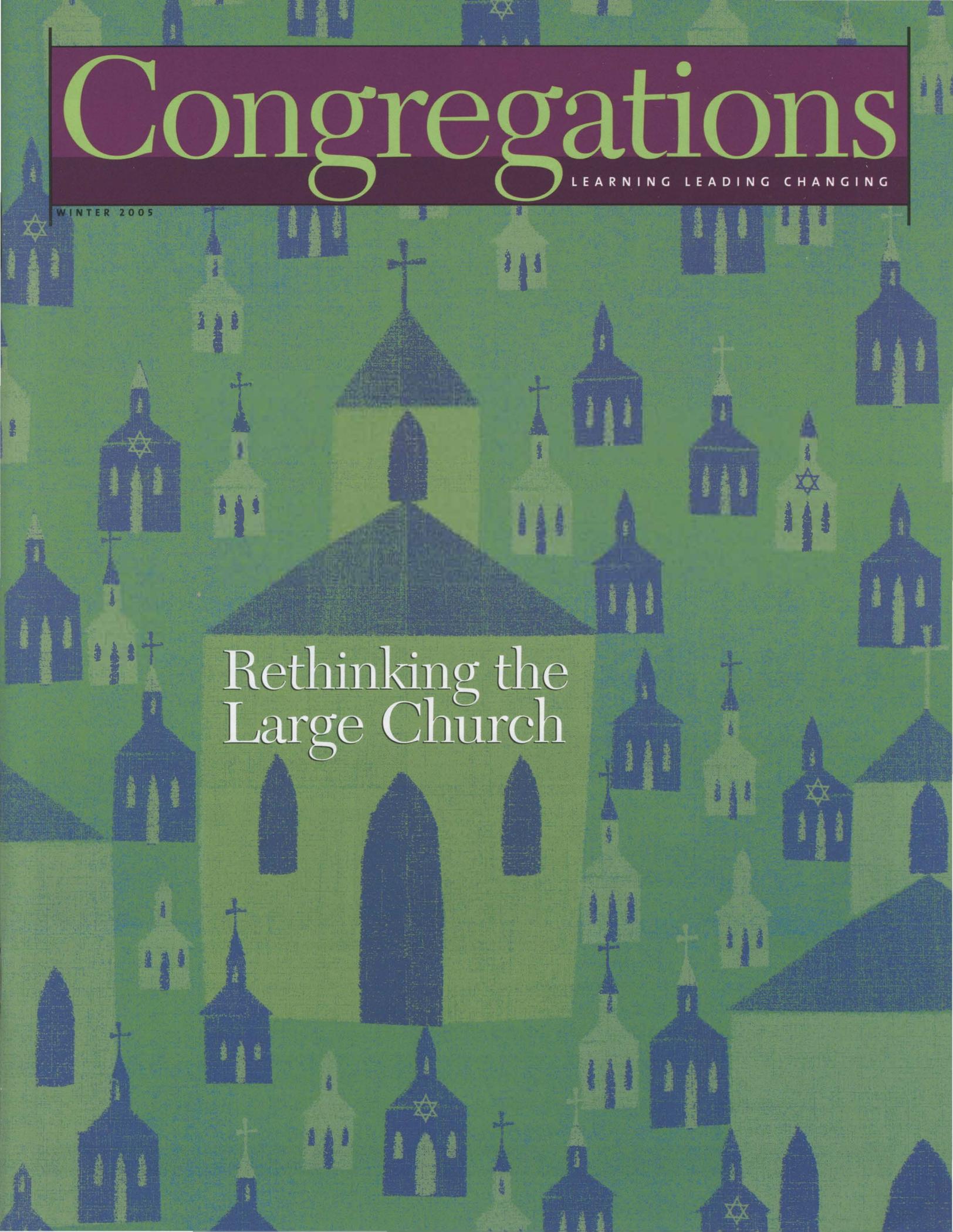


Congregations

LEARNING LEADING CHANGING

WINTER 2005



Rethinking the Large Church

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And behold, one came up to him, saying,

“Teacher...” Matthew 19:16 RSV



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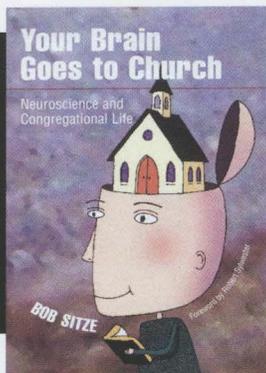
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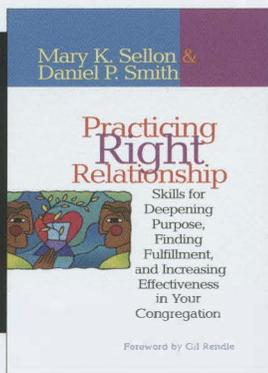
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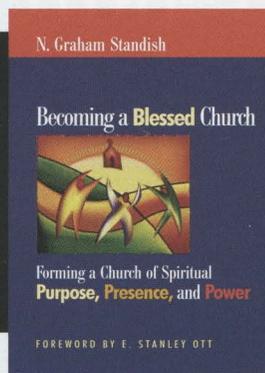
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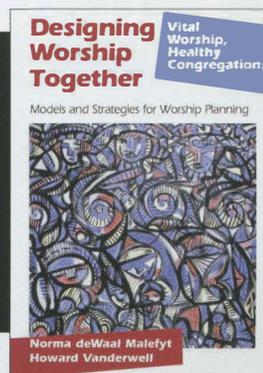
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Congregations

LEARNING LEADING CHANGING

WINTER 2005

Rethinking the Large Church



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in Focus

Telling the Better Story

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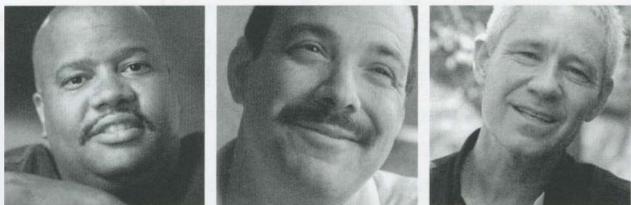


What will make your heart sing?

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

2005 NATIONAL CLERGY RENEWAL PROGRAM

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The National Clergy Renewal Program, offered by Lilly Endowment Inc., is intended to strengthen Christian congregations by providing an opportunity for

pastors to step away briefly from the demands of daily parish life and to engage in a period of renewal and reflection. They are asked: "What will make your heart sing?" They are invited to plan the steps that will make that happen. The Endowment will provide up to 120 grants of up to \$45,000 each directly to congregations for support of a renewal program for their pastor.

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For information: Contact the Endowment's Web site: lillyendowment.org, click on Religion, then on National Clergy Renewal Program, Request for Proposals; e-mail clergyrenewal@yahoo.com; call 317/916-7302, or write to Program Director, Religion, Lilly Endowment Inc. 2801 N. Meridian St., P.O. Box 88068, Indianapolis, IN 45208-0068. *Pictured top:* The Rev. Melissa Bane Sevier, 2001 recipient of a clergy renewal grant. *Above, left to right:* The Rev. Ivan D. Hicks, 2004 recipient; the Rev. Michael Mather, 1999 recipient, and the Rev. William C. Schooler, 2000 recipient.

Remembering a Bishop

For the past year I have been tracking a quiet little project going on in Washington, D.C. A small group of people with very large memories had decided to remember John T. Walker, the Sixth Bishop of the Washington, D.C. Diocese of the Episcopal Church. The group had shared stories, raised money, and commissioned an author to make something of their memories. The result is a new book, *John Walker: A Man for the 21st Century*, by Robert Harrison (Cincinnati, Ohio: Forward Movement, 2004).

In a time when it seems one must be a CEO, politician, or celebrity to merit a biography, this effort stood out as a glaring anomaly. To the best of my knowledge, books about bishops, or clergy for that matter, are not a major literary genre these days. Yet a small group of people decided to counter this trend. What, I wondered, was it about Bishop Walker that motivated these very busy people to unite in this endeavor 15 years after the bishop's premature death?

Part of the answer comes from the many positions he held, among them dean of the Washington Cathedral, first chairman of the Urban Bishops Coalition, first president and driving force behind the formation of the Interfaith Conference of Washington, chairman of the Black Student Fund, and longtime chairman of Africare. These positions and many others appear on his resume. But there is a lot that this resume does not tell us. Walker was the great-grandson of American slaves and he came of age as America faced its failures to include African Americans in the American Dream. As Walker climbed the Episcopal ladder, he frequently was the first to cross the color line in the Church's elite institutions. He was the first African American seminarian at Virginia Theological Seminary, the first African American to teach at St. Paul's School, the first African American dean of the Washington National Cathedral, and the first African American bishop of Washington. One of the central themes in his life was his tireless work to over-

come the barriers of racism, not merely in America, but around the world. His witness against racism and his courageous commitments to the central justice questions of his era were clearly central reasons why his admirers wanted to remember.

But Walker also clearly was a man with a story. He had something to say. One of the special features I appreciated in this book was the generous serving of his sermons and speeches. As one reads, we see that this bishop knew how to take the core story of his Christian faith and relate it to the most difficult challenges that America faced in the second half of the 20th century. As he told the stories of Christmas, the Passion, the Resurrection, and Pentecost, people found themselves invited into the Christian narrative, into a community of faith, and into God's ongoing work of reconciliation. In words—and deeds—he brought the Gospel to life in some of the most hopeless situations that America has faced.

Given the powerful positions he held and the nature of the city of Washington, it was inevitable that he would dance along the line of separation between church and state. Invited to

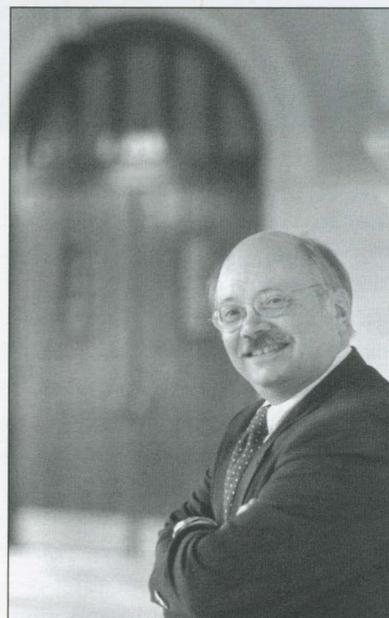
participate in many political events in his city and around the world, hosting the nation's leaders in worship services and occasions of state, and protesting to people who expected acquiescence. To him, it was clear that the church had a higher authority and that there were moments (in his case, many of them) when the church must say "no" to the powers that be.

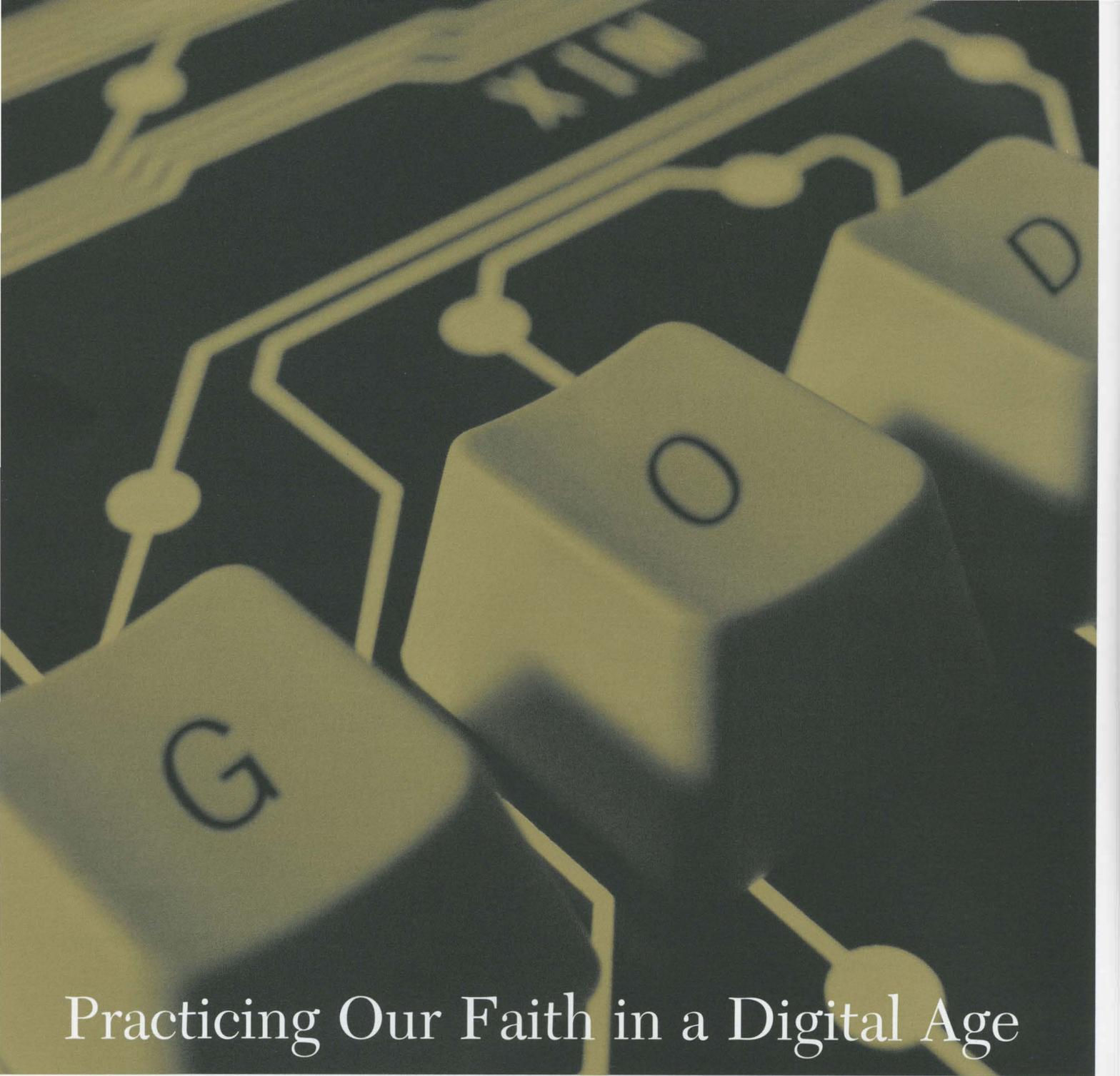
There are clear lessons here about what it means to be a bishop. Among the lessons I learned from this new book are that one must have a story to tell, one must be able to make institutions work and to invent new ones, and one must be able to call people into God's work of reconciliation. But there is one more lesson. There is something about the serious work of remembering that is very powerful. This project did not produce the final critical biography on John T. Walker. Instead, it pulled together key pieces of Walker's story and key fragments of his preaching to help us see more of the whole story of a bishop. In a day when most of us know each other primarily through the functional transactions that we share, we can see more of a whole person and more of what that person's life is about when we actively remember. Such reflection about our leaders and colleagues should be neither hagiography nor character assassination. Instead, it

should help us see more deeply into the movements of sin and grace in our world, and this book accomplishes that beautifully.

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."





Practicing Our Faith in a Digital Age

STEVE JACOBSEN

One Sunday afternoon, a teenager in my congregation woke up terribly depressed. She decided to end her life. She wrote a simple will, but it was not on a piece of paper. Instead, she e-mailed it to her friends. She then took an overdose of pills. One of the friends was at home that morning and online. She heard the tone signaling that her computer had just received a new message and opened it. When she read the message, she called 911. The paramedics arrived in time and the girl was saved. If that friend had not been online on Sunday morning,

the girl would have died. When I want to flee from the new digital culture, I am reminded of this story.

Technology continues to transform American life. Some of the changes are conspicuous and some are subtle. Some changes appear as blessings, others seem more like curses. How can people of faith navigate through these strong currents of change to claim the blessings while avoiding the curses? What practices can help us find our way?

In 1999, I began five years of grant-funded study and pastoral reflection on this topic. The first grant allowed me to get a sense of the emerging global issues during a sabbatical leave from my California parish. This project included a

national survey on the effects of technology on personal and family life and research trips to India and Silicon Valley.

In Silicon Valley, I spoke with Jan English-Lueck, a cultural anthropologist who is tracing the effects of digital culture on family life. Among her many stories, one in particular comes to my mind often. She was sitting down at a dining room table one evening to interview a family. This was, by most contemporary standards, a well-functioning, healthy family with solid relationships. As they gathered, the mother realized this was the first time in weeks that the family had been together face to face around the dinner table. Each family member had, in his or her bedroom or separate room in the house, his or her own computer with high-speed Internet access, cable television, and a personal phone. They had fallen prey to what English-Lueck dubbed “the centripetal effect”—the tendency of technology to draw people away from interpersonal time together in favor of digitally dependent time alone.

Like a behavioral force field, technology seems to exert a steady, invisible pull on our behavior, decisions, and lifestyle.

Following this first project, I wanted to explore the larger themes on a more personal scale. I received a second grant to support a study with groups of my own parishioners over a two-year period. I had previously found the 12 spiritual practices Dorothy Bass describes in her “Practicing Our Faith” project to be useful in my congregation’s life. In this study, I chose seven of the practices to use in an experiment in which people would see how technology might be affecting them as they seek to practice their faith. The seven practices I chose were “honoring the body,” “household economics,” “saying yes and no,” “keeping Sabbath,” “discernment,” “shaping communities,” and “healing.”

I also decided to focus primarily, though not exclusively, on some specific communication and information devices—personal computers, the Internet, and cell phones. From the writings of Albert Borgman, I had learned that a “device” is not just a tool. On the surface, it is a technological product that appears to simply give us what we want in a more effective way. But, in actual use, devices change our relationship to the natural world, our selves, and other people. So the question became: What effect are these new devices having on our lives, and what is the relationship between their increasing use and spiritual practice?

With these considerations as background, I formed four focus groups that involved 33 people. Three adult groups met over a nine-month period and one group of teens met over a three-month period. In each meeting, one of the seven practices was presented and discussed in relationship to the presence and use of technological devices. Each participant

was given a menu of specific activities to try before the next meeting. From the list, they chose one or two of the activities. The next meeting began with a discussion of their experiences, followed by a presentation of the next practice. A survey was given at the end of the study to determine which, if any, practices were found to be helpful in making the use of technology more intentional.

Nine months later, I polled participants to see what long-term effects the project had had on them. I wanted the project to not only help us actively reflect on the role of technology in our lives, but also to see how our congregational life might be shaped in light of our findings.

