the world community are to be represented even when they cannot be (bodily) present. It is literally a "good faith effort" for congregants to ask, "What perspectives of Christians not among us at the moment should we seek out (whether they be in Israel/Palestine, Zimbabwe, Costa Rica, or across town)? Who is especially prone to go unnoticed and unrepresented? How do we make contact and get needed information?"

At the same time, faith's imperative is this: as many as possible *are* to be present to speak as the Spirit leads. Above all, the otherwise unrepresented or underrepresented hold pride of place at the welcome table. "The last as first" (Matt. 20:16) is not Jesus' throwaway line. A congregation's calling is to be, in word and deed and as far as humanly possible, an inclusive community in each place.

Nonetheless, a question remains. Is there moral substance for this convening? Or is it all "process," with no content other than what the participants bring to a given exchange?

Recovering Christian Traditions

Consider, as an example of content, Christian traditions that have appeared in varied forms across cultures and around the globe over two millennia. We can listen, for example, to the voice of Christian asceticism: the tradition present from Jesus onward of saying yes and no in a simple and disciplined way of life, a tradition that weds spiritual richness to material simplicity so as to live lightly and equitably on the earth. Asceticism is an antidote to a consumerism that now ravages the planet and mortgages its children's futures.

Also heard is the voice of sacramentalism: all material reality is sacred and bears a value we participate in but do not create and cannot veto. Sacramentalism is the antithesis of ways of life that treat all things in heaven and on earth in unrelentingly utilitarian fashion, measuring their value only as their material value to us.

Also sounding is the never-extinguished voice of mysticism and the contemplative life—quietly listening to the world for the heartbeat of the divine and experiencing the unity of all things together in God and with one another. Here life itself is a communion of subjects in which nothing is object. It is a life worthily spent in overcoming "we" and "they," "mine" and "thine."

Not least is the voice of prophetic-liberative practices: we are all born to belonging,[4] and that makes community well-being and equality measures of social good itself, with a moral plumb line brought to all decisions, policies, and systems.

Such deep Christian traditions are all available for each congregation's efforts at moral formation appropriate to a "world house." Exactly where each might lead on any vexing issue cannot be known in advance, however—at least, not if open space for the Spirit is available and an inherently diverse community is the agent of deliberation. Nonetheless, the Spirit has been present in the very efforts that gave rise to these traditions in the first place—and may be again. ◆

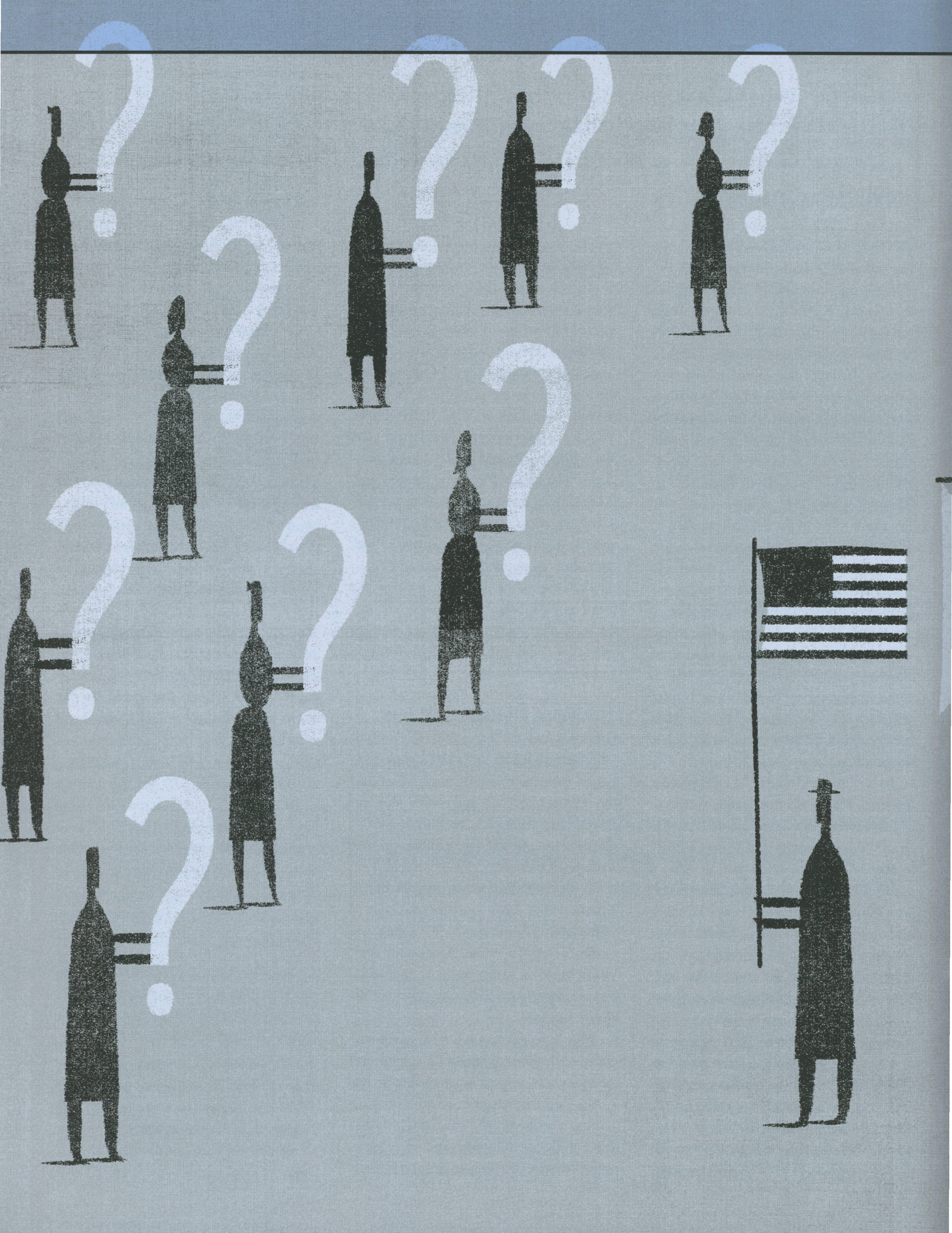
Notes

1. Martin Luther King, Jr., *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), 167.

2. Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1944).

3. See Diana L. Eck, *A New Religious America: How a "Christian Country" Has Become the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2001).

4. The reference is to the book by Mab Segrest, *Born to Belonging: Writings on Spirit and Justice* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2002).



The Elephant in the Sanctuary

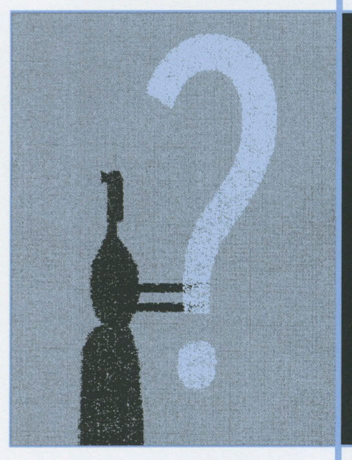
In the wake of the 1991 Gulf War, I attended a seminar in New York for denominational representatives that was sponsored by the National Council of Churches. The seminar took up the question "What happened?" The national offices of many church bodies had received a rash of reports about congregational conflict as the Gulf War was debated in Congress, and as the war ensued. While mainline Protestant leadership wielded a hesitant voice about the war, many congregations found their members torn by this issue. Not a few pastors lost their pulpits because they questioned the war. Others stirred turmoil simply by suggesting that communities of faith ought to struggle with issues of war and peacemaking.

Now leap ahead to 2003. A post-9/11 administration entered into a second war with Iraq. A strong voice from mainline Protestant and Catholic leadership challenged the "justness" of this action. Our nation was becoming polarized, far beyond the scope reflected in popular media. Even before the war started, public protest against it across the country began to rival that of the early-1970s Vietnam era. This polarization remains, but it seemed less conscious and visible after the war started. What was going on in U.S. Christian congregations?

Pastor Conrad A. Braaten says that congregations need to examine the influence of civil religion

That story's not in yet, but I suspect that not much has changed in the space of a decade. Congregations where accord prevailed between pastoral leaders and members probably sailed through this time relatively unscathed. For most, this accord would reflect that both clergy and congregation unreservedly accepted, for whatever reasons, the decision to wage war in Iraq. For a minority, this accord would encourage faith-based discussion and dialogue. For some of the rest of us, faced with polarized congregations, navigating our way through a myriad of emotions, loyalties, and opinions became a heavy burden. Why?

ILLUSTRATION BY JIM FRAZIER



When civil religion serves to embellish a nation's historical identity with self-righteousness, and to legitimize an arrogant sense of superiority, it becomes a powerful influence almost impervious to critique.

Conflicting Allegiances

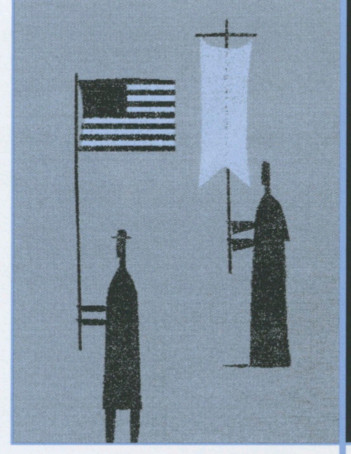
In wrestling with this "why," I have concluded that at least one major obstacle blocks the way to healthy dialogue and deliberation on issues of war and peace. Call it "the elephant in the sanctuary"—the elephant of civil religion; the identification of religious belief with the prevailing national ideology. In our day, that ideology is linked to the resurgent goal of empire. I refer here not to patriotism, our commitment to respect and protect the sanctity of the nation-state in which we live. Healthy patriotism is the expression of the citizen's fundamental allegiance to preserving our nation's core values: the "self-evident" truth that all people are "created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights and that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Patriotism nurtures within us the capacity to defend these values—even to the point of sacrificing our lives.

Yet, as Christians, we give primary allegiance to the one God of justice and love, revealed in Jesus Christ. This allegiance alone is the foundation of our ethical and moral conscience. When the qualms of Christian conscience and the claims of national patriotism come into conflict, we can get caught up in a highly charged emotional struggle. I suspect that such a struggle ensued in congregations that found themselves emotionally torn in the aftermath of Gulf War I. However, I would posit that it was not so much the tension between faith and patriotism but rather the complicating presence of our elephant, civil religion, that made constructive deliberation so difficult for churches.

The term civil religion, initially given visibility by sociologist Robert Bellah, denotes the sacred aura conferred on a nation-state, assigning to it a divine origin, a sense of divine guidance, and a promise of divine destiny. Civil religion is a feature of the meta-historical narrative, or bonding myth, of any nation; it becomes an integral part of a citizen's socialization. However, when civil religion serves to embellish a nation's historical identity with self-righteousness, and to legitimize an arrogant sense of superiority, it becomes a powerful influence almost impervious to critique. Because civil religion in the United States is expressed primarily through Judeo-Christian symbols, endowing national aspirations with the ultimate blessing of God, the distinction between civil religion and Christian faith can become fuzzy.[1] When civil religion and Christian faith become virtually indistinguishable, a dangerous idolatry is set up and critical discernment is lost. Our elephant can be of immense proportions.

