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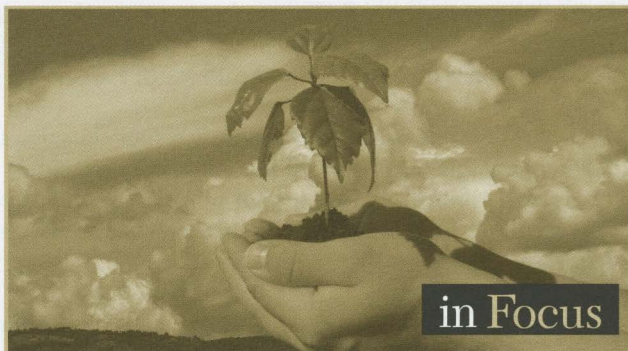
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Congregations

LEARNING LEADING CHANGING

SPRING 2007

Whatever Happened to Humility?



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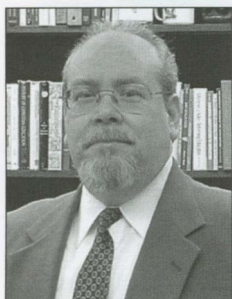
Volume 33, Number 2. CONGREGATIONS (ISSN 1816-2800) is sent quarterly to all members of the Alban Institute. CONGREGATIONS is the successor to ACTION INFORMATION, published since 1975. Copyright © 2007 by The Alban Institute, Inc.

This periodical is indexed in the ATLA Religion Database®, published by the American Theological Library Association, 300 South Wacker Drive, Suite 2100, Chicago, Illinois 60606; e-mail: alla@atla.com; Web site: www.atla.com.



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Israel Galindo

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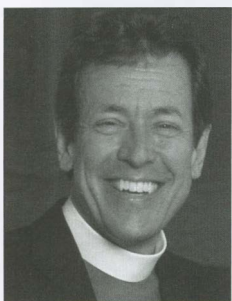
Rev. Dan Hotchkiss, a Unitarian Universalist minister, is an Alban Institute senior consultant who speaks, writes, and consults widely on strategic and financial planning, congregational governance, clergy leadership, and social justice ministries. The author of *Ministry and Money: A Guide for Clergy and Their Friends* (Alban Institute, 2002), he is currently working on a book on congregational governance. **Page 15**

Rev. Dr. Sheryl A. Kujawa-Holbrook, Ed.D, Ph.D. is the academic dean, the Suzanne Radley Hiatt Professor of Feminist Pastoral Theology and Church History, and the co-chair of the Pastoral Excellence Project at the Episcopal Divinity School. She is the author of numerous books and articles in the fields of congregational studies, anti-racism, church history, and ministries with young people. Dr. Kujawa-Holbrook is currently working on two book-length projects for the Alban Institute: a book on congregations engaged in interfaith relationships, and a book on the ministry of the baptized in vital, small congregations. She also served as the chair of the Anti-Racism Committee of the Executive Council for seven years. **Page 27**



Donna Schaper

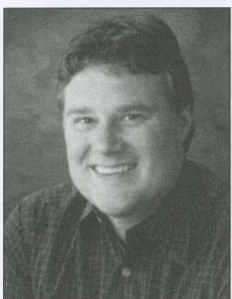
Rev. Donna Schaper is senior minister of Judson Memorial Church in New York City and the principal of Bricks Without Straw Consulting Service, which helps nonprofits and congregations raise funds, use conflict creatively, and do a lot with a little. The author of *Sabbath Keeping* (Cowley Publications, 1999), she has two new books coming out this spring: *Doing Good While Living Well* from Church Books and *Grass Roots Gardening: Rituals to Sustain Activism* from Nation Books. Her blog, which provides spiritual nurture for public capacity, can be found at DollyMama.wordpress.com. **Page 12**