This series of gatherings led to the following insights:

- ◆ Actions involved in “honoring the body”—savoring a bath or shower in quiet, taking walks without being “plugged in” to a device, taking time to wear a piece of clothing that had personal meaning—helped people move from the typical, distracted reality to a more vividly personal and physically grounded one.
- ◆ When asked, during the “household economics” session, to make an inventory of how many technological devices they had in their homes (including discarded items in the garage), many people were surprised at the length of their lists.
- ◆ We discussed the practical truth that saying “yes” to one activity (say, television watching or aimless computer use) often means saying “no” to something else (for instance, time with others). People discovered that devices do indeed lure us to retreat into private, technologically dependent worlds, particularly in the evening, minimizing face-to-face contact with one another. One husband said, “My wife and I used to talk in the evenings...now she comes home and spends time on the Net keeping up with all these ‘friends’ she’s never seen.” Saying “yes” to being constantly immersed in devices makes it difficult for children to learn to rely on their imaginations; one mother realized her younger daughter was virtually incapable of being alone. “I have to be entertained!” the daughter said. Saying “yes” to increasing reliance on technology at work or at home exposes us to fear and trembling when a computer crashes or e-mail fails.
- ◆ The Sabbath unit asked people to take a day or part of a day to intentionally be “off line” and avoid the use of devices. Many found this to be both challenging and rewarding. “I make more of a conscious effort to save Sunday as a day of rest, away from paying bills and TV,” said one participant. In my own family, one Sunday my youngest daughter sat down at the computer and began to play a game. I reminded her that we were going to keep the computer off that day as a Sabbath practice. She was not happy. I suggested she call one of her friends to play. She told me they were not getting along. My parental authority prevailed and she left the computer. A little while later, boredom led her to call her friend anyway, and they decided to get together.

They ended up having an enjoyable afternoon playing improvised games.

- ◆ Technology was not judged particularly helpful in discernment. There is, of course, an extraordinary amount of information accessible through the Internet, and some information can be helpful. However, when we have to make significant decisions, there is no substitute for turning devices off and spending time in silence, journaling, and prayer. “Being quiet and finding the inner peace and stillness is where all the ‘answers’ have come from...not while I’m on the computer, my cell phone, the palm, etc.,” said one participant.
- ◆ While technology usually eliminates the face-to-face encounters that are essential to a deep sense of community, technology was found to be helpful in making connections that would not otherwise be possible. One person noted that e-mail has enabled him to create several mini-communities with people whom he could not see in person, such as regular contact with members of his old high school car club and fellow practitioners of a particular form of meditation. At the same time, as someone who works professionally with computer technology, he is able to work at home and misses, occasionally, the face-to-face sense of community of his prior workplace.
- ◆ In terms of “healing,” many had stories of how useful the Internet is in medical situations. Information on the Web helped them understand diagnoses, find highly specific groups of people experiencing a particular illness, and sources of prayer support with people who were acquainted with the unique challenges they were facing. E-mail kept people in touch with loved ones during an illness or after a loss.

At the end of the initial nine-month period, participants gathered for dinner, discussion, and evaluation. The majority agreed that the experience had raised their awareness of the effect of technology on their lives. The practice of Sabbath and the mindfulness of “saying yes and no” received the best marks. “I have more awareness of how technology is not either good or bad, it is more how we choose to let it into our lives.... Having a faith to guide those choices is helpful,” said one participant. “I focus on using moderation with technology, just as I would with sugar, alcohol, or anything that can be addicting,” said another.

The teen group, of course, lives in another world. Those of us who are Baby Boomers or older were raised in a culture that did not have personal computers, the Internet, and cell phones. Like immigrants, we learn new practices and achieve some competency with them, but we will never be “native born.” Most American teens are totally immersed in digital culture, and my focus group was no exception. They are fluent “multi-taskers,” able to simultaneously follow five Instant Message conversations on a screen while doing homework, listening to downloaded music, answering

Digital culture and youth culture are almost interchangeable, and all of us who care for youth and families must understand it as best we can.

a cell phone, and fending off adult questions about their ability to concentrate. Even so, they reported that the very act of raising the question of how technology affects their lives and faith was an important one. The most spiritually powerful times for them are the times at retreats away from so many screens—listening, reflecting on life, finding moments of silence, and singing with full hearts and no amplification. But their practice of community is marked by an extraordinary degree of digital communication. As a pastor in his fifties, I find I have an ongoing internal debate about their future. One voice tells me I am worrying too much—that they will thrive in the digital age. Another tells me they need to know more than ever the perils of digital saturation—the tendency to be constantly distracted and never find a sense of soul, the latent powers of natural imagination, and the importance of doing things slowly.

Nine months after the group dinner, I polled all of the participants to see which practices were still valuable. Awareness of the issue continued, but changes in behavior had diminished. Like a behavioral force field, technology seems to exert a steady, invisible pull on our behavior, decisions, and lifestyle. Respondents did note that the practice of “saying yes and no” was still one of the most helpful, and the experience had influenced their parenting. One mother, reflecting on how the study had helped her appreciate technology’s influence, said, “... though religion has become very global with technology, it can still be brought down to some very basic ideas and ways to learn, teach, and practice our faith.”

The project has influenced our congregational life. I now include references to our overdependence on technology in our liturgy. We regularly include periods for silent prayer and meditation in our services, consciously offering a “sanctuary from distraction.” While we make extensive use of e-mail, I often begin group prayers before a meeting with gratitude that we will be free from the intrusion of television or cell phones as we do God’s work face to face.

Two years ago, we moved into a new sanctuary that has a state-of-the-art computer projection system. We have been experimenting with how to best use it. We briefly tried using PowerPoint templates for sermons, employing the standard “bullet point” programs, but decided it was not for us. “It makes me feel like I’m back at work,” said one engineer. Another person said looking up at the screen interrupted her eye contact with the preacher, making the worship experience more impersonal. At the same time,

I have been using the projection system to display artwork—both traditional and contemporary—as part of the sermon. In a culture where images are used primarily to market products and keep our minds busy, I believe learning to look steadily and carefully at a great work of visual imagination can be a kind of contemplative practice. We are increasingly using the screen to project lyrics to music we are singing, but we're avoiding any clever effects. While some don't like it, some older members find the screen easier to read, and some disabled members find it frees them from having to hold a hymnal.

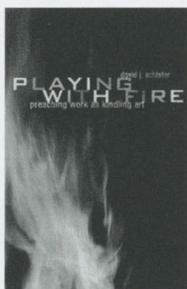
In the first session of new member classes, I introduce the themes of "saying yes and no" and Sabbath, and ask people to use the exercises to practice living apart from technology. Once we begin to see how much our behavior, lifestyles, and stress levels are influenced by technology and culture, and begin to experience some ability to make choices about these influences, we are more ready to see worship, service, and fellowship activities as spiritual practices that require intentional focus.

The project has also influenced my role as a volunteer in the local public schools. In his book *The Flickering Mind*, Todd Oppenheimer demonstrates that school districts have spent extraordinary amounts of money on technology in the last decade. It may be impressive to see a row of shiny new computers at Back to School Night, and digital literacy is obviously a requirement of contemporary life. But much of that technology is unused, underused, or soon obsolete. At budget meetings, I advocate spending less on new hardware and more on what Oppenheimer calls "enlightened basics"—for example, part-time assistants to help English teachers grade essays.

Despite these concerns, I continue to hear stories that remind me of technology's blessings. An eighth-grade girl in my congregation arrives home from school and enters her room. She has been deaf since birth. At school she experiences a degree of isolation due to her disability, but in her room life is different. She sits down at her computer and begins Instant Messaging with friends. Conversations using "IM" minimize her disability. In her room she has a smoke alarm that will shake her bed at night if a fire is detected, an alarm clock that flashes her bedside light in the morning, closed captioning on her television, and a battery charger for a recently developed, surgically

installed cochlear implant. Technology has radically decreased the isolation she would have known a decade ago.

Technology's influence is inescapable. The blessings it can bring are often causes for genuine gratitude. Digital culture and youth culture are almost interchangeable, and all of us who care for youth and families must understand it as best we can. At the same time, used uncritically, it can misshape our lives, keep us from knowing others and ourselves, and inhibit our ability to discern God's living voice within us and in nature. Church leaders and congregations have an important role to play: to raise awareness about technology's influence and to provide practices that help us find what being faithful means in a digital age. ♦

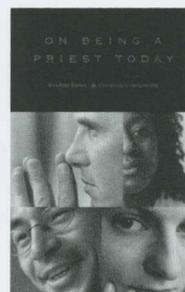


David J. Schlafer
Playing With Fire
Preaching Work as Kindling Art

Starting with the fire of Scripture, and engaging in the work of preaching as play, Schlafer offers new ways of approaching the preaching moment. Taking into account the preacher's call, the stages of preparation, the role of the congregation, and the presence of the Holy Spirit, we discover that playing with fire is a sacred act indeed.

Rosalind Brown and Christopher Cocksworth
On Being a Priest Today

This important book explores the many contemporary and denominational varieties of priestly ministry: male and female, paid and unpaid, parish and work-based, catholic, evangelical, charismatic. Essential reading for priests, priests in training, and anyone considering ordained ministry.



Ormonde Plater
Many Servants
An Introduction to Deacons

In this newly revised and updated introduction to the permanent diaconate, Plater includes a history of deacons in the early church, a survey of deacons from the Reformation to the present, stories of modern diaconal ministries, including first-hand accounts, and a discussion of formation, training, and deployment.

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Thriving in a Large Congregation

FRANK WADE

The wise among us will carefully consider the special aspects of the role of senior pastor in a large congregation before leaping into it. I have been uniquely privileged to serve in a variety of congregations—from rural to small town to a large congregation in a major city. Since 1983 I have been rector of St. Alban's Episcopal Church in Washington, D.C., where attendance on an average Sunday is about 600. It's no megachurch, but certainly big and complex enough to fit into the company of large congregations. The perspective gained from a long-term pastorate in such a place may have some value for those who are considering a call to a similar ministry.

Most of us in congregational ministry are a little like Teddy Roosevelt, who is said to have wanted to be the bride at every wedding and the corpse at every funeral. There is some ham in all of us, and the desire to play out our roles on a larger and better lit stage is tempting. It is

in the common sense of getting things done in a system—was a major factor. I did not know that these involvements and discoveries were laying the groundwork for a certain ministry, but when it came time to consider the call to St. Alban's, these points were a significant part of my "yes." My "yes"

more than individuals. We make it possible for pastoral care to happen on a large scale, but we do not often get to the hospital ourselves. The intimacies of congregational life are not our regular fare. If one's reward system responds mainly to walking with individuals at key moments, the senior pastor role will not be especially satisfying. If one cannot clearly see faces in budgets or ministry in meetings, if one does not appreciate the gospel proclamation that can be made by establishing a good policy, or if one does not draw pleasure from seeing systems work as they should, the ministry aspect of this role will prove illusive.

If one cannot clearly see faces in budgets or ministry in meetings, if one does not appreciate the gospel proclamation that can be made by establishing a good policy, or if one does not draw pleasure from seeing systems work as they should, the ministry aspect of this role will prove illusive.

Zubin Metah is a marvelous musician who has conducted orchestras all over the world. He once made the point that in a symphony the conductor makes no sound. Similarly, the senior pastor does not do a lot of the traditional work of congregational ministry but, like the conductor, he or she makes everything else happen. Finding delight in making things happen, as opposed to actually doing them oneself, is a key to thriving in the large church pastorate.

tempting because it is rewarding, make no mistake about that. But there is more to be considered than what one might experience at moments of high liturgical drama. Many fine pastors have followed an upwardly mobile career track only to find themselves trapped in a gilded cage or leading a life of high-pressure misery. Neither God nor the Church is served in such circumstances, and the burned out wrecks of so many of our brothers and sisters are evidence that mishearing God's call can be costly. But some do thrive in the role, and looking closely at them may provide some valuable insight.

My own journey to this calling wound through various judicatory roles while I was serving smaller congregations. Service on committees, helping to plan judicatory events and programs, and working with multiple constituencies unlike the basic homogeneity of a self-selecting congregation all served to introduce me to the large church pastorate. Discovering that I could understand reports, communicate effectively with strangers, and interpret budgets was personally satisfying but also an indication of aptitude for this ministry. The discovery that I liked politics—both in the literal sense of dealing in the affairs of people and

was, of course, one of those holy guesses that make up a life of faith. I really did not know what I was getting into, but I have since learned some things about the joys and sorrows that attend large church ministry.

Consider Albert Schweitzer, the incredibly gifted physician, theologian, concert organist, and missionary who did so much to bring witness and relief to the people of Africa. I am told that he was once asked why he did not use his lucrative talents in Europe since that would have enabled him to send several doctors and missionaries to Africa. He replied that he knew that, but he had to be there himself. Such thinking gives us another reason to admire Dr. Schweitzer, but it also indicates that he would not have been happy as the

The primary community we serve in a pastoral role is the staff. That role is more than a little complicated by the fact that we hired those people and may, on occasion, be required to fire them. Our primary job is to provide clarity for their roles, resources for their work, and direction in selecting their priorities. We are part of every problem they have, as well as every success they enjoy. On our best days we can lessen their

Finding delight in making things happen, as opposed to actually doing them oneself, is a key to thriving in the large church pastorate.

senior pastor of a large congregation. The role is not one that satisfies the hands-on, do-it-yourself instinct. Senior pastors work with systems

problems and heighten their successes. In my experience, the best pastoral care I can offer is based on prayer. The staff community needs to

know that I pray for them daily and, in the best of worlds, pray with them regularly. Those prayers establish a meeting ground where the dynamics of the office are less of a factor and the dynamics of our lives can have freer reign.

I genuinely like and admire the people with whom I work. I care

demands of stewardship. The million- or multi-million-dollar budget is an enormous responsibility. Turning those assets into useful service in the Kingdom of God is no mean task. The temptation to wallow in some ill-begotten concept of opulence has ruined more than one pastor, pastorate, and congregation.

focus on action, I have to keep my attention on the ideas. Oftentimes, others actually apply the themes and principles to programs and events. I do a lot of planning, goal setting, clarifying, and reviewing, and less often experience the work and satisfaction of leading a small group or joining a mission effort. The same can be said for community involvements. I meet and think with others about needs and resources, but I do not get my hands dirty as often as I used to or probably should. Finding money for a worthwhile project is challenging and important, but the effort and rewards are different from traditional sweat equity. I teach and preach to large groups and I love it, but it means that more people know me than I know in return. People hear how I think and understand far more often than I get to hear how they think and understand. This requires a major effort on my part to find opportunities to listen to others' hearts and minds lest I trip into thinking that my view is everyone's view or—what is worse—that my view *should* be everyone's view. Large church pastors need to be heartily proactive in the work of finding out what is going on in the lives and, more importantly, inside the lives of individuals.

If I were to sum up my ministry in this wonderful place it would be to think of myself as a traffic cop on the road to Emmaus. It was on that road that disciples were discussing the events of the days we call Holy Week when they were joined by Jesus. As they walked, Jesus revealed the truth to them by teaching, and ultimately in “the breaking of the bread.” What I have been doing these 21 years is helping people—lots of people—get on a path where the Lord can speak to them, tell them the truth, and share the wonder and mystery of worship. That may sound simplistic, but it really is what all of the meetings, reports, speeches, sermons, plans, fundraising, and just plain work are about. It is, in some ways, a silly way to make a living, but it is a wonderful way to live. ♦

What I have been doing these 21 years is helping people—lots of people—get on a path where the Lord can speak to them, tell them the truth, and share the wonder and mystery of worship.

about their lives and I think we know and trust one another well enough for them to call on my pastoral gifts as readily as whatever gifts I may have in administration, decision making, and planning. One would hope that this would be the case after 21 years, but it is not automatic and does not come with every corner office with a nice view. Staff issues are common concerns among senior pastors and much anguish is lavished on them. Oftentimes the “senior” part of the job must take precedence over the “pastor” part. In those difficult times, it is hard to enjoy the warm satisfactions of caring for the people closest to you. Enjoying the role of *pater familias* in the staff setting without losing one's humanity or humility is a bit of a trick that relies on mental as well as spiritual health. But the role can be very rewarding, especially if one finds joy in seeing others do well.

Like pastoral care, money is a defining quality of life in a large congregation. Having a big budget is a heady thing. Because of their financial abundance, large churches are full of possibilities, and the sense of largess is satisfying. It is important, however, to remember that the topic Jesus addressed most often was the spiritual dangers of wealth. His point was not to celebrate poverty but to emphasize the vital importance and challenging

The greater financial base of a large congregation can also serve to isolate the senior pastor from his or her colleagues. The person serving amid the rewards and demands of a smaller congregation is not likely to be sensitive to the pressures and issues of the Big Steeple clerics. The clergy person who is cranking his own mimeograph machine may well think that a multi-staff situation would solve all of his problems. Actually, of course, it simply provides a different set of problems—and opportunities. These differences in large and small congregations make some of the bonds of collegiality difficult to connect. If, as is often the case, there are only one or two large congregations in one's jurisdiction, the result can be a particular kind of loneliness where there should be a particular kind of fellowship.

Most of the features of large church life that make it different from that of smaller ones are matters of degree rather than actual substance, but those degrees make a difference worth noting. I find that I work with ideas a lot more than I remember doing in other congregations. My job is to guard and appropriately proclaim the principles that govern our congregational life. This requires tending the junction of ideas and action. Since most people and institutions rightly



Congregation Size: What the Research Tells Us

MARLIS MCCOLLUM

While considerable attention has been paid in recent years to small churches and megachurches, far less has been given to large churches—those with a minimum average attendance of 350 but not reaching the 2,000 mark often used as the cut-off point for defining a megachurch. However, studies and other research efforts have revealed some interesting and little-known findings about these churches—and church size in general.

“By any measure, most congregations are small” (p. 17), writes Mark Chaves in *Congregations in America*, in which he describes the findings of the 1998 National Congregations Study, a survey of 1,236 U.S. churches, the majority of them Christian and Jewish. “Fifty-nine percent of U.S. congregations have fewer than one hundred regular

participants, counting both adults and children; 71 percent have fewer than one hundred regularly participating adults” (p. 17–18). These are stunning figures, but perhaps even more startling is another statistic Chaves cites: that 10 percent of U.S. congregations—the largest ones—contain half of the nation’s churchgoers¹. “Even though there are relatively few large congregations with many members, sizable budgets, and numerous staff, these large congregations contain most of the people involved in organized religion in the United States” (p. 18).

Similar results were obtained by later surveys. “Most congregations are small. But most worshipers are in large congregations” (p. 21), write Cynthia Woolever and Deborah Bruce in *A Field Guide to U.S. Congregations*, based on the U.S. Congregational Life Survey of more than 300,000 churchgoers from 434 congregations, conducted in 2001.² “Ten percent of U.S. congregations [the largest ones] draw 50 percent of

all worshipers each week. Another 40 percent of congregations have 39 percent of worshipers attending services that week. The remaining 50 percent of all congregations [the smallest ones] have only 11 percent of the total number of worshipers in a given week” (p. 22).

Similarly, the Faith Communities Today (FACT) study, undertaken in 2000 by the Hartford Institute for Religion Research at Hartford Seminary, found that only 10 percent of U.S. churches have more than 1,000 regularly participating adult members. Half have fewer than 100 participants, and one-fourth have fewer than 50³.