Imperial Aspirations

The situation is exacerbated, I contend, when the ideology of the state and civil religion embrace the aspiration to empire. Not so long ago the topic of American imperialism was a rare bird in the popular media. Today "Pax Americana" and its relation to our national interests and globalization are talked about in workplaces, living rooms, conferences, and classrooms. This conversation moves from the question of "what empire?" to "what kind of empire?" and, on a deeper level, from discussion of its values and aims to its incumbent responsibilities and its consequences in the lives of the poor and marginalized—in this country and throughout the world. This conversation



As Christians we need to ask: Will this present course enhance the quality of life for the global family, or will it bring more injustice and suffering to an increasing percentage of the world's population, including our own?

is not new. The theme of empire has been incipient in our national *mythos* since the beginning of our colonial history, as a vision that God had bestowed a historic vocation upon this nation. It was to be a "city set upon a hill," destined to be an example of justice to the world. This benevolent self-understanding has been part of our national psyche from the beginning.

The question today is whether we have moved dangerously beyond this noble vision. In a time when we are in a position to exert unprecedented military might throughout the world, we need to ask this question as citizens: Are we acting in consonance with our core values and the democratic intentions of our founding fathers and mothers? As Christians we need to ask: Will this present course enhance the quality of life for the global family, or will it bring more injustice and suffering to an increasing percentage of the world's population, including our own? Civil religion has the ability to suffocate this important conversation.

Wouldn't it be simpler for Christians to ignore the elephant? Isn't it better to live in harmony and to avoid difficult issues? My friend the late John Cooper, Lutheran pastor, philosophy professor, and author, might respond this way: If we as Christians are not looking to our faith—our scriptures, traditions, and communities—to inform our ethical, civic, and political perspectives, and if our opinions and understandings are not developed and nurtured primarily within the community of faith, then we might have to admit that we have not taken our faith seriously. In fact, in light of theologian Paul Tillich's definition of God as that to which we give our ultimate allegiance, we might find ourselves unwittingly worshiping false gods if our critical discernment does not emanate from the ground of our Christian faith. My appreciation of John Cooper's insights finds them compelling. It may be difficult to face controversial issues, but if our faith does not inform our "being in the world," the world, ever so gladly, will inform our "being in the church."

It may be difficult to face controversial issues, but if our faith does not inform our "being in the world," the world, ever so gladly, will inform our "being in the church."

Ignoring the Elephant

Preparing for study groups in the past year, I found myself rereading with new eyes the works of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran pastor whose brief professional career corresponded with the rise of the Third Reich in Germany. A brilliant theologian, Bonhoeffer was a founder of the "Confessing Church" in Germany and the head of its underground seminary in Finkenwalde. His famous book *The Cost of Discipleship* was in part Bonhoeffer's way of responding to the pressures of civil religion and the quest for empire that was in his time demanding unconditional subservience to the idols *"Vaterland, Volk, und Fuehrer,"* which, taken together, represented the manifest destiny of the nation, the superiority of the race, and ultimate allegiance to the leader. Ignoring the elephant, and finally unable to critique its own seduction, much of the German church became captive to this idolatry.

In the face of this elephant run amok, Bonhoeffer asked: What does it really mean to follow Jesus Christ? Bonhoeffer was certain that the answer to this question could be found in the study of Scripture, in prayer, and in theological discussion of the meaning of discipleship *within the congregation.* He believed this context to be the only one out of which a Christian could address the "most urgent problem besetting our church: How can we live the Christian life in the world?"[2] Martyred just before war's end, Bonhoeffer wasn't able to contribute personally to the theological tasks that awaited the church in the war's aftermath. However, others picked up the question "What happened?" The sheer magnitude of the evil and destruction wrought upon the earth between 1933 and 1945 mandated a radical look at Christian scriptures, a reassessment of Christian theology, and a revisiting of the early church's witness under the domination and persecution of the Roman Empire.[3]

Recovering Paul's Language

In the course of this re-examination, many post-World War II theologians began to mine anew the Pauline language of "powers, principalities, sovereignties and dominations"[4]—providing terms with which to talk about the way institutions created for benevolent purposes can be corrupted. While Paul is clear that these "powers

and principalities" have a potential for good within human affairs, he is also sure that such realities can bear a more insidious character. Pretending to serve humanity, they may enslave it; feigning service to a transcendent purpose, they may usurp God's place. Taking on a life of their own, self-sufficient and divorced from the intent of their Creator, they can become idolatrous. "Isms" of every stripe have this potential. Classic examples in the 20th century are communism, as exemplified by Stalinist dictatorship, and fascism—the unrestrained collusion, as Mussolini defined it, of state and corporate power. Both ideologies offered themselves in civil-religious garb, seeking to mask their pretensions. Indeed, modern globalization, as shaped by market-driven global capitalism and reinforced by national self-interest and power, bears within it this potential if left unaccountable. The same potential holds for the church itself as an institution. The great Reformation motto, *"Ecclesia reformata sed semper reformanda"* (the church reformed but always to be reformed), expresses an awareness that the church also is corruptible and in need of continual critique.

The Setting of the Sanctuary

Engaging the elephant in our sanctuaries, whatever size it may be, is a multidimensional task of discernment. Along with a study of Scripture and theological discussion, the congregational settings of worship and meditation also offer resources for this work. As an example, our Lenten meditations in my congregation this year focused on Colossians 2:14-15, in which Paul interprets the cross of Jesus as effecting not only the cancellation of the debt of sin, but also a "dethroning" of the powers and sovereignties—that is, exposing them and putting them in their rightful place. Lenten homilies leading up to Good Friday named idolatries found within the gospels—oppressive powers and principalities that Jesus had critically engaged, and that had everything to do with why he was crucified. It became apparent to us that these idolatries are alive and well today. Nor is it legitimate to simply dismiss them as political or social issues, outside the purview of faith—as the church sought to do during the rise of the Third Reich, with tragic consequences. I am convinced of the importance of recognizing that these idolatries are of a deeply spiritual nature, because they have to do with our whole life under the sovereignty of God. They are thus profoundly appropriate to the conversation of faith within Christian congregations.

Engaging our elephant will demand careful preparation and mindful leadership.[5] However, without the desire of clergy and congregants to take this task seriously, talking with one another as sisters and brothers in Christ, we let the world inform our "being within the church" and lose faith's capacity to inform our "being in the world." Engaging the elephant can be difficult and painful, but we are ultimately stronger for it. Disagreement is to be welcomed. Our Christian faith invites us to venture into dialogue with one another, knowing that the presence of the elephant in the sanctuary is not an impediment that will be readily removed. However, at stake in facing the elephant is our consequent ability as Christians to engage the important issues of war and peace in a constructive and courageous way. If, as a people of faith, we do not carry on this important work in the context of our sanctuaries, where will it take place? ◆

Notes

1. Refer to the discussion of civil religion in Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988), chapter 10.

2. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Macmillan, 1963), 60.

3. Cf. Colossians 1:16 and Berkhof, Hendrik, *Christ and the Powers,* J. H. Yoder, trans. (Scottdale, Penn.: Mennonite Publishing House, 1962, 1977).

4. Research in the past half-century on early Christianity and Pauline theology includes, among other themes, three significant ones for our conversation: (1) the language of "powers and principalities," (2) Pauline use of militant vocabulary, and (3) early understanding of the "kingdom/reign of God" as a dominant theme in Jesus' teachings and the witness of the early church.

5. *Talking Together as Christians about Tough Social Issues,* a resource for congregational dialogue developed out of grassroots experience and research by the Division for Church in Society, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Chicago.

Suggested Reading

Dawn, Marva. **The Unnecessary Pastor.** (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans; and Vancouver, B.C.: Regent College Publishing, 2000), pp. 79–119; and **Powers, Weakness, and the Tabernacling of God.** (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2001).

Fuellenbach, John. **The Kingdom of God: The Message of Jesus Today.** (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1995).

Horsley, Richard A. **Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder.** (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003).

Weber, Hans-Ruedi. **The Militant Ministry: People and Pastors of the Early Church and Today.** (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1963).

Wink, Walter. **Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination.** (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992). The third of a trilogy: the other books are **Naming the Powers** and **Unmasking the Powers.**

Defining a "Just Peace" Vocation

ANDREW B. WARNER

President Bush addressed the nation from the National Cathedral in Washington following September 11, 2001. "Just three days removed from these events," he said, "Americans do not yet have the distance of history. But our responsibility to history is already clear: to answer these attacks and rid the world of evil."[1] The speech was a clarion call anticipating much of the defining foreign policy of his presidency: overthrowing the Taliban, pursuing al-Qaida, and seeking regime change in Iraq. That the presidential call to action came from the pulpit of the National Cathedral raises the question: What is the relationship of the Christian church to American foreign policy?

Finding an International Vocation

Plymouth United Church of Christ, the congregation I serve in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, is in the process of defining its international vocation. Our church is a mainline congregation in a wealthy urban neighborhood. We are rather small: 160 people attend worship on an average Sunday. The congregation is energized by social-service mission projects such as resettling a refugee family, building houses with Habitat for Humanity, and advocating for gay and lesbian issues. As a community we seek to engage America's foreign policy in ways that are honest about our limitations and true to our faith.

In the months after his remarks at the National Cathedral, President Bush systemically redefined America's vocation as a world power in ways that particularly engaged our congregation. His speech to graduating cadets at West Point in June 2002 provided a synopsis of his national-security strategy. The president spoke of America's commitment to a "just peace,"

saying, "We fight, as we always fight, for a just peace—a peace that favors human liberty."[2] All our strength as a nation would be used to foster and protect human liberty and dignity. According to President Bush, the just-peace vocation of America is to use its power—military, economic, political—to further human liberty, even when this policy means a pre-emptive attack or unilateral action.

The redefinition of our national vocation after 9/11 coincided with, and in many ways energized, our congregation's vocational discernment. During the 1980s, as the nation engaged in an exhausting arms race with the Soviet Union, Plymouth and other United Church of Christ congregations declared themselves "just peace congregations." That designation, an intentional play on Augustine's just-war theory, signaled our criticism of President Reagan's foreign policy, particularly his military buildup and commitment to deterrence through mutual assured destruction. But we did not claim to be pacifists. As a just-peace congregation, we sought to reject the logic of war without denying the necessity of defense. Now with new wars looming, and a president who also uses the language of "just peace," our congregation became re-engaged with what it means to have a just-peace vocation.