Frederick Schmidt

Rev. Dr. Frederick W. Schmidt is director of spiritual formation and Anglican studies and associate professor of Christian spirituality at Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University. An Episcopal priest, he is a specialist in New Testament studies. He previously served as canon educator at Washington National Cathedral and dean of St. George's College, Jerusalem. His works include *Conversations with Scripture: Revelation* (Morehouse Publishing Co., 2005), *What God Wants for Your Life* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), and *A Still Small Voice* (Syracuse University Press, 1996). **Page 6**

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N. Graham Standish

A Diversity of Riches



Congregations

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The Alban Institute is known for encouraging

risk-taking and innovation. We do it in our consulting work, our seminars, our books, and in the articles of this magazine. Rather than accepting the "we've always done it that way" rationale, we are constantly asking congregations and their leaders to step outside their zones of comfort and try new things when circumstances call for change. With this issue of *Congregations* we've decided to take our own advice. As you may have noticed from the multiple offerings touted on the cover of this issue, we are diverging from our custom of focusing the bulk of each issue on a theme. We are making this change in an effort to offer a broader array of subjects of interest to our readers. At the same time, we have not abandoned themes altogether. When in-depth coverage of a single topic is called for, we will again assemble the wisdom, insights, and practical assistance of multiple authors in a single issue. In this issue, however, we offer what we hope you'll experience as a refreshing, informative, and useful diversity of topics and voices.

We open the issue with Fred Schmidt's look at the imprint of dispensationalist thinking on our interpretation of the Book of Revelation, how to process these notions and reclaim the wisdom of Revelation, and how to share this wisdom from the pulpit.

We next hear from Donna Schaper, who provides sage advice for conducting evaluations that fulfill their original intent—to strengthen the evaluated, whether clergy or congregation, and make each accountable to the other.

This is followed by Dan Hotchkiss's informative article on the many models of governance being employed in congregations today, with advice for selecting the right model for our own.

In *The Power of Not "Pointing,"* Pam Fickenschier highlights the need for care when using electronic media in our church presentations—care that we not dim the heart and passion of our message when we dim the lights and turn on the projection equipment.

Graham Standish's passion for his topic is evident in *Whatever Happened to Humility?*, this issue's "In Focus" article. Here Standish explores his lifelong quest to discover how to be both humble and a leader, finding inspiration in the lives of Jesus and the Christian mystics, as well as the more recent—and profoundly inspirational—life of Mahatma Gandhi. Many a leader will no doubt find value in his call to rediscover humility as a leadership strength.

Next, Sheryl Kujawa-Holbrook provides a close-up look at several small but abundantly vital congregations, exploring what helps them flourish, calling into question our assumptions about both smallness and vitality, and inspiring us to create thriving congregations regardless of size.

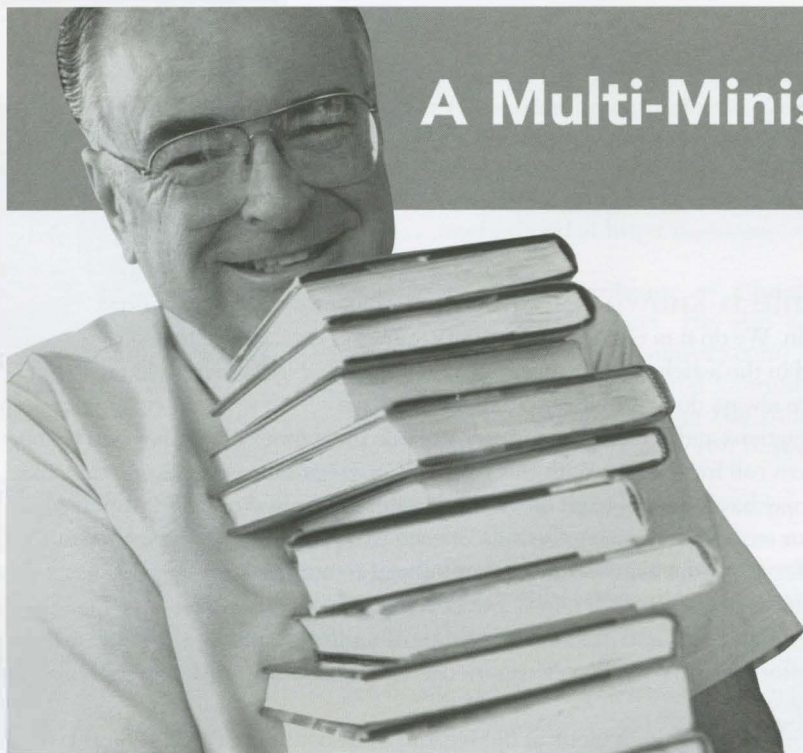
Israel Galindo provides the final article in this issue, offering a cogent argument for why sermons should address the emotional processes of a congregation. As Galindo explains, "The sermon is as much about the preacher, the congregation, and their relationship in the context of being church as it is about the text."