Church Growth: The Where and Why

Fifty-one percent of the congregations in the FACT study reported that they had grown in the previous five years, with 34 percent reporting a membership increase of 10 percent or more.

Factors contributing to the greatest growth, the Hartford researchers found, included being located in the suburbs (particularly newer ones), offering a variety of social ministries, attention to social justice issues, denominational loyalty, a clear sense of mission, well-organized programs, uplifting worship, spiritual nurture, and inclusion of contemporary worship styles and music—characteristics that describe many large churches.

New suburban communities, Hartford researchers Carl Dudley and David Roozen found, are particularly favorable to the growth of faith communities because they offer the family composition, higher educational and income levels, and the available teenage, male, and young adult populations that are conducive to such growth. According to these researchers, the larger the congregation, the more male participants it has⁴. In addition, “Newer and larger congregations in growing suburban communities report a higher percentage of active high school youth. The ability to attract teenagers and youth also contributes to membership growth,” they write (p. 21).

Additionally, many large churches tend to very socially conscious, develop strong ministries, are often located on arterial highways or other convenient access routes, offer plenty of parking, and are frequently highly denominational, the researchers found. “They do the tradition and they do it really well. They are not required to be so much innovative as excellent,” says Dudley, faculty emeritus for the Hartford Seminary and the Hartford Institute of Religion Research.

However, Dudley says, “Large churches do not necessarily grow at all. The growth of a large church is typically based on how good a job it has done at providing family-based programming.” Many growing large churches, he says, are located in “feeder suburbs”—suburban areas where there is a match between a church’s ministry and the surrounding population’s needs and desires, causing the community to “feed” members into the church. This

LARGE CHURCHES ACCOUNT FOR MORE THAN HALF OF ALL U.S. CHURCHGOERS

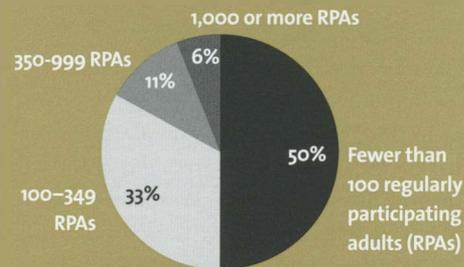
As Mark Chaves notes in *Congregations in America*, in which he analyses the data from the 1998 National Congregations Study, that study showed that 53 percent of the people who attend church in the U.S. attend 10 percent of the nation’s churches, those with average attendance of more than 350. Sixteen percent attend churches with an average attendance exceeding 2,000, or a megachurch. Even when Catholic churches, which tend to be large, are excluded from these calculations, 39 percent of American churchgoers are still found in 8 percent of the churches—the largest ones.

| Congregation Size (based on average attendance) ^a | People Attending Churches of This Size ^a | Congregations of This Size ^a |
|--|---|---|
| Under 50 | 7% | 40% |
| 51–100 | 11% | 24% |
| 101–350 | 29% | 26% |
| 351–2000 | 37% | 9% |
| Over 2000 | 16% | 1% |

^aThese figures are based on the number of regularly participating individuals, including both adults and children. Source: 1998 National Congregations Study

PARTICIPATION IN SMALL, MID-SIZE, AND LARGE CONGREGATIONS

According to the Faith Communities Today study of 14,000 congregations from 41 denominations and faith groups, conducted in the summer of 2000, adult participation in congregations of various sizes was distributed as follows:



Source: Carl S. Dudley and David A. Roozen, "Faith Communities Today: A Report on Religion in the United States Today," Hartford Institute for Religion Research, Hartford Seminary, March 2001, page 8.

heavy reliance on local support sets the large church apart from the megachurch. As Dudley points out, megachurches are often regional institutions, drawing their members from a wide geographical area. Consequently, their growth potential tends to be more independent of the reaction of the people living in the immediate area.

The Perception of Vitality

Dudley and Roozen also found that larger, newer, and growing congregations are more often described by their members as vital and healthy than are other congregations, and that the perception of vitality contributes to continued growth. Older, larger congregations—especially those in the suburbs—report better financial health than other congregations, as well. Directly related to a church's growth and financial well-being, the FACT study suggests, are clarity of mission and purpose and the strictness of the church's expectations of its members. Larger congregations, the

researchers say, are more likely to be clear about their mission and purpose, and more likely to emphasize personal morality.

Larger congregations are also more likely than others to welcome change, the FACT study indicates, especially if they are Evangelical and located in growing suburban areas or Western states. More recently organized congregations appear to be more willing to change than older congregations, which tend to have more established patterns that appear to make them less able—or more resistant—to making changes.

When it comes to the breadth of program offerings, size makes the most significant difference, the Harvard researchers contend. "While Sunday school, Scripture study, and prayer groups are the most universal programs, other programs for spiritual development seem to require a minimum critical mass of participants, funding, and building space to sustain the activity. Larger congregations, therefore, have the option of developing a much broader range of programs" (p. 44).

The ability to offer a wide array of programs, in turn, affects reports of the church's vitality. "Congregations with the broadest offerings of programs report greater vitality among their members. For many participants, community outreach is as much an expression of faith as participation in prayer groups, liturgical practice, or doctrinal study. Congregations working for social justice and with a broad array of outreach ministries are more likely to express vitality. Congregational size has the predictable effect on social ministries, with larger congregations generating more programs and speaking to more issues" (p. 47).

Scores on Spiritual Growth and Nurturance

Size alone, however, should not be viewed as a reliable predictor of growth, cautions Deborah Bruce, asso-

ciate research manager of the Research Services Office of the Presbyterian Church (USA). Like the FACT study, her research with Cynthia Woolever revealed that a church's commitment to caring for its children and young people through adequate programming is a significant predictor of church growth. So is level of participation. In other words, says Bruce, "the degree to which people are involved in more than just worship"—whether that takes the form of singing in the choir, teaching a Sunday school class, participating in a small group, serving on a committee, or getting involved in the church's outreach programs—is a strong indicator of how likely the church is to grow.

Size may actually be a drawback in some ways. As Woolever and Bruce note in *Beyond the Ordinary: 10 Strengths of U.S. Congregation*, although worshipers in mid-size and large congregations report being "more satisfied with the spiritual nurture they receive from their congregation" (p. 20) than those attending small congregations (those with average attendance under 100), small church members gave much higher ratings on factors relating to "growing spiritually" than did those attending larger churches.

Perhaps most significantly, small churches received the highest average scores from their members on the following six out of the ten strengths Woolever and Bruce believe are tied to church growth:⁵

- ◆ growing spiritually
- ◆ meaningful worship
- ◆ participating in the congregation
- ◆ having a sense of belonging
- ◆ sharing faith
- ◆ empowering leadership

Mid-size congregations had the highest average scores on the following three strengths:

- ◆ caring for children and youth
- ◆ focusing on the community
- ◆ looking to the future

Large congregations received the highest average score on only one

“Even though there are relatively few large congregations with many members, sizable budgets, and numerous staff, these large congregations contain most of the people involved in organized religion in the United States.”

—MARK CHAVES, from *Congregations in America*

strength: welcoming new people. Contrary to what they expected, the authors say their research indicates that congregations with high scores on their Growing Spiritually Index are less likely to be growing numerically. “Unfortunately, congregations that are strong in the area of spiritual growth are rarely strong in welcoming new people, a congregational strength that

powerfully predicts growing in numbers” (p. 23). Nevertheless, they caution against viewing growth as the key to determining a congregation’s health and vitality, and warn that “congregations whose members fail to spiritually change and grow” are likely to ultimately see membership declines—and possibly even their own demise.⁶ ♦

NOTES

1. Mark Chaves, *Congregations in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 18.
2. Cynthia Woolever and Deborah Bruce, *A Field Guide to U.S. Congregations: Who’s Going Where and Why* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002).
3. Carl S. Dudley and David A. Roozen, “Faith Communities Today: A Report on Religion in the United States Today” (Hartford Institute for Religion Research, Hartford Seminary, March 2001).
4. Dudley and Roozen, “Faith Communities Today,” 13.
5. Cynthia Woolever and Deborah Bruce *Beyond the Ordinary: 10 Strengths of U.S. Congregations* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 24.
6. Woolever and Bruce, *Beyond the Ordinary*, 136.

A Contrast of Characteristics

Pastor-Centered Churches versus Large Congregations

Large congregations are vastly different from smaller congregations in a number of ways, as are the roles of their pastors. Alban Institute senior consultant Gil Rendle has drawn the following conclusions about these churches from his work with congregations of various sizes.

| PASTOR-CENTERED CHURCHES (average attendance: 75–200) | LARGE CHURCHES (average attendance: 350–2,000) |
|--|--|
| <i>Pastor-driven.</i> The pastor is often the primary or only provider of focus, program oversight, pastoral care, and leadership energy. | <i>Staff-driven.</i> Aspects of ministry typically handled by the pastor in smaller churches—such as pastoral care and program oversight—in the large church are typically handled by other staff members. |
| <i>Pastor-dependent.</i> The pastor’s personality and effectiveness are the primary determinants of the congregation’s growth and success. | <i>Staff-dependent.</i> The staff’s effectiveness and ability to work in harmony with each other and with lay leaders determine the success and growth of the congregation. Healthy communication and effective accountability systems are therefore a must. |
| <i>More relational than organizational.</i> The currency of leadership is in the forming, managing, and shaping of relationships. | <i>More organizational than relational.</i> The currency of leadership is organizational, through attention to vision, goals, staff supervision, and outcomes. |

| | |
|--|--|
| <p><i>Communal and relational advantages.</i> The size of the congregation supports a sense of community and creates a familial environment, in which members typically know and care about each other.</p> | <p><i>Mission advantages.</i> Financial and human resources enable large churches to develop and sustain numerous and varied programs.</p> |
| <p><i>Characterized by homogeneity and simplicity.</i> These churches tend to have homogeneous memberships and limited options in regard to worship styles, music, and programs.</p> | <p><i>Characterized by complexity and diversity.</i> Large churches tend to offer a variety of worship styles, music, and program offerings, thus attracting people of diverse backgrounds, ages, and interests.</p> |
| <p><i>Expect conformity.</i> Individuals tend to be expected to conform to the style and level of participation of other members. A willingness to work closely with others and establish close relationships with them is often expected.</p> | <p><i>Expect individuality.</i> Individuals control their level of participation and commitment. Because of the variety of offerings available in large churches, individuals may choose to opt for small-group intimacy or full-group anonymity.</p> |
| <p><i>Private communities.</i> Often have a singular purpose and tend to be self-contained communities.</p> | <p><i>Public presence.</i> Large churches have a significant institutional presence in the community, and their leaders are able to speak to multiple issues and audiences in the community.</p> |
| <p><i>Denominationally supported.</i> Pastor-centered churches tend to rely on denominational support for resources and training.</p> | <p><i>Less denominationally supported.</i> Large churches tend to look outside their denominations for resources and training.</p> |
| <p><i>Broad leadership role.</i> The pastor's role and responsibilities tend to be broad and encompassing, requiring a generalist approach.</p> | <p><i>Narrow leadership role.</i> The senior pastor's role and responsibilities tend to be focused on preaching, visioning, staffing issues, development, and working with the governing board.</p> |
| <p><i>Heavy reliance on volunteers.</i> The pastor is often the only paid staff member. In many other small churches, the pastor and one other person constitute the paid staff.</p> | <p><i>Heavy reliance on staff.</i> Programs are of such a magnitude and complexity that trained staff are needed to fulfill the roles that volunteers are able to fill in smaller churches.</p> |
| <p><i>Governing board meetings are brainstorming and decision-making sessions.</i></p> | <p><i>Governing board meetings are moments of discernment and visioning and—at best—events where direction and policy are set.</i></p> |
| <p><i>Vision alignment takes place within the governing board and in the work and focus of the pastor.</i></p> | <p><i>Vision alignment and organizational strategy take place in staff meetings.</i></p> |
| <p><i>Personalized expectations.</i> Members are often willing to accept whatever leaders and members offer—of whatever quality.</p> | <p><i>High expectations.</i> Expectations of quality are high, so greater attention is given to detail and quality in the large church.</p> |
| <p><i>Personalized discontent.</i> Discontent often has a very personal orientation around the practices or personality of the pastor.</p> | <p><i>Organized discontent.</i> Large churches are more vulnerable to organized discontent because leaders are not as involved with members, and dissatisfaction can therefore go undetected for an extended period of time, leading to people to organize around their dissatisfaction.</p> |
| <p><i>Multiple networking opportunities.</i> Pastors of smaller churches have many opportunities to network and form friendships with pastors of similar churches.</p> | <p><i>Limited networking opportunities.</i> Pastors of large churches have few opportunities to network with pastors of similar churches.</p> |



So Many People, So Little Time The Challenge for Large Churches

GREG COOTSONA

My friend Derek and I have both served large churches, and we're constantly looking for the perfect number—the exact size at which a church gets too big and loses its character as a Christian community. We want to know when a church simply becomes a mass of strangers. Is there a time, for example, when it has to “double down” and start a second congregation? And when will we know? Although the specific integer fascinates us, a related question of greater importance has emerged: How can big churches maintain intimacy and nurture healthy relationships among their members?

Life in a variety of congregations has certainly taught me both the benefits and liabilities of large congregations—and by “large” I mean having an average of between 500 and 2,000

people in worship on Sundays. My first experience came as a college student in a church with three Sunday worship services attended by a total of about 1,200 people. Currently, I serve as associate pastor of Bidwell Presbyterian in Chico, California, which sees about 700 on an average Sunday in its sanctuary. In between these chapters of church life, I participated in a church with 60 members in worship on Sundays. A few years later, I served as associate pastor of Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City, which averaged around 1,200 during my six years there. In my two decades in churches, about 90 percent of my time has been spent in large congregations.

A moment ago, I conceded that big churches often lack intimacy, and I expect many of you nodded your heads, thinking, “This is precisely the problem of a large church—it’s not a real Christian community. Look, Jesus had only 12 disciples. A large congregation becomes just one gigantic exercise in herding sheep and producing mounds of policies and procedures.”

You’re right, it can and often does. A large church can also be a hotbed for pride (“Look how big we are. Look how dynamic we are. Look at how God is moving. Look at us!”). With its jungles of forms and intricate tangle of committees, it can also become a bureaucratic offense to the way of Jesus. And despite the inherent pride of many larger churches, they certainly have no lock on producing the best Christian leaders. Presbyterian churches of about 100 members have produced two of the most dynamic voices in our country, authors Anne Lamott and Kathleen Norris.

In light of these contentions, I need to build a case for large churches. Here are four basic reasons:

- ◆ **They provide resources sufficient for quality programming.** For instance, a 50-member choir led by a full-time choir director sounds better than a six-member one staffed by a part-time high school band teacher.
- ◆ **Their facilities and numbers offer more effective outreach—**

an important benefit if we want to proclaim the Gospel to people who aren’t yet inside our doors. Fifth Avenue Presbyterian is an example of this. It accounted for 10 percent of the New York City presbytery in terms of members and 25 percent of the growth. The percentages are similar for Bidwell

So, large congregations are not Satan *in ecclesis*. But do they fulfill Christ’s call to true *koinonia*, or Christian fellowship? Here I lean on Jesus’ words in John 13:34 as the final criterion: “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. *Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.*” Christ’s ultimate work of love is self-

A large church must find ways to grow smaller as it grows larger.

Presbyterian and the Sacramento Presbytery. (Part of large churches’ success at outreach stems from the current desire for anonymity in checking out a church. I’ve heard one too many stories about young people walking into small congregations and having every head turn.)

- ◆ **Larger congregations achieve efficiency of resources.** This is that old Economics 101 “economy of scale” idea. In more biblically grounded terms, we’re talking about stewardship of resources. In other words, one pastor caring for 30 people is not nearly as efficient as one caring for 200. Also, it simply requires an ample number of congregants to afford a church building, the accompanying utility bills, and a pastor’s salary.
- ◆ **Larger churches offer an assembly of smaller “congregations” in the same stage of life.** In other words, there emerges a critical mass in discrete demographics. For example, youth groups consisting of three people simply do not attract participation as well as those with 30 members do. Larger churches therefore offer their members greater opportunities for connecting with others in the same stage of life. And, because of their ability to offer a variety of programming, they tend to attract members of all ages and a variety of other demographics.

sacrifice. But too often we slip into “Fine, how are you’s” during coffee hour as the sole (soul?) form of “fellowship.” Or perhaps—especially for Presbyterians—“community” equals coming together at a committee meeting. But true *koinonia* is where we ask one another, “How are you?” and truly listen to the answer! If that’s not true, we are not realizing God’s gift of community.

Having offered the advantages for large churches and Christ’s goal for Christian community, it’s time to tackle the big nemesis of large congregations: finding that church members are simply strangers lost in a crowd—with the result that new members come in one door and, in a short time, leave through another. As daunting as this problem may seem, it is entirely surmountable. Below I outline six strategies for creating *koinonia*.

Small Group Communities

I once engaged George Gallup as a speaker at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian. He’s a wonderful Christian. Not only did he challenge our congregation with a call to spiritual nurture, but he also spoke of how critical small groups are for developing Christian community.

A large church must find ways to grow smaller as it grows larger. The concept of building intentional gatherings of three to 12 people who meet regularly for prayer, fellowship, and

If you're going to get to know your congregation as a pastor, you'll have to expand beyond greeting members at coffee hour or at the door after the worship service...

study is textbook wisdom. Go to your local Christian bookstore and you'll find abundant material on the subject, but one of my denomination's own, Roberta Hestenes, realized a couple of decades ago that Presbyterians have a ready-made answer to small group community. They can turn "committees into communities." In other words, why not see the weekly or monthly gathering of Session, Worship Committee, and even staff as a covenanting small group? Why not take these meetings and set aside time in them to nurture one another's spiritual lives? By doing this herself, Hestenes discovered that when people are nurtured in fellowship, there isn't as much pointless babble in the meetings, and the business gets handled more efficiently. At Bidwell Presbyterian, our head of staff, Steve Schibsted, believes this community model starts with senior staff—that if the value of intimate Christian *koinonia* is a priority at Bidwell, it must start with us. As a result, our senior staff has sought to model this by making sure we include *in the weekly agenda* time for sharing our lives and for prayer together.

Creative Adult Education

Related to the call for intentional small groups, but often forgotten, is the importance of excellent adult education. If you're going to get to know your congregation as a pastor, you'll have to expand beyond greeting members at coffee hour or at the door after the worship service, and making appointments to meet with individuals in your office. Here's where adult education

classes help. I regularly teach at least one class a week in five-week increments. (I describe this model more fully in "Renewing Minds" in the winter 2004 issue of CONGREGATIONS.) Why the five-week blocks? First of all, it's a length of time to which people can commit easily without failing. More importantly for the topic at hand, I'm able in this way to "shuffle the deck" and encounter a variety of members from my congregation throughout the year—at the same time providing opportunities for them to meet one another.