Challenges and Dilemmas

Our new international mission consists of several elements. As a community, we increased our foreign aid. In the past 12 months we undertook financial campaigns for parachurch organizations like Heifer Project International and World Vision. Nearly 10 percent of our member contributions go toward international projects, almost double what we gave before 9/11. A committed group of lay members is organized for continual prayer and occasional political action. Sermons and educational events seek to address foreign-policy matters from our faith perspective. Our involvement with international issues has brought challenges and dilemmas endemic to any congregation taking such a step.

Immediately after 9/11, several women in the congregation formed a group called "Mothers for Peace." They met weekly for community prayer and vowed to pray for peace individually every day. One member, describing their practice, said they would contemplatively hold President Bush in the light of God's love, encouraging him to find peaceful ways to resolve international conflicts. They similarly prayed for leaders like Saddam Hussein, Ariel Sharon, and Yasser Arafat. Our most visible just-peace ministry was the ongoing practice of prayer.

> Is it the gospel of Jesus Christ, or the bitterness of Gore Democrats, that governs our reaction to President Bush? The danger that our passion is partisanship wrapped in piety must be faced and confessed.

The Mothers for Peace kept our congregation's antiwar activism grounded in lay concerns. The group provided other members with information on upcoming protests and even organized public events on Afghanistan and Iraq. Support for their work was evident among the congregation as a whole. Many members commented on a sense of congregational unanimity on foreign affairs. In spring, when we held our largest congregational education events on just-peace issues, the primary question was not "How can we agree?" but "What can we do?" Church attendance grew a dramatic 20 percent in 12 months as we increasingly took on peace issues. Our just-peace vocation is effective only because it engages the faith convictions of lay members.

Hope-Filled Activists

The congregation as a whole equipped Mothers for Peace for their ministry. One group member observed a difference between our church ministry and the activism of secular peace groups: secular activists seemed weighed down by discouragement and anger while church members were buoyed by hope. Another member suggested, "World peace comes from a lot of people having inner peace." The congregation cultivated inner peace in our activists by helping them name their own sins and graces. It provided a place for peace activists to transform anger into hopeful action and to recognize themselves as both sinners and saints.

The discussion of foreign policy in sermons and educational events was largely driven by the questions of lay members. The pastors responded by addressing foreign-policy issues from a biblical perspective. At the most basic level, sermons and educational events provided information on what was happening in the wider world. Their editorial component often motivated members' activism. At their best, the preaching and education events led people back into our biblical and theological traditions as they sought ways to understand contemporary problems. Lay members were engaged by the public preaching and education because these did not shrink from foreign-policy concerns.

Piety and Partisanship

As the congregation increasingly responded to issues of foreign policy, identity questions arose. The primary question involved the tension between our spiritual membership in the body of Christ and our worldly identity as American citizens. The question has both a practical and a theoretical dimension. Practically, any description of the congregation must admit that we are heavily Democratic in voting patterns. As Barbara Brown Zigmund, formerly of the Hartford Institute, said, someone giving directions to our building might well say, "They're the last house on the left."[3] When the nation split its vote between Bush and Gore, our congregation split between Gore and Nader. We come to matters of foreign policy as both Christians and liberals, a practical amalgam that cannot easily be separated

but that must be honestly acknowledged.

The distinctive political affiliation of our members raises the possibility that our foreign policy commitments are rooted more in partisanship than in spirituality. Indeed, it is troubling that the congregation's engagement with just-peace issues is strongest when a Republican is in the White House. President Clinton used the military for extensive foreign involvement without provoking comment from our congregation. We must ask if we would support the current national-security strategy if it had been proposed by a President Gore. Is it the gospel of Jesus Christ, or the bitterness of Gore Democrats, that governs our reaction to President Bush? The danger that our passion is partisanship wrapped in piety must be faced and confessed.

The greatest lay concern in this regard is to keep the pastoral office separate from a distinct political agenda. Lay members are wary of preachers holding a newspaper in one hand and the Democratic Party platform in the other. Instead, they seek a focus on education and consciousness-raising that may motivate activism but does not direct it. This concern grows out of a commitment to maintain community dialogue about important issues. An unspoken sense among members suggests that the congregation is one of the few civic venues still available for rigorous discussion and dissent on political matters. Our congregation spans the spectrum from a young man entering military service to longtime war protesters; our challenge is to balance openness to discussion with prophetic witness.

Balancing Global and Local

Just as it might be said that international crises are primarily an interruption of the overall domestic focus of our national government, it is hard for the congregation to maintain constant attention to international concerns. Engagement with foreign policy competes with our commitment to local mission projects. Continually some suggest that the congregation redirect international-aid projects to help local recipients. At its best, this proposal represents a desire to help nearby neighbors, to attend to the men or women in the ditch instead of walking past them. Yet it can also manifest a long-standing American isolationism, a yearning to help our own kind first. Do we address segregation and racism in Milwaukee or civil war and atrocity in Liberia? Can we do both? Discerning where the congregation is called to witness involves a steady negotiation between legitimate, compelling possibilities.

Sorting out our identity as partisan citizens and faithful Christians and balancing international and domestic priorities poses a theoretical question. Recently a new member expressed shock at how openly progressive politics are preached from the pulpit. Few members are confused as to how the ministers vote; some lay members champion even greater political activism. Theoretically, we are working out what H. Richard Niebuhr dubbed the "Christ and Culture" question.

A Congregation in Transition

Plymouth, as a congregation named for a civic experiment instead of an exceptional saint, traditionally manifested the ecclesiastical version of noblesse oblige. In earlier years, our congregation founded many of Milwaukee's important cultural institutions. In recent decades this close relationship with the city changed as a result of two trends. First, our congregation became more liberal than the surrounding culture, most notably in our support of women's reproductive freedom and the acceptance of gays and lesbians. Secondly, the movement of people between denominations, not to mention the conversion of unchurched people to our faith, eroded any Congregationalist understanding of the role of church in society. How a former Quaker views our role in society will differ greatly from that of the former Pentecostal and the former agnostic. Our congregation is in a transitional period as we seek to develop a new consensus on how we can relate to American society and the state.

It remains to be seen if Plymouth will renew a vocal public ministry or become a religious enclave. Many members want to see the congregation effectively organized to promote a clear vision of society, a liberal Christian voice countering that of our conservative brothers and sisters. Our congregation could, on the other hand, become a colony of inwardly focused progressives who rail against the vile culture around us. Such a possibility seemed real as members verbally dismissed people who supported the president and Operation Iraqi Freedom. Plymouth is faced with the potential to be an inclusive church in the city or a colony of the pure. Our development of a just-peace vocation forces us to confront choices as to how we regard our role in society.

Choosing Mission Partners

Not only is our relationship with the state in question. We must also ask how we relate to other denominations and parachurch organizations. The youth group held a successful campaign for "Operation Christmas Child," a mission of Samaritan's Purse. The project provides a shoebox of practical items and small gifts to children in poverty-stricken communities around the world. Once the project was completed, we learned more about the mission approach of Samaritan's Purse and its top executive, Franklin Graham. We realized that Samaritan's Purse approached its mission in ways we could not support and that Franklin Graham's views of Islam did not reflect our own approach to other religions. This discovery was an important lesson. As we seek greater involvement in international work, we now know to review carefully the theological framework of our mission partners.

Finally, as we move forward in our just-peace vocation, we need to reflect as a community on several theological issues. Our conversions about Operation Iraqi Freedom evidenced a deep discomfort with the use of military force. We clearly tend toward pacifism. Yet as Reinhold Niebuhr once remarked, Christian pacifism makes sense only if espoused along with a withdrawal from the demands and responsibilities of society. If our just-peace vocation is truly civic and engaged with society, then moving forward will

require the congregation to shift from a reactive protest of military action to the active articulation of a policy and a vision of the circumstances in which military force can be faithfully used.

A just-peace vocation further requires that we take up underlying issues that create the current international instabilities. President Bush is acting out of a prescient awareness that the threats facing Americans, and all of humanity, have significantly changed. He said he believes that "the greatest danger to freedom lies at the perilous crossroads of radicalism and technology."[4] We need to make our own diagnosis, specifying how we factor widespread inequality in wealth, proliferation of weapons, and the horror of genocide into our calculations of a just peace. If we are going to have a prophetic voice, instead of merely a reactive one, we must face some of the difficult moral dilemmas that President Bush is trying to work out.

Our emerging consensus seems to commit us to working on both international and domestic issues related to social justice, an active engagement in the world guided by our interpretation of the gospel. While our views may differ greatly from the foreign (or domestic) policy of our government, we still function as a very American church. Whenever possible, we seek out partnerships with other churches and parachurch organizations. An aside by Augustine might well describe our role. Writing about empires in *City of God,* Augustine said, "Justice being taken away, then, what are kingdoms but great robberies?"[5] The vocation that excites our congregation is reminding the state of its obligation to justice, so that the United States not become a "great robbery." This is a uniquely American and civic vocation, but one that calls us to comment on policies ranging from foreign military action to the detention of domestic terror suspects to the funding of public schools. Plymouth Church will continue its just-peace vocation, praying for President Bush to be held in the light of God's love and preaching the biblical demands of justice. ◆

Notes

1. President George W. Bush, Washington, D.C. (remarks at National Cathedral, September 14, 2001). Presidential speeches are available online at www.whitehouse.gov. Search the current news section of the Web site by the date of the address. Copies of the National Security Strategy (September 2002) and the National Strategy to Combat Weapons of Mass Destruction (December 2002) are also available on the White House Web site. The Quadrennial Defense Review of September 2001, which concretely outlines President Bush's doctrine of pre-emptive military action, is available from the Defense Department Web site.
2. Bush, speech at West Point, June 1, 2002.
3. Barbara Brown Zigmund, speech before the Wisconsin Conference (UCC) Annual Meeting in Stevens Point, Wisconsin, June 2000.
4. Bush, speech at West Point, June 1, 2002.
5. Augustine, *City of God,* IV, 4 (NPNF Vol. 2, p. 66).