We hope you'll enjoy the diversity of content this issue provides, and that you'll let us know if there are other ways we can support your ministry through *Congregations* magazine.

In faith,

Richard Bass

Director of Publishing



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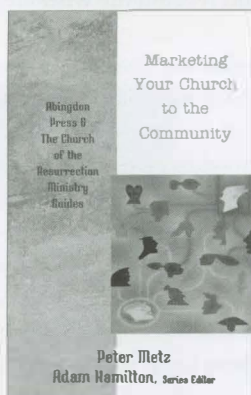
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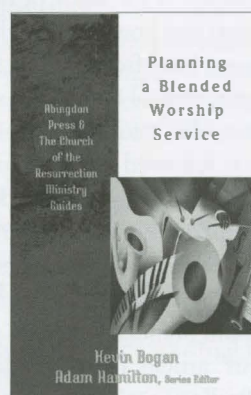
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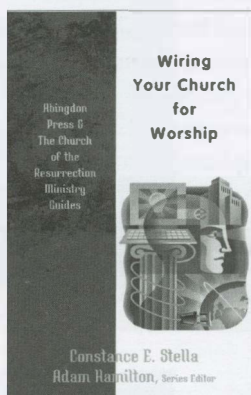
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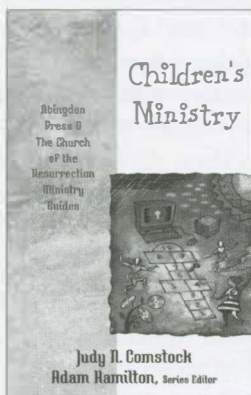


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Faith and Work—Can We Dance?

ONE OF THE UNRESOLVED STORIES OF THE 20TH century is that of the changing role of the laity in the church and the world. The American (and largely Christian) version of this story is full of denominational subplots, ecumenical endeavors, and a bewildering dance between clergy and the people they serve. As the 20th century unfolded, at times the dance seemed to be a harmonious waltz, at others the clergy and laity seemed to be moving separately to different musical idioms, and at some moments relations looked more like a wrestling match than a graceful ballet or a crisp tango. Today, many wonder if the dance has stopped. Another possibility is that it is taking on a new form.

In his new book, *God at Work: The History and Promise of the Faith at Work Movement* (Oxford University Press, 2007), David W. Miller, executive director of the Yale Center for Faith and Culture, tells of the large and complicated social movement that has reached widely into American and international life—the quest to find the connections between the worlds that modernity had sundered: faith and work. In essence, he tells a tale of a great spiritual hunger that exists in the lives of many moderns and post-moderns—a hunger for wholeness, a deep need for integration, a pervasive struggle to find coherence and meaning in our daily lives.

What Miller calls the Faith at Work story is a response to the creations of modernity—cities, assembly lines, great concentrations of wealth, new corporate structures, labor movements, and great social dislocations. In the latter part of the 19th century, he explains, two streams of effort arose to address these challenges. The first focused on transforming the structures and institutions of modernizing, urban America. The second focused on evangelism and personal transformation. These two strands danced with each other through each of the first two waves of the Faith at Work movement (from 1891 through the early 1970s), and continue their dance today. In each wave, countless new organizations and networks were created, new media were employed to build connections, and new leaders, both clergy and lay, attempted to bridge the Sunday/weekday gap.