Volunteering and Fellowship

The worst sentence a pastor can hear is, "I'm not needed in this church." Large congregations with sizable staffs of professionals may offer the illusion

In large churches, ministry does not equal the minister.

of taking care of everything without needing the help of church members. Let's take this to the extreme: Megachurches like Willow Creek near Chicago and Saddleback Community Church in Lake Forest, California continue to attract *and retain* members because they know the importance of volunteer recruitment. *Harvard Business Review* has even studied Willow Creek's methods, and Saddleback has included a means for new members to discover their "ministries," one of the four "bases" of their assimilation process. At Bidwell, we have constructed a "Gifts and Call"

class designed to follow our "New Members" class. It guides our new Bidwellians to discover their gifts and then to see where they can connect with the church.

You Can't Know Them All

It's important to realize that, in a church where 500 to 2,000 people come to worship every Sunday, you will not know all of their names. This is primarily a call to psychological health. In other words, "It's okay, you're only human." The recognition of this human limitation is necessary and sometimes painful, such as when a church shifts from being a small congregation to a large one. There used to be a time when the entire congregation of Bidwell Presbyterian Church could gather in our sanctuary. There used to be a time when the senior pastor knew everyone's name. This day has passed. It needs to be both mourned (because it is definitely a loss) and celebrated. There will always be those who can't stand me—my personality, the way I preach, my nose ring (actually I don't have one, but if I did, it might be a problem).

The up side of a multiple staff is that these members can connect with another pastor.

The Role of a Multiple Staff

A multiple staff is not just multiple people doing the same thing as a solo pastor. In larger congregations, all the pastors can't attend any one event. That doesn't increase your effectiveness at all. According to my reckoning, four pastors engaging in the same event that only one pastor previously attended actually decreases the effec-

tive use of your resources by 300 percent. Let's be honest, congregants like it when all their pastors are at their committee meetings or raffles. But we've had to learn to utter sentences such as, "I'm sorry, but all five ministers can't attend the Presbyterian Women's Christmas Tea,

out 1 Thessalonians. It begins, "We give thanks to God always for you all, constantly mentioning you in our prayers..." (1.2). In every letter (except Galatians, where he's so angry he forgets to do it), Paul prays for the communities he loves and to whom he's writing. It keeps his relationships

I've made it my practice to pull out the pictorial directory and pray through a page or two. Or, when I meet a new college student at our church dinner following the Sunday evening service, I jot down his name and intercede the next day. Gradually, I've come to know the names of many of the people in my care and, more importantly, I've deepened my ministry.

So, in conclusion, Derek and I will stay committed to the viability of pastoral ministry in large congregations—with both its benefits and challenges—while, of course, we keep discussing that optimal number. There is one final element I haven't yet mentioned: Though I've written this article with professional church staff in mind, the experience of pastoring a larger congregation has taught me that not all community is pastor-centered. In large churches, ministry does not equal the minister. This, indeed, may be the most important lesson of all. ♦

It's important to realize that, in a church where 500 to 2,000 people come to worship every Sunday, you will not know all of their names... It's okay. You're only human.

but Jim will be there." And, thus, other ministers are freed to take the church's youth on a retreat, prepare a sermon, or even take a day of Sabbath. In addition, the participation of multiple pastors can move closer to that much-desired pastoral attribute of omnipresence, or at least multipresence. In other words, there can be pastors in multiple places at the same time.

alive even at a distance. And that practice helps me, too. Physically, I cannot be with most of the members of Bidwell most of the time. In addition, I often feel as if I suffer from declining memory as I look at the sea of faces during the worship service and recall seemingly few names. But

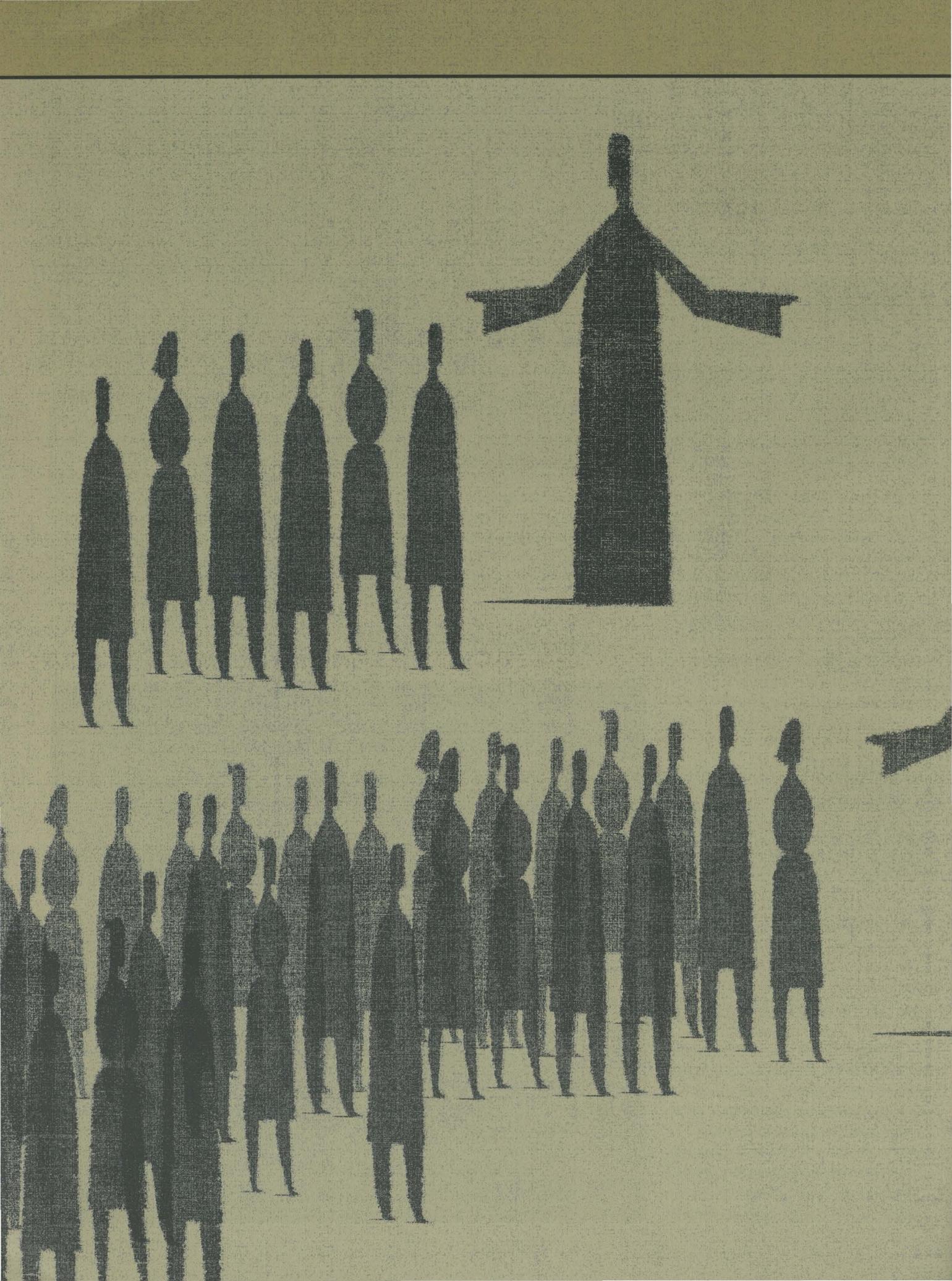
Keep in Prayer

I've heard the story of a pastor visiting a woman from his congregation at an assisted-living facility. He had been told that this woman was suffering from dementia and might not even remember his name. As soon as he arrived at the bedside—and before he even spoke—she exclaimed, "Jeff, it's so good to see you. I've been praying for you." The pastor knew what kept her mind sharp and her heart active. It was prayer. Prayer life increases care life. Indeed, it increases our ability to connect with our congregations. It even physically sharpens the brain. Studies in the hot field of "neuroplasticity" have verified that using the brain actually strengthens it, just as physical exercise tones muscles.

So, pastors, keep praying! The Apostle Paul is our model here. Check

SIX PATHS TO CREATING COMMUNITY IN LARGE CHURCHES

- 1. Create small group communities:** Nurture intentional communities of three to 12 people. These will help a large church grow smaller.
- 2. Offer adult ed** Multiple classes throughout the year offer the staff excellent ways to connect with church members (and non-members).
- 3. Provide easy access to volunteer opportunities and fellowship** Classes (and/or a volunteer coordinator) are indispensable for helping new members find their niche in the church.
- 4. Understand that you can't know them all:** It's okay. You're only human. Just make sure your congregational members are connected with someone on the staff.
- 5. Recognize and communicate that a multiple staff is not just multiple people doing the same thing as a solo pastor:** It is important to communicate clearly to the congregation that not all pastors can participate in all events, and that there are advantages to this arrangement. When one pastor is present at an event, there is a pastoral presence. That's enough. By limiting the number of pastors at any one event, there can be a pastoral presence in several places at once.
- 6. Keep in prayer** This is God's way of keeping us connected—and remembering names!—as well as a key responsibility for our church work.



Telling the Better Story: A Structure and Process

Research has shown that leaders of large congregations deal with much more complex daily management issues than do small church pastors. But how do they do so while still providing a leadership that shapes a community of faith out of a diverse group of gathered people? This question is still being explored, but one answer that appears to be emerging is that effective visionary leaders of large congregations tell stories.

Alban consultant
Gil Rendle explores the
power of story to shape
congregational mission
and identity

In a stunning article written in 1987, J. Gordon Kingsley, then president of William Jewell College in Liberty, Missouri, tried to answer the question of what a college president does.¹ Naturally, he acknowledged all of the business of leading: the meetings, the phone calls, the handshakes, the presentations, the dinners, the budgets, the spreadsheets, the personnel issues—the list goes on. But, having summarized the activities and tasks of a president, Kingsley made the claim that all of this is still not at the heart of what a college

president *does*. In claiming the central purpose of the president's role, Kingsley turned to images of the bard, the poet, "the solitary singer galvanizing a people to noble, even heroic action by the power of Their Story" (p. 18). With conviction, and with a suitably convincing telling, Kingsley wrote that the real work of the president is to learn the story of the college in order to tell its story—to help others find their place in that story, so that they can become participants in writing the college's next chapter.

Kingsley was pointing to the critical difference between all of the management activities that determine *how* an organization fulfills its purpose and the critical leadership skill of being able to give voice to *why* an organization fulfills its purpose.

I would argue that Kingsley's thinking has direct application not only to colleges and their presidents, but also to congregations and their leaders. Learning, telling, and rewriting the story of the congregation is, I believe, a key and critical practice of leadership in the large congregation that needs to be understood more deeply. Attention to congregational size confirms that leaders in large congregations must develop



Increasingly, what seems to form the new center in the large congregation is the story—the narrative of who we are as a congregation, as a people of faith.

more administrative and organizational forms of leadership. This shift challenges the management skills and capacities of many large congregation leaders, who are suddenly responsible for a complex organization with often competing differences and a sensitivity to quality and performance—all of which can no longer be negotiated by simply getting people together to agree, as is often done in small churches. Indeed, it is essential for large congregation leaders to master many of the organizational and administrative tasks named by Kingsley as the responsibility of a president of a college. But still we are not talking of leadership—of what makes the community “hum,” gives action purpose, gives faith meaning, makes ministry live.

Increasingly, I believe I am watching leadership surface in a new way as leaders tell the stories of their congregations. The effective use of story is leadership that goes well beyond efficient and effective organizational management. To be sure, large congregations require effective management, but a well-run organization does not call a person to personal searching, nor a community to reach beyond its own comfort for greater purpose.

The Power of Story

In the story of Esther in the Hebrew Bible, Mordecai learns of a plot to destroy the Jews. Haman, an officer of King Ahasuerus, plots against the Jews because Mordecai, himself a Jew, will not bow down before him as did all the other servants of the king. When Mordecai, knowing that all will be lost if the king is not alerted, charges Esther with going to

the king in her role as queen to plead on behalf of the Jews, Esther shrinks from the task because she has not been summoned to speak with the king, a considerable problem since those who speak uninvited are subject to death. But Mordecai is not put off. He retells Esther's own story in a way to empower and embolden her. “Who knows?” he says. “Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.” In his retelling he shifts Esther's understanding of herself from one of powerlessness as one of the servants of the king to a position of power in which she sees herself in a role of royal dignity. She is moved from fear to courage—all in the retelling of who she is.

Powerful stories do not need to be long and elaborate. Jesus, walking by the Sea of Galilee, came upon two brothers, Simon and Andrew, who were fishermen. “Follow me,” he said to them, “and I will make you fishers of men.” In this very brief retelling of Simon and Andrew's stories, Jesus used simple wordplay (from fishermen to fishers of men) and the first disciples answered the call and set out to do things they had never before dreamed of.

There are modern-day examples of the power of even the simplest story, as well. For instance, in a community divided by

factions, one congregation realized that they were a safe place for all parties to meet, so they began to tell their story as the town “meeting place.” This retelling of their place in the community shifted them from a passive role to one of active ministry in reconciling groups with contentious differences.

Howard Gardner, professor of education at Harvard University, writes that when one thinks of the leader “as a storyteller, whose stories must wrestle with those that are already operative in the minds of the audience, one obtains a powerful way of conceptualizing the work of leading.”²² Gardner says the visionary leader doesn't just rehearse or retell an existing story but, having learned the story of the people, actually creates a new story that produces change. Jesus took simple Galilean fishermen and

gave them a better story to live: as fishers of men. Similarly, the “better story” told effectively and embodied authentically by the leader of the large congregation galvanizes, directs, and provides leadership.

Old Centers No Longer Hold

The people participating in large congregations are less and less able to find a common center around the links that once held people in congregational community together. Personal family relationships, ethnic identity, a shared denominational history or identity, polity—the way of “doing church”—or a neighborhood location were ways in the past by which the people in a congregation could share a commonly held center. While these centers can still hold in smaller congregations, they have, for the most part, disappeared in the large congregation. People are drawn to large congregations for the multiple opportunities and choices among programs, for the alternative worship settings they represent, and for the small group connection with others like them that they offer, all of which underscore the differences that people bring to the

congregation rather than providing a common center that all share.

Increasingly, what seems to form the new center in the large congregation is the story—the narrative of who we are as a congregation, as a people of faith. The story that one large congregation tells is of being a place where people of great theological and social differences can gather, but where discernment and decisions will come from their center as a part of the reformed Christian movement. People of great differences in this congregation know that they are welcome, but that their congregation will behave in a way guided by tradition. The story that another large congregation tells is one that begins in the moments of high risk taken during the turmoil of the national civil rights movement in the United States. Participants know that their congregation, true to its history, will continue to seek social justice on a wide number of fronts, not all of which they will agree upon. To be sure, there are many smaller stories in each of these large congregations that serve as examples and evidence of how the larger story of “who we are” rings true. The power of the story in the large congregation is that people can share a sense of “belonging”

people of very great differences live day by day, the central unifying story is one of the gathering together of great diversity. Members of the congregation see their church as having received this location as a gift from God, so they include in their congregation a very wide range of people of different ages, races, economic means, genders, sexual orientations, nationalities, political alignments, and theological backgrounds, and they encourage people to hold these differences proudly. Like many large congregations, they are able to hold all the tension of their differences because the individual participants do not need to engage all of these differences directly. Participants can appreciate the differences present in the congregation, but because the congregation is large and provides multiple small groups and task forces with focused purpose, individuals can make their deeper connections in subgroups of people that they find to be much more like themselves. The idea of a fully diverse congregation and the visible witness to their differences can easily be seen in public moments, such as times of worship. But members and participants in the large congregation do not need to reconcile all of these differences. Diversity can be appreciated in the large

people centered on spiritual healing, the people who are gay and lesbian, or the people committed to neighborhood mission. Reflecting on the tension between the diversity of the whole and the similarities sought out in smaller groups, the senior pastor observed that “belonging” is never negotiated in the congregation. As long as individuals are able to see themselves in the congregation’s story about the inclusion of the great differences in God’s creation they can both participate themselves and welcome the participation of others who do not share their particular interests or life experiences.

Connection, Resonance, Meaning

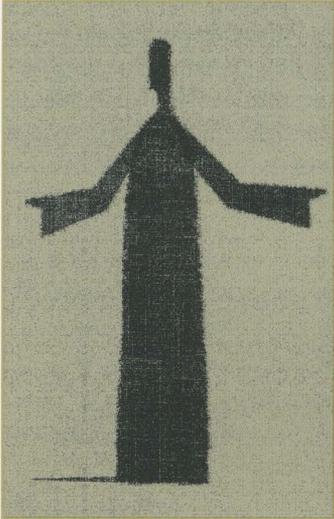
Clearly, leadership is not telling people what they want to hear. It is not creating the story with enough “spin” to manipulate people for personal or congregational advantage. Leadership happens when the leader tells a story sufficiently healthy, authentic, and purposeful for others to feel connection, respond with resonance, and find greater meaning. Connection happens when people are able to say to themselves, “I see myself in that story.”

Connection seems not to rely upon full agreement or a need for compliance from others. To feel like a part of the larger whole seems to be enough.

Resonance suggests that the historicity or accuracy of the story is not as important as the question of whether or not it rings true. When the story rings true it enables the listeners to generate a new way of thinking and acting that embraces—and even advances—the truth the story represents.³

Meaning suggests that a purposefulness is found in the story. We increasingly under-

stand faith and religion as a doorway to creating meaning in our lives. Much has been written about the spiritual search for meaning that has taken hold in a post-modern, post-9/11 world that found materialism and consumption to be empty and



The power of the story in the large congregation is that people can share a sense of “belonging” as long as they can see themselves in and as part of the larger story, yet they do not need to be in agreement or share great similarities with everyone else.

as long as they can see themselves in and as part of the larger story, yet they do not need to be in agreement or share great similarities with everyone else.

In one large urban congregation in the middle of a large metropolitan city, where

gathering and in the identity of the congregation. But individual participants then commonly participate in small group programs with the people with whom they have the most in common—such as the people focused on public policy, the



The life-giving story has to point beyond ourselves... to some greater purpose.

science and technology to be incomplete by themselves. The life-giving story has to point beyond ourselves and our congregation to some greater purpose. As such, the empowering story of the congregation must be connected to the much larger story of our faith.

Telling a Congregation's Story

How do leaders provide story leadership? The most probable answer to that question is that they do so intuitively. Good leaders in large congregations seem to just know the power of story and intuitively learn to use the congregation's story to shape the community and guide ministry. Narrative theory applied to organizations, institutions, and community has not been public long enough to give a rich language to this leadership by story. Nonetheless, there is a structure and a process that leaders bring to the authentic telling of the story. In this brief article, that structure might be captured simply in the notion of learning, challenging, and collaborating.