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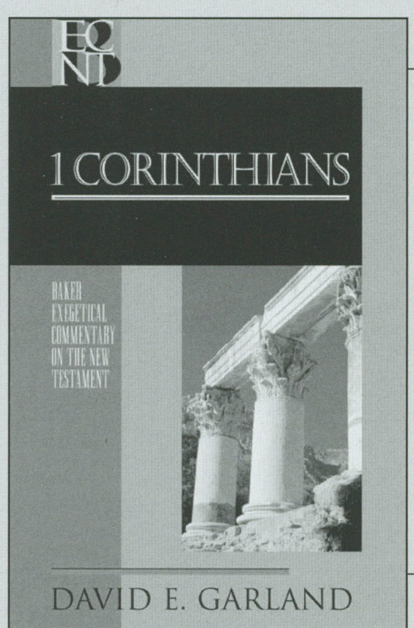

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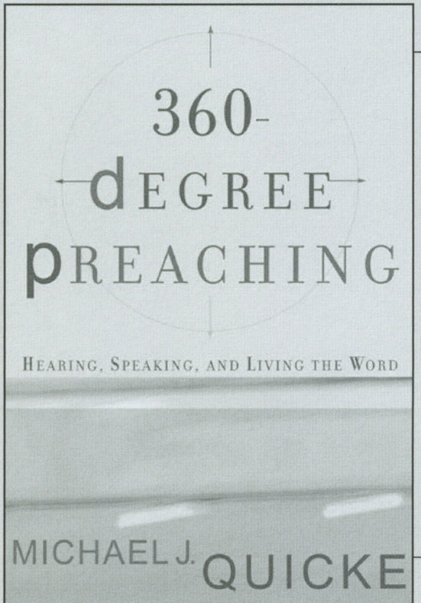

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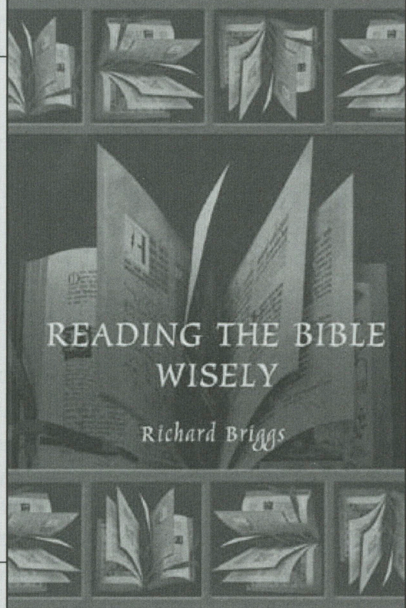

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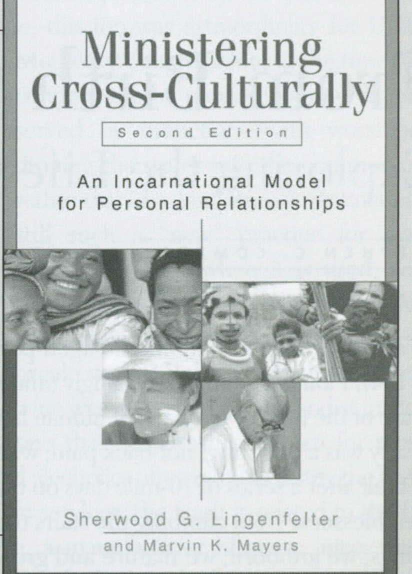

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From Birth to Death

Exploring the Life Cycle of the Church

STEPHEN C. COMPTON

As a young, 52-year-old, middle-aged person (I intend to live to be 104), I am becoming increasingly (and sometimes agonizingly) aware of the natural life cycle of human beings. I remember when misery was a bee sting, not back pain; when fatigue was what my feet felt after a series of 10-mile days on the Appalachian Trail, not breathlessness from climbing the stairs to my office. As biological beings, we are born; we mature and grow through adolescence; we become somewhat sedentary adults; we decline in old age; and we die. We all know the routine. A number of scholars have noticed how congregations often mimic the life cycle of biological organisms.[1]

Each year, I work as a consultant with dozens of churches, and through years of accumulated experience in ministry as a pastor and in congregational development, I have found the effects of this life cycle on congregations to be readily apparent. Demonstrating this life cycle and helping a church find itself in the progressive route between life and death has become an important tool for helping church leaders find their way out of stability and decline to vital ecclesial health.

Stage One: Birth

The birth stage of the life cycle is brief, almost momentary, in the scale of time usually associated with the full life of a congregation. (It must be noted that in almost no other way is a particular scale of time important to an understanding of a church's life cycle. The duration of each stage is so variable from one church to the next that it is impossible to characterize each stage by assigning a stated length of time to it.) No period in the life of a church is more responsible than the birth stage, despite its brevity, for defining the congregation's mission and self-identity. No person is more responsible for shaping

this first definition of the church than the founding pastor. In a lasting way, the character of the first pastor's leadership and role in shaping the values and practices of a fledgling congregation is imprinted on the church. First, or charter, members, a core group of supporters who join with the pastor in giving birth to the church, also contribute to defining its character. The process of founding a church, discerning its first mission, and putting in place the infrastructure necessary to make ministry happen, is often a life-transforming experience for the pastor and the first members. They do not give up easily on their first vision of the church, and their collective imprint is likely to remain on the church for a very long time. The values of the church are often set at this time. Saying you are a "charter member" carries value for those who were in the core group, and often this value is respected by many second-tier members.

Many benefits for effective ministry are associated with this potent defining period in the life of a church. Mostly, the church begins with a clean page, figuratively speaking, without prior traditions or practices dictating what will be done in and by this new church. Every new member has chosen to be part of the founding of the congregation; this experience is frequently a spiritually life-transforming event. The values of the congregation are freshly chosen, usually as the result of prayerful study of the community context, of Scripture, and of the historic tenets of the church and its sponsoring denomination, if it has one. The unparalleled clarity in this stage about the church's values and purpose, goals and objectives, may rarely be so evident again. This clarity of purpose results in intentional outreach, growth, and effectiveness that generate interest in the church, attract new members, and create support from many sources. For this reason, it is not at all unusual for a new church, meeting in temporary quarters, with limited financial and leadership resources, to grow quickly to become two, five, or even ten times larger in average worship attendance and membership than many nearby older churches serving in the same demographic setting.

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Stage Two: Vitality

In the second, or vitality stage of the life cycle, the church often enjoys an extended period of growth—in membership, activity, and funding. This is a time for renovating or building additions to its church facilities, and for moving toward fulfillment of the congregation's stated mission This vitality stage is usually built upon the foundation laid at the birth of the church, a footing rarely abandoned. The emerging congregation begins to shape and define its values. Is the church multicultural in makeup? Is worship offered in more than one language or more than one style? What is expected of members of this church? How are the traditional holy seasons observed and celebrated? In short, what traditions will we adopt that are compatible with our chosen values?

> This vitality stage is usually built upon the foundation laid at the birth of the church, a footing rarely abandoned.

I was once assigned as a pastor to lead a newly created congregation that had been operating for 18 months before my arrival. The founding pastor had led the church to increase its average worship attendance to 80, with about 50 members. Personal concerns led the pastor to make an early exit from the congregation to pursue an advanced theological degree. Upon my arrival, about 20 of the adult charter members remained in place. One of these made a quick departure after my first Sunday at worship, charging that I had been sent by my bishop to change everything the members and their first pastor had set out to do. (That was not the case.)

The church had taken the name Saint Francis United Methodist. It is a bit unusual for a non-apostolic saint's name to be used by churches of the denomination. In addition, the pastor had decided—in consultation, I am sure, with the core group—that Holy Communion would be celebrated at every worship service. Although our Anglican founder, John Wesley, would no doubt be pleased with this practice, this too was extraordinary for United Methodist congregations at the time (and continues to be today). Communion was served by intinction—with worshipers dipping the wafer into the common cup rather than drinking from it. (Intinction is still such a "new" practice for many Methodists that, when it is used, celebrants usually have to explain it before worshipers come to the table.) In another break with Methodist tradition, "real" wine was used (United Methodist folklore says that despite the concern for recovering, active, and potential alcoholics often cited to justify the use of grape juice in communion services, the truth is related to the fact that a certain Mr. Welch, a manufacturer of grape juice, was a staunch Methodist with no little degree of influence in the church.)

Notwithstanding my one skeptical, vocal core member's doubts and objections, I was cautious about changing the church's practices willy-nilly before trying to understand why such customs had been chosen to define its identity as a new church.

As it turned out, the name Saint Francis was selected by the core members while meeting in the "Upper Room," an upstairs garage office, to study the life of Saint Francis of Assisi on the 500th

An old congregation's longtime members sometimes look back to the early stage of development as the "golden age" when the church was at its best. If the church is in decline, it is often to this idealized experience of church that members wish to return—a hope that can seldom be fulfilled.

anniversary of his birth. The church was being formed in an affluent new community, and Francis' choice to deny his own legitimate claim to wealth, and to serve the poor, struck a chord with the founding members. As a result, the church became extraordinarily involved in outreach and service ministries in communities affected by poverty. Worshipers found that communion by intinction created a meaningful connection between those serving the bread and wine (the pastor and lay servers) and those coming close to the table to receive the elements. (Typically, American Methodists, in a very private posture, kneel at a rail in front of, or surrounding, the communion table, and receive individual cups of juice and a small portion of bread or a wafer.) As for the wine—historical precedents abound, but perhaps its use made the members of St. Francis feel less guilty about sipping wine at home!

Surprisingly, these somewhat unusual choices (for United Methodists in the 1980s) became valuable tools for attracting new members. The church began to attract significant numbers of young couples, one partner a Roman Catholic and the other a Protestant (often not Methodist). We became their "comfortable solution," bridging their formative faith experiences and bringing them into relationship with a church that seemed to honor many of the beliefs and practices important to them before their marriage.

I relished the practice of serving the communion elements by intinction. Wearing name tags was a requisite practice at Saint Francis. As each person came to the table, I could see the name tag, and I used the communicant's name when presenting the bread or wine. By then, the sermon was over and out of my mind, if not my heart, and I could consciously pray for each person coming to the table. These were my best moments of worship each Sunday. Usually, because of the name tags and my use of worshipers' names during communion, I could remember at least the first names of new visitors as I greeted them at the door after the service. More than once, people told me that they came back to Saint Francis for a second visit because I noted their presence and remembered their names. You see, the values of this new church were being fleshed out in its first practices and traditions, and the benefits were readily evident.

It may not be readily apparent, but a congregation is at high risk during the equilibrium stage of the life cycle. This stage is not a seemingly boundless prairie. It is more like a mesa. Its top may be wide and smooth, but every edge of the mesa drops off precipitously to a plain or a rugged canyon floor.

C. Kirk Hadaway, a researcher for the United Church [of Christ] Board for Homeland Ministries, and formerly a church-growth specialist with the Southern Baptist Convention, suggests that young churches have a "window of opportunity" for significant growth that may last for 10 or 15 years.[2] Why do new churches tend to grow more rapidly than older churches? It could be, Hadaway notes, that new churches are more flexible and open to change; growth-producing ideas can be put into practice; leaders are able to lead; rapid adjustments can still be made to changing circumstances; and friendship networks have not yet solidified, allowing for easy acceptance of new members.[3] Research conducted by Hadaway on Southern Baptist churches shows clearly how the age of a church affects its growth pattern. Only one in four Southern Baptist churches in his study organized prior to 1927 had growth in excess of 10 percent from 1981 to 1986, whereas nearly 68 percent of churches founded between 1972 and 1981 experienced this kind of growth.[4]

An old congregation's longtime members sometimes look back to the early stage of development as the "golden age" when the church was at its best. If the church is in decline, it is often to this idealized experience of church that members wish to return—a hope that can seldom be fulfilled. They remember the large youth group; the grand choral cantatas; the numerous births and baptisms; the weddings of first members' maturing children; the excitement of moving into the first church building; the young minister who knew everyone by name and who made regular home visits; and the perennially victorious men's softball team.