By the '70s, though, Miller finds that

much of the original impetus toward relating faith and the work of most Americans had been overwhelmed by social forces and the institutional needs of the clergy, the denominations, and even the ecumenical agencies that had once seemed especially open to lay leadership and concerns. As denominations downsized in the last third of the 20th century, almost all of the desks or commissions that had been created earlier to foster the ministry of the laity disappeared. Much of the focus of mainline Protestantism and the World Council of Churches (WCC) moved from the daily life challenges of workers to global and macro-economic issues. Theological discourse, especially in the mainline, became increasingly technical and suspicious of capitalism, global corporations, and business itself. As it did, a language problem emerged that we still struggle with: the worlds of business and theology do not understand each other.

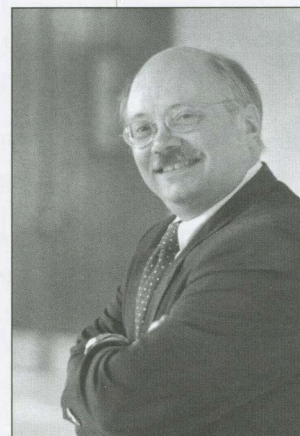
A general pattern of silence in the churches and the theological schools about the relation of faith to business prevailed by the time the third wave began to form in the '80s, Miller writes. But this wave is different. In this new wave, Miller finds a tremendous amount of energy being devoted to relating faith and work, but the vast majority is going on outside the institutional and official life of organized religion. For instance, just one new directory of Faith at Work organizations cites more than 1200 devoted to this quest. Further, while seminaries and

national denominations may not be as open to Faith at Work issues as Miller would like (few develop special chaplains to the world of business the way they do chaplains to hospitals or prisons), the business schools of the country, and management organizations like the American Management Organization, are creating many programs to explore spirituality and work issues. Bookstores feature many new spirituality and work publications, and the Internet is hosting a growing number of electronic networks and Web sites dedicated to similar purposes. More than 1900 workplace chaplains belong to just one organization, Marketplace Chaplains, and major corporations like Tysons and Coca Cola are building this new kind of chaplain into their corporate structures.

The questions Miller raises for those of us who lead congregations, denominations, or seminaries is whether this third wave will continue to take place largely outside of our institutions, whether the clergy and the denominations will once again put other priorities ahead of the Faith at Work quest or even make new attempts to control the movement, or whether our institutions and leaders can learn new ways to support, deepen, and respond to the efforts that are underway. In short, can we learn a new dance?

One need not agree with Miller's entire argument to want to. In fact, I hope that many will bring forth more creative examples than Miller cites of ways that good ministry to the realms of work and daily life is going on in our congrega-

tions. But the question of whether we will ignore, resist, or contribute to a third surge of attempts to bring faith and work into an integrated whole is one that merits fresh thinking by all of us.



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



Leaving Behind Left Behind

Reclaiming the Book of Revelation in a World Left Behind

FREDERICK W. SCHMIDT

WHEN YOU SPEND YEAR AFTER YEAR PREACHING, TEACHING, AND worshipping in a church, there are patterns that emerge. Listen to enough sermons and Sunday school lessons and one pattern becomes obvious: more often than not, the Book of Revelation is missing in action. It rarely appears in the lectionary. And when priests and pastors use it, they often focus on the seven letters to the seven churches. Though canonical, it is quoted less often than the Gospel of Thomas (thanks, Elaine Pagels). In fact, in most of our churches you have to die to hear the Book of Revelation read. Then, of course, it's too late to learn anything new about it.

No one will ever understand a single thing you say about John's Apocalypse unless you begin by describing how people have previously read and interpreted it.