The first movement of leading by story is to learn the story that is currently being lived. This is leadership by listening—listening to how a people talk about themselves: the metaphors they use, the way in which behavior and attitude do or do not match their words, the memories captured and retold, and also the memories forgotten or denied. The leader, at this stage, does the homework of the objective, or dispassionate, learner, whose task is to capture the larger picture of this congregation in the real context of its own history, its changing environment, and in a shifting culture. The leader learns what is said and unsaid, seen and unseen, and willingly searches for connections to the biblical text and to spiritual practices.

Having listened, the leader then begins to tell the story of what was learned. In this second movement of leadership, the retelling task of the leader is always directed to helping the people find and live the “better” story of their future. To be in relationship with God, who believes that we can ever be more than we presently are, means to submit our stories of who we are to the challenge of the story of who we might be. So the leader shifts from the listening mode to the talking mode. As the story is retold, the leader challenges whether there can be more or less to the story—more health, more depth, more meaning, or less fear, less caution, less control. This period of challenge produces anxiety for all, including the leader. When our stories are challenged our identity is questioned, and this is experienced as a moment of chaos. What was once known is now uncertain, and what was once home is now wilderness. We all do not behave at our best in such anxiety, so the leader must provide support and safety along with the challenge of the retelling in order to help the people stay with and live into their new story.

The third movement of leadership by story comes as leader and people together use what they have learned to collaborate on the new telling of the story or the writing of its next chapter. Some large congregations use formal planning processes at this collaborative stage. Planning is a prime opportunity for the congregation to rehearse the formation questions of ministry that rest at the center: Who are we? What has God called us to do? Who is our neighbor?⁴ Some leaders use focusing moments such as leadership retreats since these are times to step away from daily duties and consider the “big picture” that allows for thinking about the future in a new way. Leaders will commonly use the estab-

lished paths of structured conversations that come out of sermons, teaching moments, staff meetings, and governing board discussions. The new telling or the next chapter often has the energy that ignites passion in people, and a clarity that attracts people. In the large

congregation, the new story does not always have all members' agreement. In fact, the new collaboration is often the product of and dependent upon the ongoing argument and accommodation that will continue into the future as a way to shape and sharpen the story.

But is it Leadership?

The North American assumption of leadership is that it must be decisive and directive, a kind of leadership in which the single leader points a direction that others cannot see. Leaders in large congregations do need to be decisive and able to make decisions at appropriate moments. But the truer act of leadership in the faith community—particularly in large, diverse congregations—is to stand with a people to discern together a future that is faithful to God's call. The importance of shaping and claiming the story of identity and purpose in the large congregation stands out as even greater than the management tasks of budget, personnel, and program development. It is the leadership that stands at the center of the congregation. ♦

NOTES

1. J. Gordon Kingsley, “The President as Bard,” *AGB Reports*, July/August 1987, 18–21.
2. Howard Gardner, *Leading Minds: An Anatomy of Leadership* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), xi.
3. Stephen Denning, *The Springboard: How Storytelling Ignites Action in Knowledge-Era Organizations* (Boston: Butterworth Heinemann, 2001), 38.
4. Gil Rendle and Alice Mann, *Holy Conversations: Strategic Planning as a Spiritual Practice for Congregations* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2003).



Senior Pastor or CEO?

The Challenges of Balance in Large Church Leadership

MARLIS MCCOLLUM

Pastors transitioning from a small or mid-size congregation to a large church often believe their work will be much the same, only on a larger scale. Nothing could be further from the truth, say those who have already taken the leap.

When the Alban Institute interviewed eight ministers from five denominations about their own moves to large congregations, all described the large church experience as markedly different from that of pastoring a smaller church. Gone are the days of spending large portions of time personally tending one's flock, using board meetings as brainstorming sessions to flesh out fledgling ideas, and working closely with a handful of long-term staff members and a well-known cadre of volunteers. Instead, the pastor spends more time with his or her staff than with congregants, surrenders many aspects of ministry to a large and continually changing staff, and assumes responsibility for the management and administration of an organization that is far more complex than any he or she has typically known previously.

According to Joseph Britton, associate dean of Yale Divinity School, the large church has very different staffing and leadership needs than the small church. Far more staff are needed to handle tasks that can be effectively handled by volunteers in small churches,

and the church leader takes on a much broader scope of responsibility and a more public role. There are also financial challenges in large churches that do not exist in smaller ones, he points out, such as larger congregations' need to rely on a variety of sources for funding, including endowments.

In addition, worship services, staff assignments, program innovations, and ministerial commitments must be planned and scheduled years in advance. "In the mid-size church, you are generally planning for the next year. In the large church, you need to plan three to four years out," says Laurel Hallman, senior minister of First Unitarian Church of Dallas, a congregation of nearly 1,000 members and an average worship attendance of 500.

Similarly, a great deal of preparation is necessary before a proposal is brought before the governing body of a large church. Due to the sheer number of reports to be heard and decisions to be made at these meetings, there is little room for the kind of discussion that takes place in small churches' board meetings. Instead,

when a proposal is brought before a large church's governing body, "it's a 'go' or 'no go' situation," says Norbert Oesch, former pastor of what was then a 4,600-member church, St. John's Lutheran Church in Orange, California, and current executive leader of the Pastoral Leadership Institute, which has provided leadership training to pastors for the last seven years.

On the plus side, large churches have the opportunity to do programs that smaller churches are not able to do, but the more programs a church offers, the larger its management structure becomes. More people are needed to coordinate and manage the church's various programs and more funding is needed to support them, necessitating increased oversight of the revenues and expenditures associated with each program.

Shortly after transitioning to a large church, most ministers find themselves in a state of shock—or surprise, at a minimum—over these dramatic changes in their roles and responsibilities, as well as the organizational structure of the new

church they have been selected to lead.

"It seems I have been on vacation all these years," Hallman recalls one colleague remarking shortly after leaving a small congregation to assume the leadership of a large one. This minister's reaction is not uncommon. Even the seasoned large church ministers in Alban's survey recall with clarity the culture shock they experienced when they began their large church ministries.

Shifting to Systemic Ministry

The management function, they believe, is often the most challenging part of the transition from a small church to a large one. Comparisons with running a business are common. In some ways, many say, leading a large church is actually *more* difficult than running a business. While a business may be responsible for manufacturing a single object, a church has a multiplicity of functions. And, while businesses are run by people trained for their positions, many pastors find themselves with little training or experience in the tasks they are charged with, such as fiscal management; the hiring, firing, and managing of staff; forecasting market trends; and overseeing multiple programs, departments, and initiatives.

John Buchanan, senior minister of Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago, says the management challenge is also greater for ministers than for business owners for another reason—because "the leader must remember that a church is not a business and must be very intentional in his or her leadership."

In Oesch's view, this intentionality is clearly defined. "The pastor in a large church must move dramatically toward leadership—setting the vision, unifying the people, designing change, and especially narrowing the band of people he can closely minister to," he says. "The expectation of the people is that the pastor is going to be available to them as a pastor, and that becomes next to impossible."

Similarly, letting go of old notions, such as that the pastor should be at every meeting for every program, can be problematic, says Arvid Straube, lead minister

TEN KEYS TO SUCCESS IN LARGE CHURCH MINISTRY

Norbert Oesch, executive leader of the Pastoral Leadership Institute, which has provided leadership training to ministers since 1997, offers the following advice to those about to embark on their first large church ministry.

1. Get leadership training for yourself that includes some system of support and accountability.
2. Keep as your primary focus the goal of connecting people to God.
3. Learn what to say "no" to.
4. Invest your best energy and resources in Sunday mornings. That is still where 80 percent of your outreach happens.
5. Trust your people and love them. Trust their capabilities, their love for the Lord, and their desire for the good of the church.
6. Lead from strength and staff to weaknesses: Spend the bulk of your time and energy working in your most gifted areas, and hire or assign others to handle the rest. Don't be afraid to bring on staff or volunteers who are better at certain things than you are.
7. Deeply invest in leadership training for your staff and lay congregational leaders.
8. Spend intentional and systematic time with unofficial leaders—those who are influential in the congregation though they hold no elected office in the church.
9. Give close attention to the history and culture of the congregation and the surrounding community. Discover the strengths there, and build on them.
10. Remember that the church and the people are not yours but God's.

of First Unitarian Universalist Church of San Diego. The pastor himself must realize that it is logistically impossible to do this and must now channel his energies. His congregation must also realize and accept this change, Straube says.

Hallman recalls that it was a consultant who helped clarify this both for herself and the church's board of directors. Through his teaching, she learned to shift from what she calls a "relational ministry" to a "systemic ministry."

"In my former church, I had done a lot of spiritual direction with individuals. Within about a week of coming here I figured out that I couldn't do that," she recalls. "I had to be a spiritual leader, but it had to be in a larger context, and everything was like that. Everything I did had to be leveraged. I had to leverage myself, teaching other people how to do the things I had once done rather than my being a sole practitioner in my ministry." Hallman advises ministers new to the large church setting to give the bulk of their attention to vision and mission, to staff, to resources, and to preaching. "Recognize that you can't pay attention to everything, so be really discerning about those things."

One group of people Norbert Oesch says he would have paid more attention to if he had known during his large church pastorate what he knows now are those leaders who do not currently hold elected positions though they may have held such positions in the past. "I naively thought the primary—and perhaps the only—leaders I needed to look to were the elected leaders, as is so in small churches. In large churches, however, many of the leaders who have served before continue to have positions of influence." Today, Oesch says, he would set up quarterly meetings with these unofficial leaders, clarify their positions, and bind them to being truth-tellers "because the large church gets divided through half-truths, and most of these leaders will tell the truth if they know it."

Reframing the Pastoral Role

Even as large church ministers pass the torch of pastoral care to other staff members and cultivate a broader leader-

ship role, they maintain an awareness of the congregation's expectations that they will be available for pastoral care, and the disappointment that can occur when they are not. They deal with this tension in a variety of ways.

Oesch recommends continually lifting up those who are providing pastoral care—at worship services in particular—as well as publicizing in the church's bulletin and newsletter, and on its Web site, the

natural gift than others, and to know what your limits are is really important," he says. "I have many colleagues who simply immerse themselves in management theory books until they lose the sense of the rich literature that they need to have in this faith, which is built on the Word. They talk this management talk that doesn't have anything to do with the member of their congregation who is dying of esophageal cancer,

"Seminaries don't equip you to be extraordinarily capable of everything. There are many, many things you need to learn quickly and quietly from gifted laypeople and staff people."

—REV. PETER MARTY, *St. Paul Lutheran Church, Davenport, Iowa*

routes through which members may request pastoral care. The senior minister's role then becomes primarily one of ensuring that the congregation is taken care of by those responsible for providing the pastoral care, he says.

While they recognize that they cannot provide all of the pastoral care that the thousands of members of their congregation will require, many large church ministers are reluctant to give up their pastoral role entirely, despite the many other demands of the job. For some, this may be an indication that the large church setting is not a good fit, says Peter Marty, senior pastor of the 2,900-member St. Paul Lutheran Church in Davenport, Iowa, where attendance averages about 1,100 each Sunday. Marty cautions ministers not to move to a large church if they want to spend the bulk of their time on pastoral care. Likewise, he says, those without the skills and passions needed in the larger church—leadership, visionary capacity, and the ability to inspire others and foster togetherness, to name a few—would be better off not transitioning to a larger church. Not only will they lose the contact with people that they value, he says, but they will also be ill-equipped to effectively lead a large church.

"I believe people can grow in leadership, but some people have more of a

and they still need to be a pastor to her."

Large church ministers, he says, "have to fight to maintain a deep, personal sense of pastoral ministry, where you connect interestingly with people's lives and you don't just attend meetings or cast visions, but you actually know how to hold someone's hand at a critical moment."

Marty uses travel time to connect with the members of his own congregation. "I bring a clipboard with me and I dial people constantly while I'm on the road. I do everything I can to touch base with people, to let them know that I am their pastor, and that I'm available to them." Marty also believes in interrupting the pressure and pace of his job as senior pastor by occasionally doing something out of his normal routine, whether it's helping the church custodian change a few lightbulbs or unloading cases of wine from the trunk of a congregant's car. "Those kinds of things help to remind me that nothing is beneath me, and I think that helps a senior pastor keep perspective. If they are not careful, senior pastors can lose perspective on the servant character of their work, and consider themselves to be running fiefdoms," Marty says. "Once you get into that mode of self-importance, you lose interest in and an affection for people, and you lose a credibility in dealing with them."

For Ann Svennungsen, president of the Fund for Theological Education and a recent senior pastor of a 3,700-member church, one of the challenges of large church ministry is staying engaged with and connected to the congregation without becoming enmeshed in its dynamics. “One secret,” she says, “is not taking things personally—seeing things as part of what is going on in the system.” A spiritual director

church’s success depends not only on the minister but also on the staff, explains Buchanan. The senior minister, therefore, must be able to motivate and empower existing staff and make sound decisions when hiring new staff. With a large staff, departures are commonplace, so the search for new staff can be an ongoing process, particularly since competent staff are not easy to find. But finding them is

vision and gifts, fresh ideas, and fresh wisdom,” says Svennungsen. “You want creative, smart people on your staff. The challenge then becomes how to continue to guide that group in a common vision.” Svennungsen says she does so by being very clear about the intent of meetings, and by continually demonstrating that staff members will be heard, that there will be a process that will be respected, and that decisions will be made through a process of discernment.

“Surround yourself with very good people,” advises Marty, “people who have both good business sense and very good church sense, a deeply felt faith, and a deep commitment to the church.”

“Don’t be afraid to bring on people better than you,” adds Oesch, who recommends large church leaders focus the bulk of their time and effort in areas in which they excel, hiring or assigning staff to the areas in which they are not so adept.

For Marty, loving the staff is also the mark of a good large church leader. “You simply have to delight in other people. . . . On many days, I need to be more interested in my colleagues than I am in myself or my tasks. They deserve not my supervision but my attention and my respect, because they are working hard in the trenches and doing everything they can. If I can’t delight in that, I shouldn’t be in this position.”

“We’re afraid to give people power and we’re afraid of having power because we have a deep belief that power corrupts. But it is unaccountable power, I think, that is the biggest problem.”

—REV. LAUREL HALLMAN, *First Unitarian Church of Dallas*

or coach, she suggests, can be invaluable for assisting senior ministers in maintaining their perspective and seeing clearly what is occurring in their congregations.

Giving Staff a Front Seat

While many large church ministers may, at first, be shocked by how little time is available to connect with individual members, they are likely to be equally surprised to discover the vast amounts of time they spend managing the staff.

“I devote 40 to 50 percent of my time to the staff—edifying, inspiring, encouraging, redirecting, retrieving—in everything from e-mails to office visits every day of the week,” says Marty. “It is like working with a small congregation, but it’s built on the theory that if the staff is strong, and they are inspired to serve God happily and competently, the congregation will be strong similarly.”

According to Svennungsen, “there are not many weeks when there is not some staffing issue on your desk—whether it be conflict, someone leaving, or someone needing encouragement—and you really need to be attentive to those key relationships.”

While the success of a small congregation depends largely on the pastor, a large

critical, says Hallman. “Those decisions have the longest life and it’s very hard to go backward on them.”

Bringing new staff members on board is just the beginning of the pastor’s job, though, and many believe managing a large staff is the task for which most large church pastors are least prepared. As Oesch points out, the number of relationships that must be managed increases exponentially with every additional staff person. “When you add one more staff person to five, you don’t just have six. In terms of relationships, you have many more multiples of that one person, so the shift from a 12-member staff to a staff of 70 is huge.”

But a large staff is a necessity in a large church. Jobs once competently handled by volunteers in the smaller congregation must now be done by trained staff. As Hallman notes, it would be relatively simple for a committee of volunteers in a small church to raise \$5,000, but raising hundreds of thousands—as may be done in a large church—requires experience and professional know-how.

Nevertheless, large church ministers recognize the staff as a vast resource of ideas, support, and inspiration. “One of the incredible joys of being a pastor of a large church is working with others of

Taking On Too Much

When they are new to the job, though, large church pastors may make too little use of the talents of their staff—a bad idea, old hands say. “I think the most common mistake for senior pastors to make when they come to a large church is to pretend to themselves that they have all of the ideas, that they have all the gifts for effective leadership,” says Marty. “Seminaries don’t equip you to be extraordinarily capable of everything. There are many, many things you need to learn quickly and quietly from gifted laypeople and staff people. You’ve got to be more of a listener and a quiet leader than someone who pretends to know it all.”

Likewise, a senior minister who takes on too much can be detrimental to all concerned. "A really critical question for a pastor moving to a large church," Oesch says, "is: What will you say 'no' to? To say 'no' for the sake of the ministry, the staff, and the congregation is not easy, but it is critical." Hallman agrees. "I found that choosing what to ignore was almost as powerful as what I did."

Relying too heavily on themselves and trying to do too much are not the only traps new large church ministers fall into. Experienced large church pastors also caution against claiming credit or ownership of the church and its accomplishments. "I see some pastors operate as if the church is theirs, not God's," says Oesch. "The best of the large church pastors do just the opposite. It is such an incredibly empowering thing when a pastor speaks about the church as God's church, and speaks about the people and what they are doing. It unleashes the energy of the community of saints like hardly anything I've ever seen. When consistently lifting up the people becomes part of the DNA of the pastor, people just can't wait to serve."

Requiring Accountability

No matter how eager the staff and congregation are to serve, though, unless effective systems of accountability are in place, their energy and enthusiasm can result in little better than chaos—unmet promises, people left unserved, confusion over roles and responsibilities, and any number of other tangled issues the senior pastor will be left to unravel.

"Accountability is an important thing in a church, and that's a hard concept for many people to grasp because they think of church as a place to just be spiritual and be in community," says Hallman. But the way to create the kind of community the members of the congregation are seeking, she suggests, is by establishing systems to ensure that people do what they say they are going to do. "We're so worried about turning into a business that we're afraid not only of being a business but also of power: We're afraid to give people power and we're afraid of having power because

we have a deep belief that power corrupts. But it is unaccountable power, I think, that is the biggest problem."

An accountability structure for the minister is also crucial, according to Oesch. One of the most common mistakes he has seen pastors new to the large church setting make is to believe their staff can serve as their accountability group. "They cannot be the minister's accountability group because the minister is their supervisor. The staff simply will not venture into areas that need to be talked about, nor will the senior pastor expose himself to his staff in the way he needs to." In his own life, Oesch has an accountability group consisting of two professional church workers who are not themselves members of the clergy. "I consider them people that I am accountable to, and I bare my soul to them. There is no substitute for asking people to come into a relationship like that with you, where they'll be honest with you, have no fear of you, love you, and want the best for you," he says.