Stage 3: Equilibrium

After as little as a few years or as long as a human generation, stage 3 in the life cycle of a congregation usually begins. This is a leveling-out stage. Growth slows. New ideas are introduced less frequently. Traditions and practices become more routine and predictable. I call this stage equilibrium. It is a time when much of the congregational system's energy becomes focused on maintaining the status quo. The church has found its center. Although the church is not growing

significantly during this stage of equilibrium, neither is it declining. Each year, enough new members join to replace those who leave or die. Enough money is contributed to meet the annual budget, including modest increases required to maintain ongoing programs. Facilities are more or less adequate for the needs of the church, and debt, if any, is low. Members are generally satisfied with the way things are, and they don't see the need to change much about the church's programs. Conflict tends to be low. Ministers come and go, but the church survives each transition, so long as the new pastor doesn't try to rock the boat by introducing too many new ideas.

It may not be readily apparent, but a congregation is at high risk during the equilibrium stage of the life cycle. This stage is not a seemingly boundless prairie. It is more like a mesa. Its top may be wide and smooth, but every edge of the mesa drops off precipitously to a plain or a rugged canyon floor. Living in equilibrium can have a slow-release narcotic effect on a church. Periodic highs mask the increasing sluggishness and dullness that mark the character of the church. These negative qualities are more readily apparent to newcomers than to longtime members. Robert Browning's oft-quoted poem "Pippa Passes" posits that "God's in his heaven—All's right with the world" (a notion that I find inane). This "hunky-dory" attitude too often characterizes equilibrium-stage churches: God's in control in some distant place, and nothing needs to change around here.

Despite the devastating effects of decline, churches are notoriously tenacious and do not succumb easily. Many will whittle away at expense-generating programs, facility needs, and personnel requirements to keep the church doors open.

The older a denominational body, the more its congregations are likely to be found on the mesa of equilibrium, and consequently at high risk of shifting into decline (in size, as well as influence and effectiveness). These churches find their own techniques for maintaining their preferred identity, while at the same time suppressing growth.

The equilibrium phase of the congregational life cycle can be explained by a process that sociologist Max Weber (1864–1920) calls routinization of charisma.[5] Often, a young movement's traits are fundamentally shaped by its founding charismatic leader. A nascent movement, such as a young denomination or a new congregation, may initially operate with few rules and little hierarchical structure. The people gathered into the movement are captivated by the tutelage of the movement's founding leader, the movement's defining philosophy (or theology or ecclesiology), and the energies derived from their own, firsthand, life-influencing, if not life-transforming, experience of participating in the birth of the movement. But, as we will see, these effects are seldom sustained.

The early church described in the Acts of the Apostles exhibits many of the characteristics of a young, unbound movement. The apostles, energized by their recent firsthand experience of both the living Jesus and the resurrected Christ, preached the good news with great vigor, and many who heard their words "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2:42). Many signs and wonders were performed by the apostles, and the people who saw them were awed. And "all who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved" (Acts 2:44-47). These passages describe a group of people choosing to depart from the accepted behaviors of the day. They hear firsthand a life-converting message; they believe; they act in faith on their belief.

A new sect, like the Methodism of the late 18th century, was fundamentally shaped by its founder, John Wesley; and much of its early influence, growth, and success was derived from its unfettered capacity to carry an old gospel message into a rough-and-tumble frontier American setting where, along with other young Protestant movements, it would inspire an unprecedented religious revival.

A new Methodist church, like Chestnut Ridge, founded in 1832, was fundamentally shaped by rugged circuit-riding preachers, like James Christie, who came into the wilderness of central North Carolina, preaching from a tree-stump pulpit sheltered by a brush arbor and illuminated by pine-knot torches and campfires.

A new church-cum-movement, like Willow Creek Church, near Chicago in South Barrington, Illinois, is being fundamentally shaped by its founder, Bill Hybels, who is introducing new paradigms for church, such as seeker-sensitive worship, that break many of the canons that have defined the church for decades.

Yet, Max Weber points out that as a movement ages and its founder dies, routinization begins. It becomes the task of the movement's followers to continue the work of the founder. New converts become more distantly separated from the primal experience known by the movement's first followers. Structure and ritual serve to perpetuate former experiences. Germinal experiences become recalled experiences. Bureaucracy, characterized by an expanding hierarchical leadership structure, increasingly replaces grassroots leadership and decision-making. Routine sets in, and a period of equilibrium begins.

Stage 4: Decline

Following a period of equilibrium in the congregational life cycle, a church can move into stage 4, decline. No longer capable of balancing losses of membership, participation, giving, or influence with the counterweight of growth, the church slowly, or even rapidly, diminishes in strength. Decline becomes evident when the membership includes only one or two aging generational groups; budgets shrink or are not met; needed building maintenance is deferred;

worship or Sunday school attendance declines; few professions of faith and baptisms take place; pastors' salaries are cut (or pastoral service is reduced from full-time to part-time); the same laity continue to serve as church leaders because no new leaders can be found; denominational mission funds are not fully supported; and long-standing programs are discontinued for lack of support. Such evidence of decline is often accompanied by congregational conflict, malaise, depression, blaming, scapegoating, anger, and withdrawal.

Initially, a church's active members may not realize that the church is in decline. Routine in a declining church can be a deceptive partner. Busyness often hides ineffectiveness. An outside observer, such as a newcomer to the community who visits worship for the first time, or a visiting denominational staff member, may readily see the signs of decline go routinely unnoticed by congregation members. As in the process of grieving, denial becomes a mechanism for members to cope with the increasingly obvious decline in their church.

A weakening tree branch can resist the forces of gravity for only so long. Likewise, a declining church eventually breaks from the pressures of its losses and its incapacity to sustain its former level of activity. This point marks the realized decline phase. Often characterized by a posture of crisis, this is a time of desperation for a church when it begins to acknowledge openly its inability to sustain itself. In denominational systems, a church in crisis often expects its parent organization to come to the rescue. Many denominational staff members know that they can expect to hear a statement like this from a declining church's pastor or the alpha leader: "For many years we have loyally supported the denomination's cooperative mission fund. Does your office have funds you can send to help us repair our leaking roof, replace our clogged plumbing, and pay our pastor?" For several decades, numerous aging denominations whose churches, in increasing numbers, are aging into decline have attempted to prop up and revitalize declining churches by sending funds to pay bills the churches are unable to satisfy. In spite of these gallant, though essentially misdirected efforts, many of these denominations have continued to decline in size and influence.

Despite the devastating effects of decline, churches are notoriously tenacious and do not succumb easily. Many will whittle away at expense-generating programs, facility needs, and personnel requirements to keep the church doors open. Members of nearly defunct churches do not handle thoughts of closure well. Once, the attorney son of one of eight remaining elderly members of a rural congregation came to the office of the area bishop and said in very direct language, "If you close my mother's church before she dies, I will sue you, this denomination, and anyone else I can find to hold liable for her unhappiness." The church was not closed by the denomination.

Stage 5: Death

Inevitably, some churches, once strong and vital in their ministries and influence, do die. Certainly, this is an unhappy occasion for the last members of the church and for those who have supported it in its years of decline. But, when viewed in terms of the lifelong benefits afforded by the church to its members and its community, its end does not have to be an altogether sad event. A good life's natural end is death. The same can be true of an organization or movement. God's genius is exhibited in the fact that both life and death are natural and necessary for the successful perpetuation of creation. We do well to remember the words of the writer of Ecclesiastes, who said: "For everything there is a season . . . a time to be born, and a time to die . . . a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted . . . a time to break down, and a time to build up . . . a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together . . . a time to keep, and a time to throw away" (Eccles. 3:1a; 2; 3b; 5a; 6b). ◆

Notes

1. For various interpretations of the congregational life cycle, see Martin F. Saarinen, *The Life Cycle of a Congregation* (Washington, D.C.: Alban Institute, 1986); Arlin J. Rothauge, *The Life Cycle in Congregations: A Process of Natural Creation and an Opportunity for New Creation;* Alice Mann, *Can Our Church Live?: Redeveloping Congregations in Decline* (Bethesda, Md.: Alban Institute, 1999).

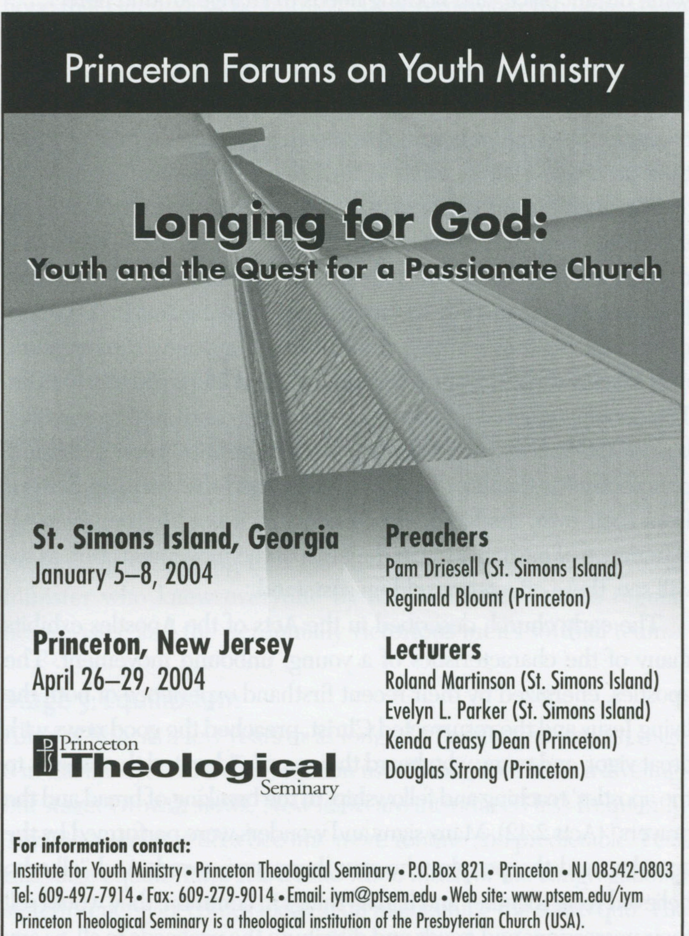
2. C. Kirk Hadaway, "The Impact of New Church Development on Southern Baptist Growth," *Review of Religious Research* 31, no. 4 (June 1990): 372.

3. Hadaway, "Impact," 377–78.

4. Hadaway, "Impact," 371.

5. For a brief synopsis of Weber's views on routinization of charisma, see Donald E. Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism: Christianity in the New Millennium* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 25–26.