While mainline churches have continued to neglect the Book of Revelation, dispensationalists have worked hard and successfully to popularize their approach to it, spawning the Bible Study Fellowship and so-called Bible churches. Although they publicly eschew claims to either denominational or theological distinctives, their approach to Scripture is, in fact, radically defined by a very specific set of theological assumptions popularized at first in the *Scofield Reference Bible*. In that approach, the whole of human history is divided into two eras of divine redemption: one effected through the Law, the other accomplished through grace in Jesus Christ. This division leaves both the Old Testament and the teaching of Jesus in the “old” dispensation, and the letters of Paul, the General Epistles, and the Book of Revelation in the “new” dispensation. The dispensationalists then further subdivide history into smaller eras, making distinctions between the ways in which God has worked and does work in the world and relying heavily on Revelation to work out the details of an end-of-days tableau of events.

To argue for even this most basic scheme not only misuses the Book of Revelation but ignores the role of grace in the Old Testament, misunderstands the nature of the Law (which is not an instrument of salvation but instruction that describes what an existence made possible by grace will look like), relegates the teaching of Jesus—along with the Old Testament—to a secondary role in Christian theology, and misrepresents the nature of Judaism.

For much of church history, dispensationalists represented a minority movement in the church. During the modernist-fundamentalist controversy of the early 20th century, even prominent fundamentalists were repelled by dispensationalism, arguing that they would make common cause with it against modernism but were not fools enough to agree with it. And by the end of World War II, which offered the best prospect ever of global conflagration, they very nearly extinguished it as a movement.

But thanks to the creation of the Israeli nation-state and the specter of nuclear holocaust—as well as the commercial success of Hal Lindsay's *Late Great Planet Earth* and Tim LaHaye's *Left Behind* series—dispensationalist readings of Revelation are now an unexamined orthodoxy. As a result, the vast majority of Christians believe that if one is going to read the Book of Revelation at all, it has to be read as a roadmap to our future. With the development of the new *Left Behind: Eternal Forces* video game—released last autumn “just in time for Christmas”—roadmap readings of Revelation threaten to gain an even deeper hold on the American religious psyche as the assumptions of dispensationalism thread their way through the culture.

So how do we leave behind the left-behind approach to reading the Book of Revelation? As I see it, there are four essential steps we must take: (1) make a conscious choice to equip Christians to read the Book of Revelation; (2) challenge the assumptions about how it should be read; (3) outline and explain the ways in which

it has been read, and (4) recapture the deeper significance of the text for the Christian life.

Equip Christians to Read Revelations

For a variety of reasons, the decision to help people understand the Book of Revelation has itself become an issue. One reason is that most seminarians are never exposed to the demands of interpreting the Apocalypse. As a result, clergy are often ill-prepared to deal with the challenges of explaining it to others. They struggle with explaining the book's arcane imagery and complex structure, they lack the information to sympathetically represent the purpose of apocalyptic literature, and they possess little more than a passing acquaintance with the historical context out of which the Book of Revelation arose.

Another reason most ministers shy away from teaching their congregations how to read Revelation can be traced to widespread disaffection in the church with eschatology, or a theology of last things. Reduced to a catalog of exotic and often lurid observations about the end of days, it is difficult to imagine that the Book of Revelation can be helpful to Christians who seek to live effectively in the world. Many ministers rightly believe that an eschatology that assumes redemption amounts to little more than a transaction in which one moves from a column marked “damned” to one marked “saved” is bereft if not corrosive of deeper moral and social commitments.

What many clergy are never taught is that, rightly understood, eschatology speaks to the shape of the future as a means of not only addressing our fate but as a means of reframing our understanding of the present and the nature of reality itself. Deeply rooted in the divine purposes of creation and in addressing the problem of evil, eschatology is the ending without which the redemptive story is incomplete and the purposes of God are finally frustrated. Unfortunately, however, left-behind theology has fueled embarrassment over eschatology, leaving clergy unwilling and unprepared to help their parishes in

John's message to the churches of Asia Minor underlines the urgency of a question that we all need to answer. Anyone who subscribes to the conviction that a person of faith must engage the world will face a choice between the cities of our own making and God's.

thinking in eschatological categories that might actually minister to them. The key to addressing this stunning omission is, in part, the commitment to explore the Book of Revelation.