Taking Time for Renewal

For many ministers, a particularly challenging aspect of the shift from a smaller church to a large one is finding time to renew themselves. "The biggest challenge for me is the relentlessness of it, and trying to keep spiritually alive and

no room for even one more, your psychological, emotional, and mental capacities will stop any new idea because you have no energy."

Also crucial to effective large church leadership, Marty believes, is for the senior pastor to have a strong theological center. "If you don't have a center, you have no circumference. How are you going to hold and shape a community if there's no center to yourself?" Marty credits his own groundedness in his faith as the source of his ability to serve effectively as a large church minister. "That orientation, that capacity to know every single day who I am and what I most deeply believe helps me make decisions in realms where I've never before had to make a decision. Without that deeply rooted, grounded sense of self in Christ, a lot of pastors flounder." A lack of such groundedness, he says, may cause pastors to be easily swayed by the opinions and wishes of certain groups or individuals—such as the larger contributors in the congregation or the more forceful members of the board—only to "flip like a weathervane" when another strong opinion is directed their way. "But if you have a strongly rooted center of faith in Jesus Christ, you know how to make sense of the rich donor, who may be a great guy but who has no business running the church. You also know how to retrieve the little person in the back pew with her need for a hearing aid when there are some big

"The leader must remember that a church is not a business and must be very intentional in his or her leadership."

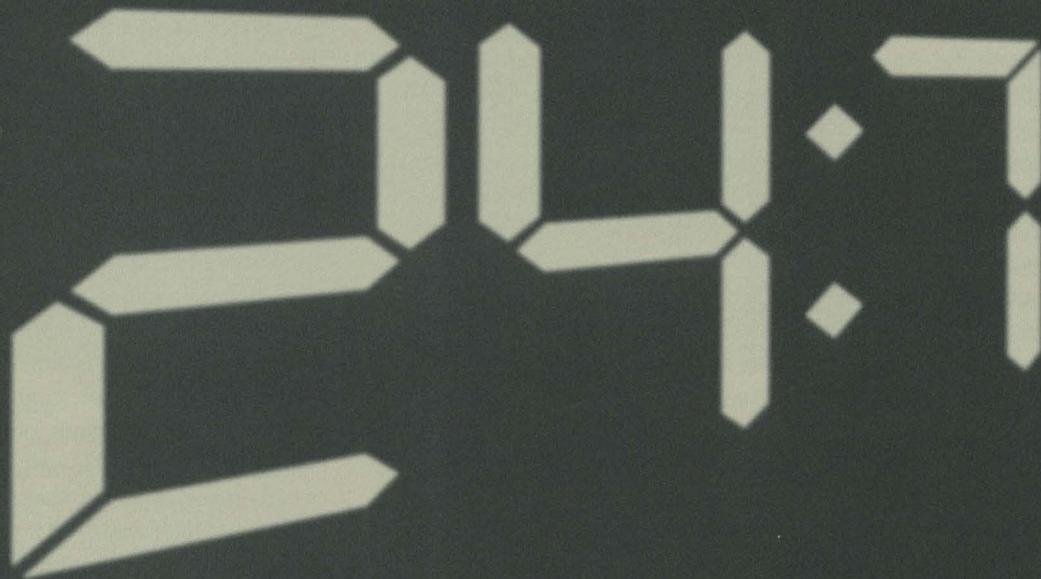
—REV. JOHN BUCHANAN,
Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago

refreshed amid all that pressure," says Hallman. To ensure that she has this time, Hallman schedules blocks of "untouchable" time for herself. "In order to be able to write and have some depth, you have to have that time," she says.

A side effect of being overscheduled is the loss of imagination, says Oesch. "If your table is so full of plates that there's

people wanting to ignore her. Simply to operate with management theory in the absence of a consistently grounded faith, I think, is trouble." ♦

Also contributing to this article was Alban Institute researcher Rowena Martineau, author of "The Large Church Project," June 2004.



The Stresses of Size

One Minister's Journey to the Land of the Large Church and Back

JEFF ZURHEIDE

My ministerial resume can be summed up fairly well in three phrases: a suburban church, an inner-city church, and a small-town church. As dizzying as that varied list may sound, I feel fortunate to have had such a variety of experience. If pushed to identify which of these contexts was the most challenging, however, I would single out the inner-city congregation, First Baptist Church of Oklahoma City, as the most strenuous of the three. Such realities as our being located in a transitional neighborhood, the general shift in focus from downtown to suburbs in terms of population growth and energy, and

Ministers, as human beings, are limited by space and time. While this is the case in every ministerial context, this truth must become the mantra of every senior pastor of a sizable congregation.

dynamics having to do with aging (of the congregation and the building) all most certainly came into play. But size, in terms of both the congregation and the physical plant, was perhaps the key issue for me.

Corporate Challenges

First Baptist's history is hardly unlike any "first" church in any large city. I'm sure you know the story quite well: Downtown congregation grows. Downtown church expands building. Downtown congregation dwindles. Large building remains. As I have heard the many accounts of the congregation's "glory days," browsed the archives, and gotten hopelessly lost in the church's cavernous halls, I have concluded that the church complex of my former parish must have been built during an era when most senior pastors lived by the adage, "A building program is the sign that God's Spirit is at work in your church." (Judging from the monstrosities that continue to be built today in God's name, maybe such a notion lives on.)

I have often wondered, while marveling at that particular church building's expansiveness, if the place was ever fully occupied. "Only briefly," some of the resident church historians have told me. Unforeseen demographic changes, not to mention church controversies, soon served to render the voluminous space unnecessary.

Since there continues to be no such thing in congregational life as a demolition program (imagine how long a pastor would last after raising

that prospect at the next business meeting!), many large-building congregations are forced to trudge along, burdened by exorbitant maintenance costs. Today, the plumbing has failed up on the third floor. Tomorrow, air conditioning units number 34 and 41 will give up the ghost. Next month, either the sanctuary roof will need to be re-shingled or a drip-catching paper cup system will need to be "installed" around the pulpit!

"And I Saw a Great Beast"

John must have seen something a lot more formidable in his Revelation than brick and mortar, but for those putting together church budgets each fall, the costs of keeping up the physical plant are likewise beastly specters. Such realities prompt all sorts of questions in my mind around the issue of stewardship. How can we

people are crying out for food, medical care, and an economic "hand up." There are undoubtedly people in our own communities who struggle to pay the light bill, and who must conclude, while gazing up at hundred-foot spires (or crosses), that the Christian faith is more about empire building than sharing tangible love.

And let's face it, aren't there other options for the overbuilt church? How about selling off church buildings that no longer meet the needs of particular congregations but have instead become financial "millstones," actually serving to prevent congregations from fulfilling the call God extends to them today? I'm not suggesting here that an inner-city church hang out the white flag and flee to the "burbs." It may be possible to purchase a smaller, more efficient structure that is also located downtown, if that remains the church's locus of Spirit-confirmed ministry. Such a change, while difficult and potentially controversial, may in fact enable the congregation to experience new life with a more profound witness and the financial ability to carry out its mission.

By the same token, for those congregations seriously considering upgrading to megachurch "digs," I

Why not move to having multiple worship services, home cell groups, or planting a new congregation in another part of town rather than undertaking a multi-million-dollar building program?

continue to spend so much of the funds God has entrusted to us on buildings? When is a skyrocketing maintenance budget simply too much? Just because you can afford to build—and to keep up your large building—should you? The world's

would offer a cautionary word. The popularity of particular congregations rises and falls with the fickle tastes of human beings, real estate cycles, and pastoral personalities. (While I have known this to be particularly true in the Bible Belt,

Preaching requires a visceral connection with people and their needs. Otherwise, whether evangelical or mainline, contemporary or traditional, pulpit activity is merely conceptual, just empty theory.

the same may also be applied to other regions of the country.) I have seen the “in” church (with all of the “bigger barns” invested in a decade or so ago) become the “out” church in a matter of months. The result, regrettably enough, is staff transition, financial crisis, and, in dire circumstances, buildings that become stone-cold mausoleums. Why not move to having multiple worship services, home cell groups, or planting a new congregation in another part of town rather than undertaking a multi-million-dollar building program? In light of the needs that call to us both near and far, from the standpoint of stewardship and Biblical priority, I have a tough time justifying such an extreme expenditure.

Naive Expectations

While the sheer size of church edifices begs all sorts of very practical questions, as suggested above, large congregations also pose a myriad of pastoral challenges. Let’s now get personal about the ministry dynamics inherent in large congregations.

I have to admit, in retrospect, that when I first began to explore a move to a much larger church family and ministerial staff, I rather naively assumed that I could smoothly transition from solo pastor generalist to senior pastor specialist. I thought that a large staff would free up my time for preaching, teaching, and otherwise leading. I imagined from afar that, rather than having to do it all, I could invest my time in a few particular aspects of ministry. Well, guess

where I ended up focusing my time and energy? On the ministerial staff! While clergy literature encourages senior pastors to replace the attention they once gave to the entire small congregation with enabling the work of the staff of the large congregation, I was taken aback by the sheer volume of time this required. And in our particular context and circumstances, I also had the dubious honor of having to downsize the entire church staff by 50 percent! Imagine the time and energy that facilitating that difficult transition took, both in handling congregational politics and exercising compassion in my relationships with staff, both those who left and those who remained.

I somehow expected that, with the significant staff support that was still in place, I would be able to leave behind the heavy administrative and organizational responsibilities of my

In a larger context, the senior pastor simply can’t cover all of the pastoral care needs personally. And if one picks and chooses, favoritism (whether deliberate or otherwise) becomes the charge.

solo pastor days, and instead concentrate on things I loved. This was not to be. Two realities stared me in the face: One, there is only so much time given us in a certain week. Preparation for sermons, Bible studies, Sunday school classes,

funerals, and weddings, while enjoyable and rewarding to a point, occupied an amazing amount of my time. Two, administration merely grows in proportion to the size of the institution. While we had in our employ a very competent church administrator, there were some substantial issues and projects that I simply could not hand off. And, as in a smaller church, it was still necessary to attend an array of important meetings (with the deacons, trustees, finance committee, and personnel committee, to name a few).

A related naive expectation was that a large ministerial staff would afford me the opportunity to do quality praying, reflecting, and visioning, but this did not happen with any consistency. Perhaps my priorities were out of whack, or I simply was not disciplined enough to take regular time for retreats away from the office (a must if one expects to achieve any depth of reflection or visioning). Any visioning I did accomplish was squeezed in on my days off, when recreational diversion probably would have been the healthier personal option.

Representational Ministry

Ministers, as human beings, are limited by space and time. While this

is the case in every ministerial context, this truth must become the mantra of every senior pastor of a sizable congregation. In this context, ministry must become more representational than personal. For instance, in the smaller church family

the pastor does pastoral care directly. She goes to the hospital, spends time with the family, and offers the prayer. In a larger context, the senior pastor simply can't cover all of the pastoral care needs personally. And if one picks and chooses, favoritism (whether deliberate or otherwise) becomes the charge.

Representational ministry requires that pastoral care be done en masse.

sorrow, large church ministry presented me with a dilemma. The impossible choice was between limiting the exercise of my gifts of pastoral care for the sake of time management or continuing to pastor individuals to the detriment of best fulfilling other responsibilities. In certain respects, I continued to pastor as if the church were smaller. This certainly enlivened my

increase the size of the congregation to be served in tandem with one's age and years of ministerial experience. "Moving up" to a bigger church is seen as a kind of promotion. This should not be the case. Depending on one's gifts, orientation, and preferences, the smaller congregation might be the context of choice.

Such questions as, "Do you prefer to know everybody's name?" "Do you prefer to be a solo act?" "Are you more of a generalist?" and "How do you feel about investing in a staff rather than the congregation as a whole?" might serve as a starting point as one considers the alternatives. While I have serious misgivings about the stewardship issues inherent in large institutional churches, and while representational ministry has its potential pitfalls, there are many senior pastors who thrive in the large church context. I have decided, however—after having a taste of large church ministry—that, personally, it's just not for me.

I treasure my time with that particular larger congregation. I love the people I left behind. I do not, however, miss the budgeting challenges of maintaining an historic building that covers an entire city block. I do not miss the dissonance I experienced in being able neither to do it all nor to sufficiently specialize. Having learned a great deal more about ministry and about myself in the process of serving a large church, I now truly celebrate the pastoring opportunities daily afforded me by the smaller church. I have found my place. ♦

"Moving up" to a bigger church is seen as a kind of promotion. This should not be the case. Depending on one's gifts, orientation, and preferences, the smaller congregation might be the context of choice.

Identifying the hurts and needs of the congregation in general and at arms length must replace the hands-on approach. Acknowledging those who have passed away over the past year, say, in the course of an All Saints Day worship service, or as part of a Memorial Day service, would take the place of phoning all of the bereaved, not to mention visiting each of them in their homes.

Significant changes in one's orientation are a must if large church ministry is the choice.

Having said that, it concerns me that large church pastors—as well as some others—who do not spend time with people in the church who are hurting, have little idea how to preach and teach and lead their particular congregations. Preaching requires a visceral connection with people and their needs. Otherwise, whether evangelical or mainline, contemporary or traditional, pulpit activity is merely conceptual, just empty theory.

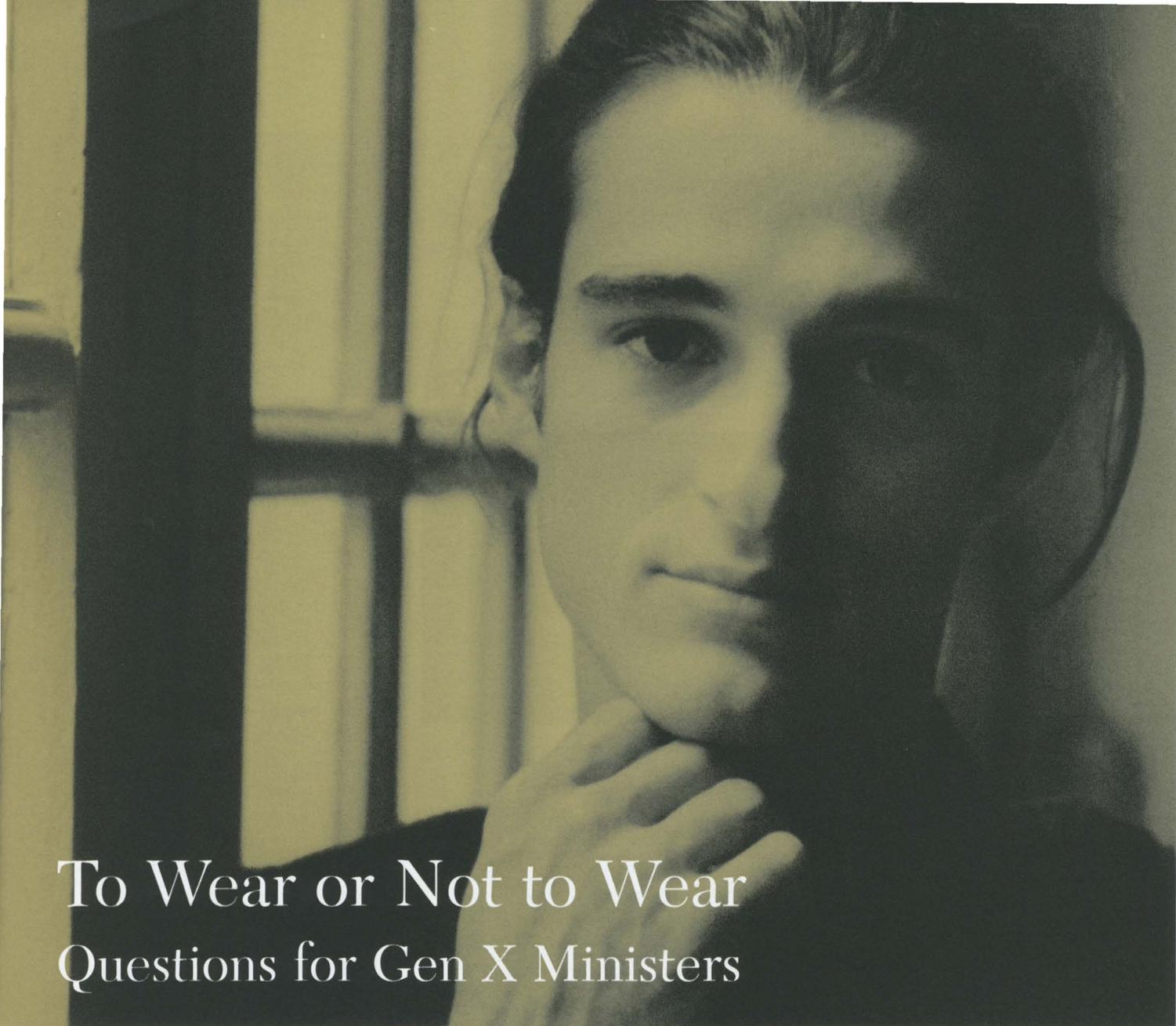
As a pastor who thrives on personal ministry, who wants to know everyone's name and be able to be with them in their times of joy and

preaching! But it left me pulled in far too many directions. And, while satisfying to me and eagerly received by the congregation, this was not the ideal way to lead the church. I could do the work. I was well loved and respected. But I knew I was not at my best. Which leads to the question of whether pastoring a large church fits everyone.

"How are you wired up?"

No, the large church context is not appropriate for everyone. The adage, "Bigger is better" (which Jesus seemed to refute in his parables), has led to the expectation that one should

Such questions as, "Do you prefer to know everybody's name?" ... and "How do you feel about investing in a staff rather than the congregation as a whole?" might serve as a starting point as one considers the alternatives.



To Wear or Not to Wear Questions for Gen X Ministers

ELIZABETH DILLEY-GONZALES

“I just want you to know,” said a member of the search committee to me after she extended the committee’s invitation to be their candidate for pastor, “that there were a couple of people on the search committee who had a little problem with your nose ring. It’s not a big deal, but it is a deal.”

I had expected this conversation to happen. For months, all through the fall and winter when I was preparing my profile for circulation and preparing to interview with churches, I had agonized about what I should do about my nose ring. My father told me simply not to wear it—“Don’t give them a reason to reject you.” My field education supervisor noted that, “Someone may use that as a reason for not liking you,” a red herring to mask resistance to a young woman’s leadership. Several of my seminary friends scoffed, “Ha! That nose ring is barely noticeable! They should be more worried about your theology!”

None of this was particularly helpful. I found myself working myself into a frenzy of terror and frustration, compounded only by the ever-increasing piles of homework I was expected to complete while seeking a call. Finally, my sister-friend at seminary, who was about two months ahead of me in the process, offered her experience of the in-person interview that had led to her recent call. “I just had to be myself, and leave it to them to decide if they wanted me as their pastor.”