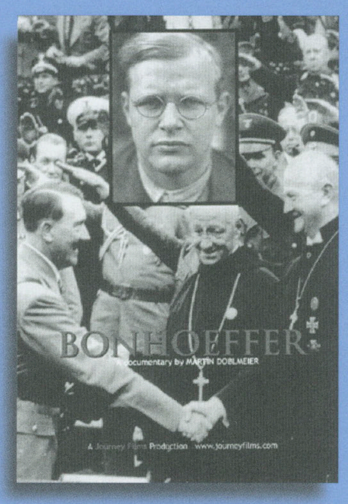
This article was excerpted from *Rekindling the Mainline: New Life Through New Churches*, which was published by the Alban Institute this fall. To order, call 1-800-486-1318, x244, or order online at www.alban.org.



Bonhoeffer

A DOCUMENTARY BY MARTIN DOBLMEIER

A Journey Films Production



film review

Congregations are composed of imperfect people. Thanks to abundant grace, imperfect people often rise above circumstance and accomplish bold things. How do flawed humans live courageously? The documentary *Bonhoeffer* tells the story of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Lutheran theologian who wrestled with God over events in Germany during the Nazi regime. Produced, directed, and narrated by Martin Doblmeier, the film is an excellent resource for imperfect congregations seeking deeper engagement with the world.

Bonhoeffer's life is told through photographs, film clips, and interviews, including conversations with Bonhoeffer's best friend and biographer, Eberhard Bethge. We see that Bonhoeffer's faith was dynamic. We learn how he became attached to the Abyssinian Baptist Church of Harlem during his time at Union Theological Seminary in New York. Initially, Bonhoeffer was disappointed in Union. Feeling that the classroom atmosphere was too informal, Bonhoeffer thought teachers like Reinhold Niebuhr lacked an ethic rooted in Christ. But he was enthralled by the vitality of the nearby Baptist church. The congregation's music energized him, as did the preaching of Adam Clayton Powell, Sr. (father of the controversial congressman). Bonhoeffer saw how faith leads one not to retreat from the world, but to engage more deeply with it. As he wrote, "The Church is the Church only when it exists for others. It must share in the secular problems of ordinary life and it must tell [people] of every calling what it means to live in Christ."

Bonhoeffer's willingness to expand his worldview led him to study pacifism. While at Union, Bonhoeffer befriended Jean Lasserre, a French pacifist, at a time when friendships between French and Germans were rare.

The documentary describes not only the development of Bonhoeffer's faith but also his flawed journey to a more sympathetic relationship with the Jewish people. Bonhoeffer was not totally immune to anti-Semitism. His twin sister, Sabine, was married to Gerhard Leibholz, a baptized Christian of Jewish ancestry. When Leibholz's father died, Bonhoeffer was asked to officiate at the funeral. He consulted church officials who counseled him to decline, and he did so. Later, Bonhoeffer became greatly distressed by that decision. The film quotes him as saying: "I'm tormented that I did not do as you asked me. . . . How could I have been so afraid at the time? I know now for certain I ought to have behaved differently."

As the Nazis established anti-Jewish laws, many Christians remained silent or affirmed the government's direction. Bonhoeffer joined those who set up an independent seminary at Finkenwalde. After the seminary was shut down by the Nazis, Bonhoeffer returned to New York. It was a brief stay. Soon he was back in Germany, this time joining a subversive plot against Adolf Hitler's regime. Eventually, along with members of his extended family, Bonhoeffer was captured, imprisoned, and, just before war's end, executed.

The film *Bonhoeffer* made national news when it was shown in packed churches in Park City, Utah, as a side event during the 2003 Sundance Film Festival. It has been greeted with similar enthusiasm elsewhere. Last spring, the film was shown in three Indianapolis-area congregations to standing-room-only crowds.

Bonhoeffer's personal appeal partly explains the film's popularity. He models for contemporary saints the grace to rise above their flaws and to engage the world in extraordinary ways. Also contributing to the acclaim is the filmmaker's artistry. Doblmeier's production values rival the standards of other stellar documentarians, not excluding Ken Burns. Viewing this film would be an excellent experience for governing boards, confirmation classes, and other small-group settings.

Ultimately, Bonhoeffer's words carry the film. Near the end of the work, Eberhard Bethge reads a letter from the theologian. The context is Bonhoeffer's thoughts about pacifism and his participation in the plot to kill Hitler.

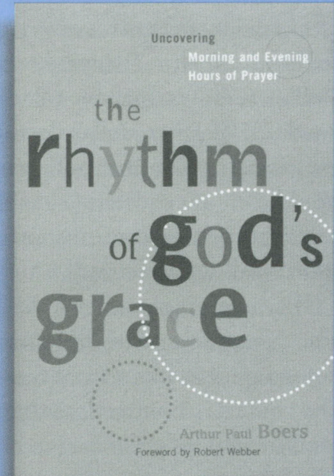
Bethge, with halting voice, reads his friend's words: "I discovered later and I am still discovering right up to this moment that it is only by living completely in this world that we learn to have faith. By this-worldliness I mean living unreservedly in life's duties, problems, successes, and failures. By so doing we throw ourselves completely into the arms of God, taking seriously not only our own suffering but those of God in the world. That, I think, is faith."

REV. TIM SHAPIRO
Indianapolis Center for Congregations
Indianapolis, Indiana

The Rhythm of God's Grace

Uncovering Morning and Evening Hours of Prayer

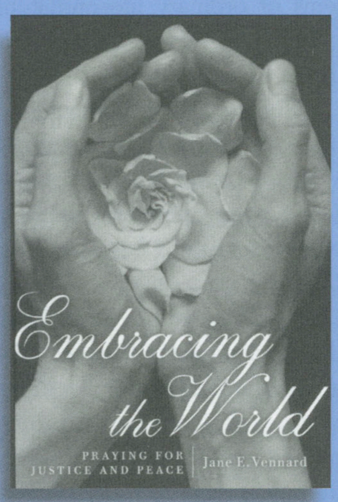
Arthur Paul Boers
Brewster, Mass.:
Paraclete Press, 2003



Embracing the World

Praying for Justice and Peace

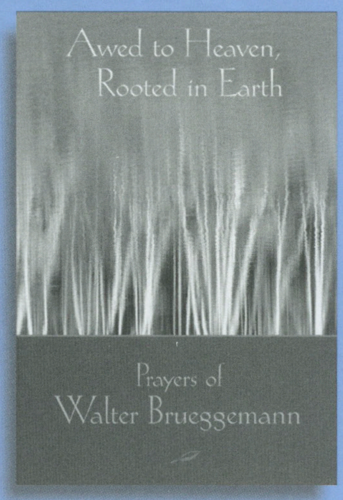
Jane E. Vennard
San Francisco, Calif.:
Jossey-Bass, 2003



Awed to Heaven, Rooted in Earth

Prayers of Walter Brueggemann

Edwin Searcy, ed.
Minneapolis, Minn.:
Fortress Press, 2003



review book

In the months surrounding the war with Iraq, many congregations and their leaders found themselves struggling with how to provide leadership to people who were in profound disagreement about the U.S. course of action. Even prayer, seemingly the most unifying of religious activities, became a political minefield for those who would publicly voice to God their pleas for peace. Is it okay to pray for the victory of one country over another? Do we pray for the safety of U.S. soldiers to the exclusion of all others? Where do our personal political agendas cross—and clash—with our spiritual practices?

The books under review here do not necessarily provide any specific answers to these questions or the overall dilemma. They do, however, deepen the reader's latent desire to persist in prayer, even in the midst of difficulty—each in very different ways.

In *The Rhythm of God's Grace,* Arthur Boers, a Mennonite pastor and teacher, makes a personal and persuasive case for adopting a practice of fixed-hour prayer. Rather than giving the reader a "how to" book, Boers talks about his own introduction to the practice, and explores the historical and theological dimensions of this style of prayer. That is not to suggest, however, that this is in any way a dense or boring volume; instead, the book wears its learning lightly, making its case in an easygoing and encouraging fashion.

One of the most important points Boers makes is that, even when the one praying is in solitude, fixed-hour prayer is far from a solitary activity. The Offices that Boers lifts up here are universal in their use and timelessness, binding the pray-er to others worldwide, both past and present. And for those who struggle with how to pray in difficult situations, this practice provides a means to come before God with Scripture, song, and collects deeply rooted in Christian tradition and that speak beyond one's own limitations. An excellent annotated resource list at the end of the book leads the reader to more specific guides and helps.

Of course, prayer in difficult situations is not just problematic from a political perspective. Often one simply feels ill-equipped to pray "adequately" in the face of overwhelming circumstances. The restoration of Iraq is a mind-boggling job, not only for those doing the restoring, but also for those praying for its renewal! One of the best qualities of Jane Vennard's *Embracing the World* is that she recognizes such feelings of helplessness and calmly assists the reader to re-imagine the work of prayer to fit the enormity of the situation.

Vennard, a spiritual director and teacher, opens the book by describing a compelling model for prayer that she has developed, consisting of intercession, action, renewal, transformation, and discernment. Although the chapters of the book explicate each of these dimensions of the process, I was disappointed that she does not really weave that model through

the book in any specific way after the introduction. Instead, the volume takes on a rather anecdotal character, strewing its insights here and there as nuggets to nourish prayer. The book coheres, nevertheless, but not as well as it might if she had more explicitly returned to her model throughout her narrative.

And it should be said that the book is more broadly applicable to all sorts of prayer needs than the subtitle, *Praying for Justice and Peace,* suggests. Indeed, what I like most about this work is the author's open-mindedness about what constitutes prayer—she recognizes it in both one's words and one's actions. Taking that perspective, prayer definitely becomes less a daunting, task-oriented practice and more a way of living.

Where Boers' and Vennard's books are relatively sedate, expository volumes, Walter Brueggemann's *Awed to Heaven, Rooted in Earth* is a robust, audacious collection of prayers that may teach us more about the nature of prayer than the other two combined. Brueggemann, recently retired as professor of Old Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia, has long been beloved as a teacher and writer. Indeed, few biblical theologians have made a deeper impact on mainline Protestant pastoral ministry, as his writings and lectures have compelled thousands of pastors to re-imagine the biblical texts and to interpret them in their own contexts in fresh ways.

What I find astonishing is that *Awed to Heaven* is not simply a light grace note to Brueggemann's distinguished oeuvre of books on Bible, theology, and ministry. I am convinced that this is one of Brueggemann's most essential volumes, not only for how these prayers interpret God and the biblical texts, but also because of the way these prayers interpret their author to the reader. Rather than being a vanity project, the vital faith that has been the driving force behind all of Brueggemann's life work is on full display here. More than anywhere else in his prodigious output, these prayers show the author at work before God in the public arena, engaging both the biblical text and the One who is hidden and revealed in that text. Composed originally as preludes to lectures, classes, and sermons, Brueggemann is always mindful of his context, yet each prayer is written solely for an audience of one: God.