Challenge Assumptions

Of all the books in the Bible, the Book of Revelation is probably the one most easily distorted by the assumptions that people bring to its reading. No one will ever understand a single thing you say about John's Apocalypse unless you begin by describing how people have previously read and interpreted it. They will either be completely mystified or will simply add the "interesting" observations you have made about the book to the larger, implicitly dispensationalist view of Revelation that has already shaped their understanding of the book. The difficulty in challenging those assumptions lies in the hold that dispensationalist views already have on the public consciousness and the presumptive orthodoxy that they therefore enjoy.

Challenging those assumptions has to be done as gently as possible, because what is at stake are not simply parishioners' discreet views about the Book of Revelation but also, to some extent, the shape of their faith. That said, the effort to reorient the way in which people read the book does require a fairly direct challenge to dispensationalist assumptions.

It can be fairly pointed out, for instance, that when we read Scripture (or, indeed, any piece of literature) we read it with questions surrounding its original meaning and likely intent. It is difficult to know what Paul might have been talking about when he addressed the question of eating meat sacrificed to idols without knowing something of the historical setting. It is hard to know why Matthew would make so much of the lineage of the Messiah without knowing something of the traditions that shaped the messianic expectation of the era.

So it is counterintuitive, if not simply strange, to suddenly begin reading the Book of Revelation as a roadmap to the contemporary reader's experience. Without being at all unfair to dispensationalism, essentially the left-behind approach to reading the text of the Apocalypse asks the contemporary reader to assume that over two millennia ago in Asia Minor, a Greek-speaking writer wrote to a Greek-speaking congregation and, upon completing it, concluded, "I don't have any idea what it means, but people living 2,000 years from now on a continent that has yet to be discovered, in a country that has yet to be founded, living under circumstances no one can now imagine, will understand it." This is the obvious logic of a dispensationalist reading of Revelation, but it often goes unexamined. Therefore, taking a congregation through the typical ways in which we honor the historical particularity of biblical

literature and then comparing the singular approach we take to John's Apocalypse can be instructive.¹

Explain Past Interpretations

It's not necessary to use a lot of arcane terminology to help your parishioners think about how to read the Book of Revelation, but the basic approach taken to John's Apocalypse is the greatest determinant of what the reader will get from this part of Scripture, so it is important to familiarize your parishioners with the various approaches.

The key lies in using accessible labels and definitions. For example, as mentioned earlier, dispensationalist understandings of Revelation can be described as roadmap readings. Such readings, intending to discover signposts to our future, deals in one-to-one correspondences with events in the text and events in our world. It is often literalistic in its approach to the imagery of John's Apocalypse, even where those images resist literal renderings, and it treats the book as a timetable, even though the events in the apocalypse reverse the telling of the story, revisiting some of the images used earlier in the narrative.

Other readings, like the one popularized by French theologian Jacques Ellul, read the Book of Revelation as myth, a narrative describing in an evocative fashion the deeper nature of an experience, event, or person. We tell myths to

conjure up a set of associations that not only pluck at our heartstrings but also shape our thinking and prompt us to act. For that reason, it is not surprising to discover that some interpreters have argued that the true meaning of the Book of Revelation is not to be found in a one-to-one and literalistic decoding of the book's images but in the evocative and symbolic character of its language. Mythic readings of Revelation tend to be far more subtle than dispensationalist readings in their handling of the images in John's Apocalypse, but lack the interest in the book's setting to explain why it was originally written or how the circumstances under which it was written compare with those that we face.