A Question of Identity

This subtle reframing allowed me to consider my dilemma from a whole new vista. How important was my nose ring to my identity? As it turned out, important enough to wear to an interview with a small church in rural Iowa—even though I knew it was risky, even though I desperately wanted to be their pastor. They deserved to have the real me present at the

interview, and I deserved to know if they truly wanted *me* to be their candidate.

Don't get me wrong—this nose ring is hardly noticeable, at least as far as such things go. It is a tiny silver stud, no hoops or dangly things, and rarely does it include a jewel any more extraordinary than a faux diamond. And I am not unmindful of how different rural Iowa is from Berkeley, where I went to seminary, or New York City,

They deserved to have the real me present at the interview, and I deserved to know if they truly wanted me to be their candidate.

where I'd gotten my nose pierced in the first place, and that even such a tiny thing as this could be very alienating to people. But it is a part of me. And if that part of me was so alarming that a congregation would refuse to call me as their pastor, then perhaps God was calling me elsewhere.

Happily, this did not prove to be the case. While it was a “deal” with some of the older women in the congregation, others saw it as a delightful sign that I would bring youthful energy to the church. Still others thought it too ridiculous to merit discussion, and were outraged that it would even come up in conversation. I daresay several people (including some of the youth and children) didn't even notice. During my candidating weekend, I wore my nose ring to all the potlucks and meet-and-greets, fielded several interesting questions about it and our probable transition to rural Iowa, and waited for the Holy Spirit to direct me concerning the nose ring during my candidating service. Sunday morning, as I was ready to walk out of the hotel, the Holy Spirit said, “Go gently on the older women,” and I removed my nose ring without any hesitation or regret. As it turned out, barely anyone noticed its presence or its absence, and no one cared. The congregation unanimously affirmed my call, nose ring and all.

Changing Culture, Shifting Expectations

The question of identity and pastoral responsibility is one that all ministers have to face, no matter what generation they are from. For Gen X ministers, however, the questions are different. “Your wife *will* play the organ, right?” has been replaced with, “How does your significant other support your ministry?” Likewise, “You will work constantly for us, won't you?” has been replaced with, “How will you care for your family?” Particularly in my milieu—which I characterize as predominantly white, typically middle- to upper-class, and socially progressive—clergy are being asked new questions. “Are you comfortable being ‘out’ in this community?” “How will you connect with people your own age?” (This question was crucial and ultimately very challenging for a single friend of mine, who served a small church in a small

Georgian town!) And of course, “What about that nose ring?”

Such questions signal not only a shift in pastoral expectations by congregations, but also an acceptance of the changing social mores in U.S. culture today. However reluctant this acceptance may be, churches have come to realize that they need to consider the “whole person” when seeking a pastor, and that this requires new kinds of questions. Many Gen X pastors, in particular, expect and even relish the opportunity to respond to such questions with our words and our deeds.

Balancing Personal Identity and Pastoral Duty

Generation X as a whole is notorious for being independent and fierce, refusing to take the well-traveled path in favor of new adventures, new journeys. Additionally, we Gen Xers guard our personal integrity as one of our most prized assets. This is a necessary corrective to previous generations, many of whose members felt they had to give everything and save nothing for the sake of their own spirits. Yet the pendulum can swing too far, guarding personal integrity at the cost of ministering to others. We younger pastors must weigh the balance between personal integrity and pastoral duty in new ways, with fewer supports and resources to do so appropriately.

For example, one male youth minister loves to wear his hair long, but knows that this causes great consternation to a number of the elderly women in the congregation, for whom such a hairstyle is disrespectful and perhaps even dangerous. As a result, he occasionally cuts off the long hair for “Locks of Love,” an organization that makes wigs for people who lose their hair from chemotherapy. Now, when the women want him to trim his hair, they simply ask, “Isn't it about time for another donation?”

Acts of Liturgical Disobedience

While congregations may be accommodating on certain issues, sometimes it is the clergy who must be accommodating to the will of the congregation. Some Gen X clergy (and, doubtless, clergy from other generations, too) engage in what my colleague Timothy J. Luoma calls “subtle forms of liturgical disobedience” as they try to maintain individuality in a role that seems to demand a measure of conformity. Often these acts of “disobedience” revolve around issues of appropriate clergy attire. One pastor, in response to a congregational expectation that she wear collared shirts, tie-dyed a clergy shirt and wears it to worship. Another, after his congregation “insisted” he wear a necktie, wore several featuring Marvin the Martian, a popular cartoon character. Working within the constraints required, many Gen X clergy find similarly creative ways to let their spirits and personalities come through.

While serving an international church, one pastor encountered the issue of “appropriate travel companions.” She reports

that the expectation of her congregation was that “as a woman, I should only travel with women.” By contrast, she argued, “Our generation can have mixed friendships, so if my travel companions were men and women, why should the church care?”

Despite the fact that they did care, she traveled with men and women, even arguing at times that it was beneficial to have men along “for security reasons.”

Unfortunately, while one may cheerfully obey the letter of the law while still attempting to challenge its spirit in such situations,

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not every case lends itself to such subversive activity. Take Kharna Amos, a 30-something pastor in an MCC church in northern Virginia. In her congregation, composed mostly of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people, the use of the term “queer” when referring to the LGBT community, or even individual members of it, is a problematic one. “In our generation,” she says, using the term “queer” in public discourse is “totally acceptable. In the generation of many of my congregants, it’s not.” How, then, might Kharna even begin to address the issue of appropriate and relevant language in her congregation—to say nothing of the larger, heterosexual community that surrounds her?

A Shortage of Supports

With such new and peculiar questions emerging, is it any wonder there are so few resources for us? Yet most Gen X seminary students and pastors know that if we *are* to do ministry with generations other than our own, we will need to ponder these questions deeply, to pray and to discern what is right for the good of the whole as well as what is life-affirming for ourselves. Those answers may be different than we expected, but we must accept that ministry often involves sacrifice on the part of pastors. Sometimes we must give up what we want in order to do what we need to do. In so doing, it is possible to find a deeper sense of integrity that is both rooted in community and located within each individual.

But opportunities for such prayerful discernment are often quite difficult to come by. The relative dearth of Gen X clergy makes creating discernment communities among that age group even more challenging. Statistics often vary in the particulars, but it is nonetheless clear that, in nearly every denomination, young people are simply not entering the ministry in large numbers. This “clergy crisis” not only bodes ill for the future, but those who

do choose to enter the ministry find few peers who are in a similar “place” in life with whom they can connect.

Furthermore, many Gen X ministers face patronizing or belittling attitudes from other ministers in denominational and local ecumenical settings. While I am often praised for my “energy,” my input is often slighted with such comments as, “How sweet,” or “You’ll learn.” Often these remarks come from well-meaning but older ministers with many years of experience, but their effect is nonetheless aggravating and belittling. While some of these comments surface as a response to my gender as well as to my age, I have learned that older colleagues often treat Gen X clergy with such seemingly benign acts of head-patting. This, in turn, makes it difficult for us to feel comfortable risking the vulnerability required for meaningful theological reflection on the new questions of ministry.

Yet there are signs of hope for peer-supported reflection on these “new questions.” Gen X clergy are a resourceful bunch. If the need is present, you can be sure we’ll throw ourselves into addressing it. Covenant groups composed of seminary friends, denominational peers, and local ministerial alliances are places where many Gen X pastors find spiritual nourishment, provided there is a critical mass of young clergy to support them. In addition, some organizations have seen this need and are actively seeking to fill it. The First Parish Project, a Lilly-funded initiative from the Hinton Rural Life Center in North Carolina, provides an opportunity for ongoing reflection and resource for young, new clergy. Meeting six times over the course of two years, a group of 26 clergy under the age of 35 come together to worship, pray, support, and challenge one another. Small groups within the larger one provide deeper connection and relationship, and group members can stay connected through scheduled online chats and more “traditional” methods, such as letters and phone calls.

Younger pastors must weigh the balance between personal integrity and pastoral duty in new ways, with fewer supports and resources to do so appropriately.

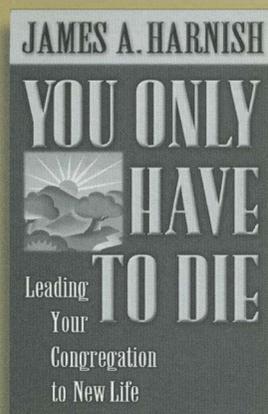
In the eight and a half months since I’ve been serving First Congregational UCC in Red Oak, I’ve performed two memorial services for women I’d never met. I kept my nose ring out for both services. My sense of responsibility to be the pastor for these women and their families (whom I’d also never met) overrode my personal preference concerning my nose ring. It just seemed more respectful of me to leave it out. Perhaps, years from now, when I bury the women and men I have come to know and love in this church, I will wear my nose ring at their graves. But not today. ♦

You Only Have to Die

LEADING YOUR CONGREGATION
TO NEW LIFE

James A. Harnish

Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004



review book

It's a paradox that we Christians live with from our baptisms: Death is the way to life. We must die in order to be born again. This book reminds us that birth—and rebirth—always involves pain. This is true not only for individual Christians but for Christian institutions as well—in this case, Christian congregations.

James A. Harnish has written a thoughtful and articulate volume on how and why this is the case. The decline of mainline denominations is his focus. Harnish doesn't spend much time on statistics to convince the reader of the need for mainline renewal. Instead, he dives right into the prescription—and the medicine is hard to take. Congregations with declining participation (particularly those of the mainline churches, but not exclusively so) must die in order to live.

I have several years of experience as a member, elder, lay educator, and small group leader in a declining congregation within a declining mainline denomination. I understand firsthand the annual goals for growth, the congregational

plans and the hard work of implementing them, the dashed hopes, and the seemingly unheard prayers. Tomorrow I will be recommending that every leader in my congregation read *You Only Have To Die*. I am confident that it will shed new light on our dilemma, helping us—and all congregations like ours—to understand why we haven't been able to grow. The hard truth is that it's because we haven't been willing to die.

Harnish writes that congregations must be willing to die to all the things that keep us from being true disciples and making disciples of others. We have to be willing to die to a focus on our glorious past, to old habits, to self-destructive behaviors, to avoidance of painful truth-telling, to antiquated structures, to old ways of decision-making, to traditional (habitual) but non-transcendent worship, to long-established programs that no longer accomplish our mission, to anything that does not contribute to our specific congregational calling. To be willing to die in all these ways and more will be an inevitably painful process, but only through such difficult and faith-testing losses can a consistently declining congregation make room for the experience of resurrection.

The author uses the metaphor of his own cardiac arrest and physical rehabilitation to lead his readers through the steps that will move a congregation from decline through death and back into life and health. "Congregational cardiology" is what he calls it. This is an apt description for congregational heart work for, as Harnish insists, "the heart of the matter is always a matter of the heart."

After building a new and large congregation, Pastor Harnish was called to move to a smaller, older, declining congregation within the United Methodist Church. He accepted that call, and through it learned much about how God requires both new megachurches and older established congregations to bring God's kingdom to earth. He shares the inspiring story of this older church's transformation, how

it came to understand its new vision and mission, and how it strives to live out its unique calling in every phase of its existence. The author also shares his own struggles and mistakes, as well as his successes, in facilitating this radical change. His congregation's specific transformations in worship, education, caring ministries, and witness are outlined as examples that may inspire courage for action in other congregations.

This book is not addressed to Christians on either the theological "right" or "left." The author finds that, while both types can be Christ-centered, both also can be rigid, unyielding, and hard-hearted. His is an equal-opportunity prescription for rebuilding a vital, Christ-centered congregation, committed to transforming the faithful into true disciples.

Of particular interest to a broader spectrum of readers will be Harnish's chapter devoted to small groups. He uses a model that harkens back to the class meetings or societies of the early Wesley movement. As a group leader, I can attest that his outline for building small groups within a congregation is impressively detailed and is a plan that is likely to work. Even those in growing churches who may be interested in starting or revitalizing small groups will find this particular chapter useful.

You Only Have To Die is a well-organized book, with many lists that keep the reader focused and questions that clergy and lay leaders can answer to ascertain how the material presented may be applicable in their unique situations.

If you are looking for help in re-growing a congregation to do God's work in this world, James Harnish has written the book for you. Be prepared for a difficult but rewarding challenge. And keep the faith, remembering that Jesus taught that the road is hard that leads to life (Matthew 7:14).

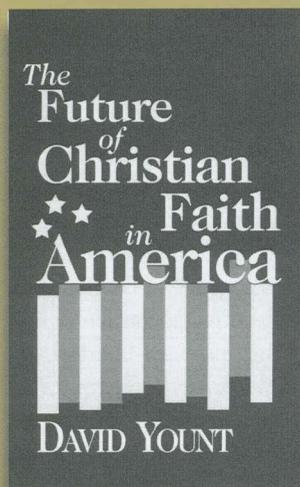
DR. CYNTHIA H. CHERTOS

Bethesda Presbyterian Church
Bethesda, Maryland

The Future of Christian Faith in America

David Yount

Minneapolis: Augsburg Books, 2004



review book

David Yount, journalist, religion columnist, and former seminary chairman and college dean, takes the reader on an astonishing survey of the state of Christian faith in the U.S. today. Yount struggles with the paradoxes of the pervasive influences of Christianity in the U.S., even as this country seems so far adrift from Christian priorities. He ponders megachurches, church shopping, parachurches, fundamentalism, liberalism, social gospel, controversies over sexuality, and the charismatic movement—just to name a few—and repeatedly observes that Christian faith in America is “mile-wide” and “inch-deep.”

The author laments that, in sphere after sphere, Christianity has become largely innocuous. We have departed from substantial faith and observance. The consequences are serious: Social bonds are loosening, faith is growing fuzzy, generosity and volunteering are declining, church attendance is decreasing, and confident faith is eroding—in spite of the fact that the church has so much potential to be influential.

This book is derived from a series of lectures Yount first delivered at the Chautauqua Institution. It covers much information with important implications in a condensed form. Sometimes Yount's pace takes one's breath away. At other times he covers so much that his approach veers a little too closely itself to being mile-wide and inch-deep.

The author argues that the true American dream is a Christian-inspired social vision exemplified by such luminaries as the first Puritans, and more recently by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He is aware that this vision is far from being fulfilled and that the American dream is too often co-opted by materialistic priorities.

I share Yount's cautions and reservations about using Christian crusader ideas in American foreign policy, and I concur that the latest Gulf War is seen by other nations as a particularly unfortunate and dangerous manifestation of Christianity. (Yount and I both belong to historic peace churches; he is a Quaker and I am a Mennonite.) Yet, at times, I struggled with Yount's ideas. I remain unconvinced about intrinsic Christian intentions in the founding of the U.S. I would argue that the American dream of a basic right to the “pursuit of happiness” is fundamentally flawed and inherently un-Christian. I was also surprised that Yount was not more careful to include gender-inclusive language.

There is, nevertheless, much that I like about this book. Recommending a book depends on the purpose for which one uses it. Readers should not rely on this one for detailed sociological analysis. For that, one must go elsewhere. But I appreciated the quick survey, the longing for social progress, the priority of ecumenicism, and the persistent hope that things could change in the church.

This book has many uses. Yount includes telling statistics and vignettes that pastors will be glad to note and cite in various sermons or teaching. It also would be a good resource for discussion groups.

REV. DR. ARTHUR PAUL BOERS

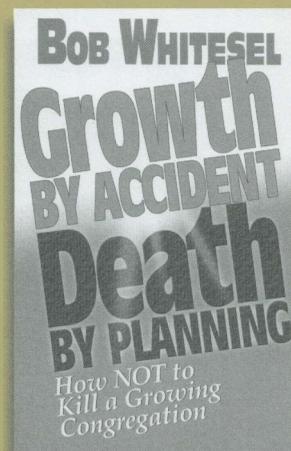
Author of *Never Call Them Jerks* (Alban Institute, 1999)
Elkhart, Indiana

Growth by Accident, Death by Planning

HOW NOT TO KILL A GROWING CONGREGATION

Bob Whitesel

Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004



review book

Despite the title of this book, author Bob Whitesel does not believe planning is wrong. Instead, he argues that “the problem comes with planning that does not fully understand the factors that contributed to growth in the first place” (p. 11). This book is number three in a series. Whitesel claims that although it is not necessary to read the previous two, they do “build a foundation for the planning steps that are outlined in this book” (p. 12).

Whitesel developed this material from his research with actual congregations. Eleven chapters are devoted to describing the “missteps” of once steadily growing congregations that have since stagnated and declined in vitality, with each chapter devoted to one of these issues, which include staff influence, worship celebrations, prayer, budgets, new facilities, innovation, evaluation, dysfunctional people, staff education, small groups, and the centrality of Christ. Each of these

chapters follows the same format: Factors that caused the church's initial growth are presented, followed by the erroneous decisions that led to plateauing, a brief description of corrective steps to regain growth (illustrated by another church's success story), and study questions that enable individuals or groups to apply the material to their context.

There are some very good points of advice and aids available here. For example, Whitesel states that people attending church "must find and connect to a small group within the church if they are to connect with and remain in a congregation" (p. 139). This advice holds true regardless of the style of church. He also cautions churches who are building new buildings to be aware that architects and builders may be experts in the codes and engineering of structures, but "few are acquainted with the principles and strategies of church growth" (p. 78). However, I found myself asking more questions in response to much of the material presented. Given that only one "misstep" was addressed in each chapter, the issue addressed seemed to be isolated from other systemic issues that could have contributed to the church's situation. Nonetheless, Whitesel offers concrete, constructive, and practical steps for regaining momentum in church life.

A primary target audience for this work would be leaders in congregations that adhere to and participate in the church growth movement. Leaders in congregations of this type will resonate with and benefit from the material. Many other ministry leaders searching for alternative approaches and ideas for dealing with plateaued congregations would also find the material stimulating and helpful.

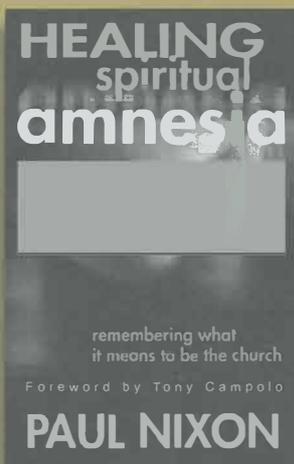
REV. C. FRANKLIN GRANGER
First Baptist Church
Athens, Georgia

Healing Spiritual Amnesia

REMEMBERING WHAT IT MEANS
TO BE THE CHURCH

Paul Nixon

Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004



review book

Jacques Ellul, author of *Anarchy and Christianity*, reminded

us that we suffer mightily from living in the age of technique, a world where success is defined by employing the right approach at the right time. The end result often is that, while we achieve what we desire, it is not what we truly want or need.

At the heart of Paul Nixon's *Healing Spiritual Amnesia: Remembering What it Means to Be the Church* is this same notion. This insightful book by an experienced director of congregational development within the United Methodist Church ignores the infinite array of specialized services and consultants available for church revitalization efforts, the latest multimedia tools designed for churches, and the plethora of books on marketing strategies to make the church relevant. Instead, Nixon moves us to consider what he sees as the core issue: forgetting that the church's greatest challenge is to make the gospel available in

new and compelling ways to those most in need of hearing it.