These knotty, lyrical supplications extend the compelling vision of life lived in the presence of the God of Scripture that Brueggemann has always fervently articulated, proving the author's point that "prayer is characteristically a dangerous act, and dangerous rhetoric is required to match the intent of the act." There are lines here that will astound with their beauty, others that make one wince with their brusque wisdom, and occasionally some that make one cringe with their bold clumsiness (I didn't say these prayers were perfect!). Brueggemann is fearless in employing both rude images ("Our vomiting over injustice and recalcitrance is a social problem") and rude entreaties ("So listen up: You, majestic sovereign…*move off the page!*"). One cannot imagine Brueggemann being daunted by the political dimensions of war when praying before a congregation (his prayers following the September 11 events are models of such a tricky balance). After absorbing the feast to be found here, anyone engaged in public prayer will likely find the prospect less intimidating as well, and be thus spurred to re-imagine and re-voice their own supplications.

All three of these books can be recommended without hesitation to those seeking renewal and support in their private and public prayers. Jane Vennard and Arthur Boers, in their smooth and reliable books, competently and confidently teach us *about* prayer. But it's Walter Brueggemann, with a rigorous mind, a pastoral heart, and a prophetic soul, who actually teaches us to pray.

David Lott
Managing Editor
The Alban Institute

The Journey Home

DISCOVERING THE DEEP SPIRITUAL WISDOM OF THE JEWISH TRADITION

Lawrence A. Hoffman
Boston.: Beacon Press, 2002

the Journey Home Discovering the Deep Spiritual Wisdom of the Jewish Tradition
Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman

review book

In 1975, when Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman was a guest lecturer in the University of Notre Dame's theology department, he was asked by a student to explain the spirituality of the Seder. Hoffman, never before having been asked a question regarding spirituality, was stumped. This was mainly because the language of spirituality is a foreign one for Jews. (It is not that the language cannot be meaningful within Judaism, but that it requires a translation process. Jews do not normally think in terms of revelation and salvation.) The next day, Hoffman committed himself to discovering the spiritual foundations of Judaism.

In *The Journey Home,* Hoffman writes a clear and moving explanation of Jewish spirituality in the early 21st century, drawing upon his own struggle with what it means to be a believing Jew. For all "in search of a spiritual home" (p. 17), Jews and non-Jews alike, he writes about the Jewish way of being in the world and the uniquely Jewish way of mapping reality.

Spirituality, for Jews, is a system used to make sense of our lives, to connect us to each other and as a community to God.

> Judaism invents community . . . something more than communities of truth, care, and virtue. The Jewish ideal is a sacred community, a community where our daily regimen together suggests that there is more in heaven and on Earth than is dreamt of in most philosophies; where in short, there are rumors of angels and moments when, angels or not, we are willing to posit the reality of G-d. (p. 64)

Throughout the course of eight chapters, each building upon the previous, Rabbi Hoffman discusses the unique factors upon which Jewish spirituality is based. One of these is the notion of *blessings*—"the single act of worship that best typifies the prayer life of Jews" (p. 46). He defines "blessings" as Judaism's primary speech act, thus implying that saying really is doing. These speech acts celebrate the reality of the divine. "Blessings," the author writes, "raise human consciousness of how sacred the universe is so that ordinary human beings may rightly enjoy it" (p. 64).

Another aspect of Jewish spirituality is text study. Metaphor is offered as a way of relating to the Bible in terms of spiritual meaning. Hoffman suggests, for example, that the reader view Genesis as "the first stage of life: it is childhood, our struggles with brothers, sisters—yes, and parents, too—capped in the end by the complex fabric of parental blessing" (p. 35). Similarly, "Exodus . . . appropriately begins by listing the Israelites who are in Egypt, preparing for their life as responsible adults" (p. 35).

A third feature of Jewish spirituality Hoffman discusses is *landedness*—the importance of the land of Israel. The idea of landedness is at the core of the Torah and of Jewish ethics. Jews are constantly reminded not to oppress the stranger because they themselves were strangers in Egypt. Explaining this concept, Hoffman writes:

> Love of the land . . . is related to, but separate from, love of the state. And it is love of the land that lies at the root of this unique brand of Jewish spirituality . . . sensing that not all patches of the earth's surface are identical; feeling that somehow you have an attachment to a certain latitude and longitude where, indeed, somehow your Jewish center is located. (p. 97)

As a layperson who has read many books on Jewish and non-Jewish spirituality, I found this book to be fresh and enlightening. It is very different from the others in that the reader is drawn into the material by the energy of Rabbi Hoffman's personal inquiry.

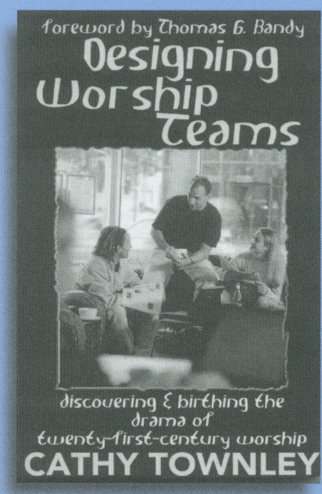
The Journey Home is a very useful and accessible text for anyone who would like to better understand Jewish spirituality and how Judaism approaches prayer, the Torah, suffering, stewardship, the Land of Israel, and individual and communal relationships to the divine aspects of life.

Seth Shapero
Temple Beth Ami
Rockville, Maryland

Designing Worship Teams

DISCOVERING AND BIRTHING THE DRAMA OF TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY WORSHIP

Cathy Townley
Nashville: Abingdon Press



review book

In defense of the revivals of the Great Awakening, Jonathan Edwards argued that in order to transform the whole person worship must address the emotions as well as the mind. At that time in Puritan New England this was a novel argument. Churches that once required members to recount the drama of their own regeneration had come to accept intellectual assent in place of felt experience.

Today few would argue theoretically, as the Puritans did, against "enthusiasm" in religion; it is conventionality, not rationality, that dries up spiritual passion in too many of today's churches. Prosaic sermons, "sacred" music, and formal prayers express sentiments too familiar to move long-time members and too unfamiliar to move newcomers.

Like Edwards in his time, Cathy Townley wants to put feeling back in worship. As a lifelong stage performer, Townley calls on Christians to bring theatrical excitement, creativity, relevance, and high standards to their

worship. Like most real thespians, she does not associate the theater with artificiality or empty show. On the contrary, she envisions worship rooted in the authentic personal faith of those who lead it.

Designing Worship Teams begins, as Townley would have worship do, with the lives of those who will experience it. In brief vignettes, Townley identifies the kind of worshipers she has in mind: young adults who are not so much alienated from the church as ignorant of it and struggling with a world of drugs and alcohol, blaring media, and friends and families with problems of their own.

In response to such struggles, Townley describes worship that encompasses a "powerfully edgy combination of the Holy and the profane" (p. 101). "Postmodern" worship teams, guided by prayer and open to insight from each member, produce "indigenous" services responsive to what God is doing in this congregation at this moment. Participants are led to a state of "nirvana" or "abandon" comparable to that reached by teens at a rock concert (p. 92–93).

Needless to say, not every reader will buy all of Townley's program. But it can hardly hurt the average lukewarm Protestant to be challenged by her model for reaching those left cold by mainline churches. At the very least, all worship leaders ought to ask themselves, "If 'postmodern' worship teams like those Townley describes are not our way of reaching out to younger people with new values and concerns, then what is?"

Rev. Dan Hotchkiss
Senior Consultant
The Alban Institute

Challenging the Church Monster

FROM CONFLICT TO COMMUNITY

Douglas A. Bixby
Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2002

review **book**

Bixby defines the church monster as "the extensive conflict, anxiety, and bureaucracy that grows out of poor structure and the inability to make decisions effectively and efficiently" (p. 15). His basic premise is that administrative structure should be minimized in order to free people for ministry and that any and all controversial decisions should be made at the congregational level. Part One of the book is devoted to restructuring.

Bixby writes from a background in congregational polity, and as George B. Thompson, Jr., writes on page 11 of his foreword, the other two basic polities (connectional and episcopal) will have to modify Bixby's plan in order to benefit from it. For example, he states, "Downsizing is simple. You eliminate all your boards . . . and create individual leadership positions on one centralized church council" (p. 33).

He is not unaware of the kind of power-hungry people that cause havoc and conflict in congregations. However, his solution to this dilemma—that of smaller church governments—presumes the presence of clergy leadership highly skilled in interpersonal relationships and team building. If a pastor can recruit, develop, and empower lay leaders to carry out administrative responsibilities, Bixby's plan will free up other leaders to carry out the ministry of the congregation. Unfortunately, my experience with highly conflicted congregations is that, almost always, the pastor's interpersonal incompetence is a major factor in the situation, regardless of the structure. Given that fact, a smaller church government serves only to supply power-hungry people with more opportunity to create conflict.

Chapter Seven gives some solid, practical tools for changing structure, including suggestions for term limits and an annual leadership orientation meeting to teach new leaders about the benefits of congregational decision-making.

Bixby also offers some of his experience with his own congregation. There are helpful thoughts on creating an experimental attitude, bottom-up leadership, and innovative and engaging worship.

My only quarrel with Bixby is that, in my opinion, he overstates the role of structure as the source of church conflict. "I passionately believe that bad structure is keeping our churches from being the churches God wants them to be in this day and age" (p. 117). When I work with a conflicted congregation, I use a "source checklist" that my colleague Margaret Bruehl and I developed. The checklist names 17 conditions that contribute to congregational conflict under five categories: purpose, resources, relationships, leadership, and (yes) structure. I have never seen a church conflict that can be attributed to only one source.

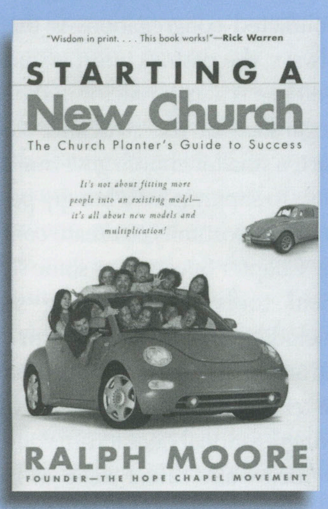
With that caveat, if you are a pastor with the interpersonal, group, and organizational skills that Douglas Bixby obviously possesses, *Challenging the Church Monster* is a good roadmap for removing the bureaucratic confusion that churches tend to accumulate over their lifespans.

Rev. Roy W. Pneuman
Senior Consultant Emeritus
The Alban Institute

Starting a New Church

THE CHURCH PLANTER'S GUIDE TO SUCCESS

Ralph Moore
Ventura, Calif.: Regal Books, 2002



review book

"Every mature organism is capable of reproducing itself," writes Ralph Moore. "Some congregations [reproduce themselves] many times," he continues, "but most will never do this in their lifetimes. . . . We produce in kind. Christians should multiply converts. Churches should multiply congregations" (p. 256). "Every church," he says, "should be in the business of planting churches—repeatedly" (p. 14).

This is not typical mainline new-church development talk. But then, Ralph Moore is not a mainline Christian. He is a pastor of the Foursquare Gospel Church, a Pentecostal body that, over the past 80 years, has reproduced itself into more than 1,800 congregations in the United States and almost 30,000 worldwide.

"New congregations pay off in effective evangelism and church growth," says Moore (p. 23). He claims (without providing a reference) that one American denomination had 80 percent of its new converts come to faith in churches less than two years old. Church planters, he points out, do not specialize in nurturing and pastoral care, as do leaders of established congregations. Since church planters are concentrating on starting fresh and reaching new people, they may not emphasize the inner growth found in older congregations that otherwise lack a strong outreach priority.

The author's purpose is not to replicate existing mission models. Rather, he writes of creating new models with a focus on the multiplication of new churches. He does this by elaborating four themes: thinking through, design, planting, and anticipating the future.

First, pastor developers must draw a core group of congregational leaders and supporters around them for the purpose of defining and refining the nature of the mission they intend to pursue, always maintaining a clear focus on the client group they wish to reach. Second, links with parent churches or denominational bodies need to be responsibly guarded. Many practical pre-launch arrangements need tending. Third comes the planting of the new church itself, with attention paid to worship, preaching, money, membership, and building matters. Finally, as the congregation matures it should continue to dream.

Some sections of the book discuss the downside of building a new church. Moore offers advice on disruptive people who could divide the immature community and derail the mission: they need to be handled firmly but with restorative intent. Younger members, he says, may need guidance in translating the loyalty they feel towards people into loyalty towards impersonal church structures. And the author reminds us that while new churches help growing Christians experience community, they should also help them to love and support the wider church that exists nationally and internationally.

Moore believes that bivocational pastors can serve a useful purpose during the formative period of a church, as they do in some inner city and rural areas unable to support a full-time ministry. Pastors with secure income from other sources, he says, can provide the kind of service many new congregations require. The author also advocates the mentoring of new ministers within local congregations, believing that only after practical church experience should most ministry candidates consider formal seminary training.

New Christian communities, Moore thinks, should not be too quick to build permanent facilities for themselves. As much as a building helps a congregation to identify itself in the community, it can also inhibit long-term growth if a facility is erected before a certain level of congregational maturity is reached. Buildings, the author believes, tend to confine rather than free congregations.

Two decades ago, this reviewer was heavily involved in the founding of a new and growing Lutheran parish at what was then at the edge of Calgary, Alberta. Had I been able to read this book then, I would have been spared many a painful mistake. I underestimated some important needs of the larger community and should have been more discriminating in selecting and engaging the people I chose to be my key church-planting team. While I enjoyed those eight years immensely, Moore could have helped me relish them even more than I did.

Much can be learned from this book and from new church planters like Moore. While some mainline church readers may be uncomfortable with aspects of the author's approach, no one can doubt his skill and effectiveness. All concerned about new church development will find in *Starting A New Church* a rich resource.

Rev. Dr. Wayne Holst
University of Calgary
Calgary, Alberta

Learn More

RESOURCES ON DIVIDED LOYALTIES FROM THE CONGREGATIONAL RESOURCE GUIDE

Brueggemann, Walter. **The Prophetic Imagination** (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001). This book passionately urges congregations to pursue the purposes of justice, compassion, and equality in response to God's call. The author suggests that congregations willing to resist the dominant culture—and express their eternal hope in a better future—will engage public debate and action in ways that flat faith pronouncements will never accomplish.

Budde, Michael L. and Robert W. Brimlow, eds. **The Church as Counterculture** (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2000). This collection contains 10 essays by authors who speak prophetically about congregational identity, purpose, and organization. Challenging churches to reclaim their roles as countercultural communities of disciples, they encourage church members to move from cultural captivity to a place where the gospel speaks as a vital alternative.

Day, Katie. **Difficult Conversations: Taking Risks, Acting with Integrity** (Bethesda, Md.: Alban Institute, 2001). While the church should be capable of initiating and sustaining difficult conversations on controversial issues, Katie Day often finds congregations whose mundane chatter gravitates to the lowest common denominator. Day urges congregations to move beyond superficiality and to have difficult conversations. She discusses risk and trust, conversational models, and pathways to spiritual growth and action.

Herr, Robert and Judy Zimmerman Herr, eds. **Transforming Violence: Linking Local and Global Peacemaking** (Scottsdale, Penn.: Herald Press, 1998). This collaborative effort of the Historic Peace Churches and the Fellowship of Reconciliation explores the biblical basis for peacemaking and practical strategies for its implementation. It is an empowering collection of stories by people who are doing the work of peace and justice from a faith perspective.

Lombard Mennonite Peace Center (www.lmpeacecenter.org). The Lombard Mennonite Peace Center is a nonprofit ministry dedicated to conflict resolution and relationship building in private and public arenas: homes, workplaces, churches, and schools. It provides workshops on topics such as conflict resolution skills for churches and facilitating healthy pastor-congregation relations. Its Web site features information about books on conflict resolution and related topics.

Peacemaking Without Division (www.congregationalresources.org/PWD/home.asp). This Web site—based on a workshop conducted in many congregations—provides theoretical models and practical tools for exploring issues of peace and conflict on the personal, interpersonal, community, and global levels. It provides an opportunity to examine feelings, stories (personal and biblical), and ideas related to these issues.

Sine, Tom. **Mustard Seed Vs. McWorld: Reinventing Life and Faith for the Future** (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1999). As individuals, families, churches, and communities find themselves driven by economic and technologic imperatives, the resultant values often conflict with the gospel. Challenging Christians to choose a "whole-life faith" over "Christian dualism," the author describes the obstacles churches face as they struggle with vision and action in regard to outreach and mission.

Wheatley, Margaret J. **Turning to One Another: Simple Conversations to Restore Hope to the Future** (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2002). "Real change begins with the simple act of people talking about what they care about." With this premise, Margaret Wheatley encourages and instructs readers in the practice of vital conversation. This book introduces conversation principles and starters for people willing to reflect creatively on those issues that most matter in their lives.

Wink, Walter. **The Powers That Be: Theology for a New Millennium** (New York: Doubleday, 1998). Walter Wink asserts that "fallen powers" dominate others and create an idol of something other than God. In order to sustain their privileged position, they must rely on a culturally accepted hierarchy—maintained, however indirectly, by violence. Wink finds in Jesus' teachings a way to unmask the powers and offer opportunities for redemption.

www.congregationalresources.org

Building Shared Reality: The Group Interview

Q: **At our synagogue we are trying to learn more about congregational attitudes and members' needs and wants. What method of group data collection would you recommend?**

A: The congregational world is changing. Marketing-oriented leaders are expected to help the congregation look closely at members' needs and wants. Marketing is difficult because most congregational leaders are "internally focused" and tend to expect members to share their interests, approaches, values, and priorities.

Focus Groups

To poll a large percentage of members, a survey questionnaire is useful, especially to obtain quantitative data—for example, the percentage of members that would agree to a 10-percent increase in dues. When planners want deeper qualitative insights, they often find that focus groups offer spontaneous, energized discussions. Focus groups are small (8 to 12 participants). Led by an impartial moderator, they address a pre-established set of questions.

The fluid nature of the focus-group process allows speakers to influence one another. In commercial market research, participants are paid, and they are seldom connected to the organization. In congregations, however, we rely on volunteers to take part without compensation. As consumer-members, they are not unbiased. In fact, as volunteers they are often more passionate and invested than an average member.

Congregational conversations elicit strong emotions. The moderator must ensure that no individual or subgroup dominates the discussion or intimidates others. All groups will include both extroverts and introverts. Introverts tend to "stand back." The moderator must work to draw them out. In my synagogue focus groups I work to balance the desire for input with the Jewish tradition's concern to prevent "harmful speech" (*lashon hara*). Attacks against clergy or lay leaders are unacceptable in a focus group; such talk entails unbalanced, uncharitable assessments of others. I often need to remind people to focus on congregational issues rather than individuals.

Group Interviews

In my group interviews, everyone fills out a questionnaire. Some questions deal with strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. Some items concern professional and lay leadership. Others ask what's working and what isn't. Still others solicit responses about members' needs, and programs that might meet them. The facilitator, allowing everyone to offer one answer to each question, writes the comments on newsprint, demonstrating active listening, respect, and curiosity. Everyone participates without being overwhelmed or intimidated.

This "facilitator-centered" process reduces the opportunity for "unhelpful" speech. The leader may cut off certain topics and "move on." He may paraphrase an inappropriate remark to help the group focus on the issue, not the person. I hand out the Alban Institute's "Rules for Healthy Congregational Communications" at the start of each session to reinforce the value of balanced, respectful, fair speech. When the rules are emphasized and enforced in group interviews and discussions, members learn that serious issues can be managed with respect. Thus we not only gather data but also help the system reflect on its behavior.

Professional staff members are dismayed when they see planning groups building giant lists of proposed programs. They know that they lack time to direct such programs. Change agents may find that in their planning they inadvertently raise expectations that congregational leaders can't fulfill.

I try to identify members' underlying needs (children at home without supervision from 3:30 to 6:00 p.m., for example). When leaders have a clear picture of an unmet need, they can develop a range of approaches to address it. For this reason I have stopped asking groups to list all the programs they want. Instead of noting that "some people" might support a book club, the facilitator records that "Josh Stern from the Tuesday night group said he would support it." When we set priorities for possible programs, we want to know who will take part—attend the book club, help plan it, host it, sponsor it.

Participants may also be asked to fill out a membership profile. I use a one-page form that identifies their Jewish background, their skills, and their interests. We try to follow up with each person to explore interests and identify his or her commitments. To build community, we must balance a concern for the member-consumer's wants and needs with the congregation's mission.

Providing Critical Data

The group interview allows the collection of more input by engaging larger groups (12 to 15). This highly structured process enables a less experienced facilitator to manage sessions. The interviews provide both objective data (written summaries of responses) and opportunities to observe group dynamics within a 60- to 90-minute session. The sessions supply critical data about congregational culture—its strengths and weaknesses, as well as insights into individual needs. They collect crucial information for strategic planners while building a sense of community among participants.

Bob Leventhal specializes in synagogue consulting services for the Alban Institute. Before joining Alban, Mr. Leventhal served as a business consultant, a university instructor of marketing, and a Jewish educator.

Ecumenical Stewardship Center

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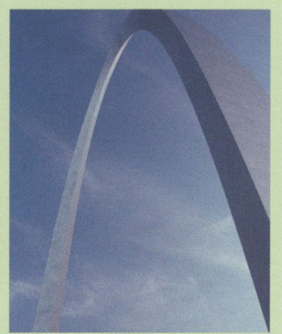

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For more information on any of these events, including costs and registration deadlines, contact:
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CONGREGATIONS is a quarterly publication of the Alban Institute, a nonprofit, interfaith membership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

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

The Alban Institute encourages dialogue with many faith traditions, people of diverse ethnicity, men and women, large and small congregations, and urban and rural congregations. We invite you to join in conversation with us by becoming a member or writing an article for CONGREGATIONS – or both! Please call us at 301-718-4407 or send an e-mail to membership@alban.org.

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