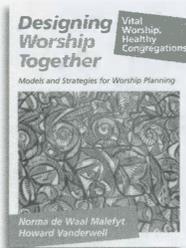
Rather than advocating the abolishment of existing churches in favor of new church plants started from the ground up, as some recommend, the author urges the church at large, and mainline churches in particular, to recover their memory around four distinct areas: remembering who Jesus is, remembering the holy habits of faith, remembering our neighbors, and remembering how to be effective. He eschews cookbook formulas and other supposedly easy ways by which this transformation can be accomplished, reminding readers that the healing of spiritual amnesia requires—even demands—divine intervention coupled with human openness.

A series of eight fictitious but all too recognizable churches populate the book and allow Nixon's ideas to take form and live in the reader's mind. A final chapter pulls the threads together with concrete suggestions about how to employ the ideas in this book in order to recover the best of what it means to be church. The author wants the church to carefully and forcefully consider how it is different than the world and how its programs and outreach differ from the world because it is *the* institution created by God to reach the world. This requires the recovery of a biblical sense of who the church is, what the church is for, and what the church needs to be in the wider world. Nixon's message is timely, finely tuned to context, and impassioned. Leaders and congregations will benefit from grappling with this book and its central challenge to "remember what it means to be the church."

REV. DR. DENNIS W. CHEEK
John Templeton Foundation
Radnor, Pennsylvania

New & Noteworthy

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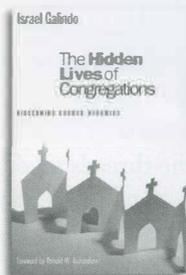


Designing Worship Together: Models and Strategies for Worship Planning

NORMA DEWAAL MALEFYT AND HOWARD VANDERWELL

AL286; \$16.00

This book draws on more than two decades of collaborative worship planning by pastor Howard Vanderwell and musician Norma deWaal Malefyt of the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship. The authors offer thoughtful, field-tested processes for planning, implementing, and evaluating life-enriching weekly worship. DeWaal Malefyt and Vanderwell clarify the vital role of worship in the life of a healthy congregation, identify the biblical assumptions underlying Christian worship, highlight the importance of teamwork in worship planning, and name the barriers worship planners must overcome. Also included in this invaluable resource for worship planners are more than a dozen field-tested tools and a selected bibliography.

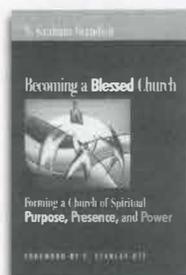


The Hidden Lives of Congregations: Discerning Church Dynamics

ISRAEL GALINDO

AL297; \$18.00

Israel Galindo, a professor at Baptist Theological Seminary in Richmond, Virginia, takes leaders below the surface in this book to provide a comprehensive, holistic look at the corporate nature of church relationships and the invisible dynamics at play in congregational life. Informed by family systems theory and grounded in a wide-ranging ecclesiological understanding, Galindo unpacks the factors of congregational lifespan, size, spirituality, and identity and shows how they work together to form the congregation's hidden life. He provides useful tools for diagnosing and understanding how congregations function and suggests leadership skills needed to help congregations achieve their mission.

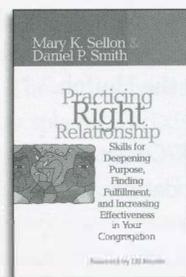


Becoming a Blessed Church: Forming a Church of Spiritual Purpose, Presence, and Power

N. GRAHAM STANDISH

AL302; \$18.00

In this book, pastor Graham Standish shares the story of Calvin Presbyterian Church in Zelienople, Pennsylvania, and its journey to become a "blessed church," one that is spiritually deep, inwardly and outwardly healthy, and intimately connected to the living God. Calvin Presbyterian discovered that by being open to God in everything they did—from worship and administrative meetings to the creation of budgets and sermons—blessings flowed through their church in ways they had never experienced before. This book offers a guide and toolkit that will help other congregations enter the same process Calvin Presbyterian has to create a church that is open at its foundations to God's purpose, presence, and power.



Practicing Right Relationship: Skills for Deepening Purpose, Finding Fulfillment, and Increasing Effectiveness in Your Congregation

MARY K. SELLON AND DANIEL P. SMITH

AL304; \$16.00

In this profound yet practical book, Mary Sellon and Daniel Smith make the case that the health of churches and synagogues depends on congregations learning how to live out love in "right relationships." Sellon and Smith bring together the findings of several prominent researchers with the wisdom they acquired in their work with dozens of pastors and congregations to show the practices that are central to relational leadership. They present theories, stories, and tools that will help congregations and their leaders learn how to build and maintain the loving relationships that provide the medium for God's transforming work.

To order these or other Alban titles, please visit us online at www.alban.org or call us toll-free at 1-800-486-1318, ext. 244.

RESOURCES ON **LARGE CHURCHES** FROM THE CONGREGATIONAL RESOURCE GUIDE

Galindo, Israel. **The Hidden Lives of Congregations: Discerning Church Dynamics** (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2004). Israel Galindo takes leaders below the surface of congregational life to look at the corporate nature of church relationships and the invisible dynamics at play. Informed by family systems theory and ecclesiological understanding, Galindo unpacks such factors as congregational lifespan and size to show how these form a congregation's hidden life.

Heifetz, Ronald and Martin Linsky. **Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading** (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2002). Because leadership involves moving communities through moments of sustained and often painful change, it is dangerous work. The authors explain the skills needed to successfully lead adaptive change: gaining perspective, developing allies, allowing issues to ripen, controlling conflict, and giving the work back to those who must make the changes.

Large Congregations: Ideas, Reflections, and Experiences. (www.congregationalresources.org/LargeCngs.asp). For people seeking a quick overview of the principles and forces driving large congregations, this online list from Gil Rendle is invaluable. Here readers will find Rendle's wisdom on issues large congregations face in the areas of structure, conflict, leadership, relationships, planning, and cultural realities.

Mann, Alice. **The In-Between Church: Navigating Size Transitions in Congregations** (Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 1998). Starting with Arlin Rothauge's description of family, pastoral, program, and corporate size churches, Alice Mann explores the challenges that arise in the "plateaus" between church sizes and hinder new member assimilation. She helps readers to consider whether their church should be growing, and discusses the "why," "what," "who," "how," and "time frame" of size transitions.

Mann, Alice. **What Size Should We Be?** (Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 2000). Is our congregation in a size transition? What are the signs? Can our congrega-

tion cross our size barrier? Do we, in fact, have a vocation to make room for more people? This video explains what it takes for a congregation to change sizes, why congregations make the sacrifices needed to grow, and how they can develop a plan for growth.

McIntosh, Gary. **Staff Your Church for Growth: Building Team Ministry in the 21st Century** (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2000). Presenting a functional and biblical approach to church staffing, Gary McIntosh helps senior pastors answer questions about the "what," "how," and "why" of multiple staff ministry. Included are models for team ministry, guidelines for adding staff, techniques for interviewing staff candidates, and steps for dealing with staff conflict.

Peterson, Eugene. **Under the Unpredictable Plant: An Exploration in Vocational Holiness** (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1992). Eugene Peterson urges a paradigm shift from "pastor as program director" to "pastor as spiritual director." He demonstrates why we should not think of pastoring in terms of "efficiency" or "outcomes." Drawing on his own pastoral journey and the biblical story of Jonah, Peterson explores the need to avoid enslavement to programs so that one may discover the holiness of one's vocation.

Rendle, Gilbert R. **Leading Change in the Congregation: Spiritual and Organizational Tools for Leaders** (Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 1998). This book is for congregational leaders trying to be faithful in an unpredictable environment. It provides leaders with practical diagnostic tools for leading change spiritually. The case studies, analyses, worksheets, and games included here will help congregations and their leaders understand varied reactions to change.

Staff Meetings in Large Congregations (www.congregationalresources.org/LargeCngMtgs.asp). In this short online article, Gil Rendle outlines the purposes of staff meetings in large congregations and explains why such meetings are so important. He then describes some key points to keep in mind when conducting staff meetings: maintain a standard format, don't rush to decisions, and delegate and entrust.

Creating a Vision that Makes a Difference

Q: Why does our congregation need to have a vision? How can we ensure that it is not only worth the effort and time it takes to develop one—but that it also makes a difference for our congregation?

A: Visioning is often seen as a panacea in congregations. However, having a vision in and of itself does not satisfy the need for congregations to involve their members in a discerning process that brings the wisdom and imagination of the whole system to bear on the questions, “Who do we want to be?” and “What do we have to do to get there?”

One day, at a religious organization where I once worked, each staff member received a copy of “the vision” of the organization. We learned that we should appreciate this “hard work of the executive staff” and that we, of course, would be the people implementing the plan they had outlined. Sadly, although we “had a vision,” it lacked momentum. Because little effort had been made to gather the wisdom and stir the imaginations of those who would implement it, the vision we had been given had little impact on our day-to-day work. This anecdote typifies what often occurs in congregations. There is a better way!

The visioning process I have found most effective is one that brings together representatives of the whole system to review the past, assess present challenges, and develop a common vision and an action plan for achieving it. Congregations often balk at the idea of asking their members to give up a weekend to participate in this process, but I have not yet found a

congregation that issued such an invitation that did not ultimately have to scramble to accommodate all those who wanted to attend.

Consider the following questions as you begin to consider your own congregation’s visioning and strategic planning process:

- ◆ **Why now?** Some congregational leaders propose engaging in a visioning process as a way to avoid dealing directly with a conflict. Other times, congregational leaders expect that visioning will solve some spiritual malaise. All too often, congregations have the energy for articulating a vision, but no commitment to doing what needs to be done to implement it.
- ◆ **What outcomes are you seeking?** Usually these outcomes are broader than “having a vision” and relate to achieving some clarity of direction, setting priorities, aligning human and financial resources, discerning God’s call, and determining new ways to be in relationship to the surrounding community and the changing world. Spelling out these goals helps to clarify that the vision is the start of a process of redevelopment and realignment in the congregation—not an ending.
- ◆ **What are the critical questions that need to be addressed?** Identifying a few overarching, crit-

ical questions is an important part of designing a visioning and strategic planning process. I use the image of interlocking Russian dolls to help congregations discover the big question into which their various questions fit.

- ◆ **How will you connect the best of the past to the challenges of the present?** A vision is often empowered if it builds upon the congregation’s past strengths and considers responding to present challenges in ways that remain true to the congregation’s own “story” and identity.
- ◆ **Who needs to be in the room?** In order to achieve the commitment to the vision that will be required to make it a reality, it is critical to draw from the various experiences, insights, and commitments of the various stakeholder groups within the congregation and the surrounding the community.



Rev. Lawrence Peers is a senior consultant with the Alban Institute. He works with congregations during times of change, transition, and conflict, using an integrative

approach of whole systems planning, appreciative inquiry, congregational studies, and spiritual discernment processes. Rev. Peers also works with middle judicatories and national denominational bodies.

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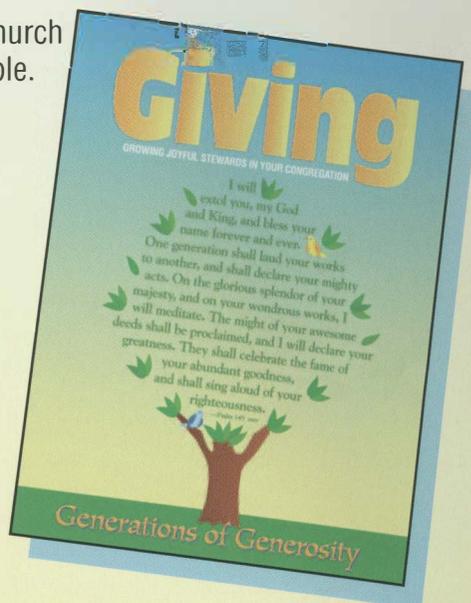
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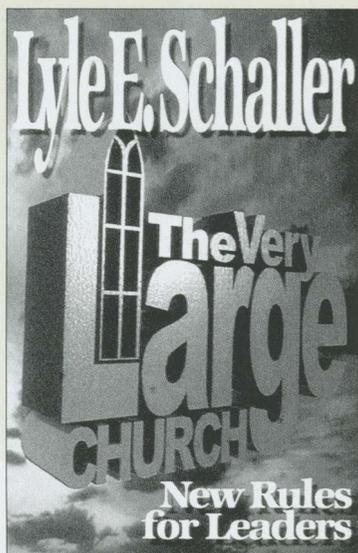
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A New Context for Ministry

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by Lyle E. Schaller. Contemporary leaders should realize, asserts Schaller, that the rules have changed for everyone involved in organization life. Both volunteer and paid staff must recognize that their old rule book is obsolete and that church life should no longer be defined by local traditions, geographical boundaries, or yesterday's stereotypes. The new context for ministry is defined by the culture, the societal context, a theological belief system, a passion for evangelism, a high level of competence, creativity, innovation, and a new and different set of rules. He helps church leaders understand how to make the transition to the megachurch culture while retaining Christian integrity.

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

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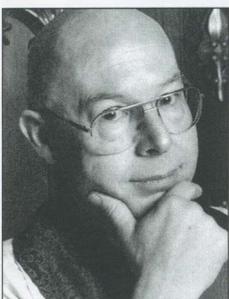
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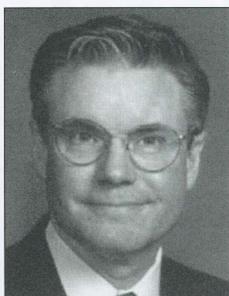
Marlis McCollum



Gil Rendle



Frank Wade



Jeffrey R. Zurheide

Rev. Dr. Greg Cootsona is associate pastor of adult discipleship at Bidwell Memorial Presbyterian Church in Chico, California, former associate pastor for education at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City, and author of *Creation and Last Things: At the Intersection of Theology and Science* (Geneva Press, 2002). Dr. Cootsona's current research focuses on the reconciliation of science and art from a theological perspective. He can be contacted at GCootsona@bidwellpres.org. **Page 18**

Rev. Elizabeth Dilley-Gonzales is the pastor of First Congregational United Church of Christ in Red Oak, Iowa. She has a degree in educational theatre from New York University and a master of divinity degree from Pacific School of Religion. This is her first pastorate. **Page 36**

Rev. Dr. Steve Jacobsen is senior pastor of Goleta Presbyterian Church in Santa Barbara, California. The author of *Hearts to God, Hands to Work: Connecting Spirituality and Work* (Alban Institute, 1997), he recently completed five years of grant-funded study on how technology is affecting spiritual practices in congregations. He can be reached at steve@goletapres.org. **Page 6**

Marlis McCollum is a freelance writer who has written for a variety of organizations, including the College of Preachers, the Alban Institute, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the National Gallery of Art. **Pages 13 and 27**

Rev. Dr. Gil Rendle is a senior consultant for the Alban Institute with expertise in strategic planning, change management, team building, and leadership. Dr. Rendle is the co-author, with Alice Mann, of *Holy Conversations: Strategic Planning as a Spiritual Practice for Congregations* (Alban Institute, 2003), and the author of several other Alban titles, including *Leading Change in the Congregation: Spiritual and Organizational Tools for Leaders* (1998), *Behavioral Covenants in Congregations: A Handbook for Honoring Differences* (1999), and *The Multigenerational Congregation: Meeting the Leadership Challenge* (2002). **Page 23**

Rev. Dr. Frank Wade has served as rector of St. Alban's Episcopal Church in Washington, D.C., for more than two decades. A nationally renowned preacher, teacher, and speaker, his sermons have been included in a number of anthologies. He has also authored a number of books, most recently *The Art of Being Together: Common Sense about Life-Long Relationships*, an audio book available through Episcopal Media Center in Atlanta that is soon to be published in print by Forward Movement Press. Among Rev. Wade's other publications are *Companions along the Way: Sermons about Relationships* (Posterity Press, 1996) and *Rites of Our Passage: Reflections through a Christian Year* (Posterity Press, 2002). **Page 10**

Rev. Dr. Jeffrey R. Zurheide is senior pastor of the First Baptist Church of New London, New Hampshire, an American Baptist congregation. Previously, he was senior pastor of the First Baptist Church of Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. He is the author of *When Faith is Tested: Pastoral Responses to Suffering and Tragic Death* (Fortress Press, 1997) and (with his spouse, Karen J. Zurheide) *In Their Own Way: Accepting Your Children for Who They Are* (Augsburg Fortress, 2000). **Page 32**

How Large is “Large”?



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When you received this issue of CONGREGATIONS, a question may have come to mind: What do you mean by “large” church? It’s a fair question. Last year, when Alban Institute researcher Rowena Martineau began a project to learn more about the workings of large churches and the demands they place on their leaders, she asked six self-described (current or former) large church leaders for their definitions of a large church. She received six very different answers:

- ◆ a church with more than 350 people in worship, on average
- ◆ a church with at least 500 people in worship, on average
- ◆ a church with at least 400 members and some form of endowment
- ◆ a church with at least 550 members
- ◆ a church with more than 2,000 members on its roster
- ◆ a church with more than 2,000 people on its roster, an average of 800 to 1,000 in worship, an operating budget of \$2 to \$3 million, and a staff of 20 to 30 people

In the literature, there is similar disparity. Large congregations are sometimes described as “corporate-size” churches, defined in some places as churches with average worship attendance ranging from 500 to 2,000 people, elsewhere as churches with more than 350 attending members.

Given the lack of agreement on church size terms and definitions, not to mention the development of new ones, some clarification of what we mean when we refer to “large churches” is indeed called for. For the purposes of the discussions in this issue, we’re defining the large church as one with an average attendance of more than 350 but less than 2,000, and we’ve given somewhat more emphasis to the churches in the upper half of that range.

We should be clear that our focus is not the megachurch, whose size has afforded it a great deal of media and research attention in recent years. Likewise, it is not the small or mid-size church, both of which have been the recipients of considerable study and discussion as fears of their decline or disappearance have loomed large in certain circles. Far less is known, however, about the large churches that fall in between these two extremes. Yet, according to several recent studies, these churches are the spiritual homes of a large proportion of U.S. churchgoers. If this population is to be properly served, we need to know more about the large churches these Americans have chosen to attend and the skills required of the pastors who lead them. It is therefore on these congregations that we focus our attention in the following pages.

The issues we explore are many: Who is best suited to large church ministry, and how does one know if this is or is not his or her calling? How can large church ministers make personal connections with the many people in their care? What is the emerging wisdom about how a congregation’s story can create a shared identity and vision in a community characterized by diversity? In this issue of CONGREGATIONS, we gladly share our findings and the wisdom of your colleagues on these and many other aspects of large church ministry.

In faith,

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