That is why it continues to be important to help Christians understand that the Book of Revelation must also be read as the product of history. For many Christians the historical-critical approach to Scripture is thought of as an approach to the text bent on denigrating its spiritual value and undercutting claims to its inspiration. Consequently, it is important to reassure people in the pews that this is not the purpose of historical criticism. Instead, its intent is to discover the intended meaning of the text by focusing on the original writer and readers, as well as the historical, social, cultural, and religious circumstances that gave rise to the text being studied. Revered as they are today, it is very easy to forget that biblical texts were once very much like the writing we do today: certain circumstances usually require us to write, and we write in the hope of shaping the circumstances.

Historical critics give attention to that reality as a key to recovering the meaning of the Bible's literature. Far from being abstract, theological treatises, the books of the Bible are occasional pieces of literature, written to specific people, dealing with specific struggles, events, and controversies. Knowing as much as possible about those matters informs the interpreter's study of a given text. So, more

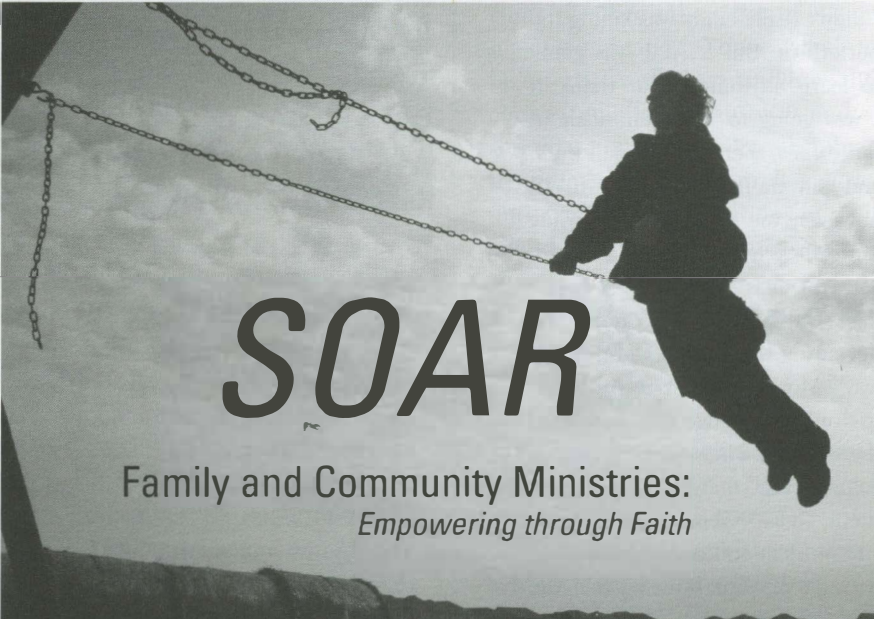
often than not, they begin with five basic questions: Who, what, where, when, and why?

Recapture Revelation's Significance

As important as it is to help readers think deeply about how to read the Book of Revelation, it is far more important to help them understand its significance for the Christian life. If all we do is take dispensationalist assumptions away from them, we

are unlikely to be heard or we will discourage them from ever reading it again. An historical-critical approach to John's Apocalypse needs to be accompanied by an unabashed effort to make sense of it for our own day, and that is neither as hard nor as irrelevant as it may seem.

My friend and colleague Natalie Van Kirk compares reading the Book of Revelation with catching butterflies, a hobby she undertook with great earnestness as a child of 10 or 11:



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I would take the butterflies I captured back to the house and mount them carefully on a padded board and then look in my butterfly book to learn what sort of butterfly I had captured, its range, and its living habits. If I damaged one when I caught it, then I would sometimes dissect it and look at pieces of it under my microscope, or shake some of the butterfly dust from its wings onto a slide to see what that looked like close-up. ... The only part of the process that I didn't really enjoy was killing the butterflies. But ... if I was going to learn anything about them, if I was going to really know about butterflies, then I had to kill them and pin them to that board. If, however, the only way you study butterflies is pinned to a board, you will miss quite a lot. You will miss the Swallowtail caterpillars devouring the parsley and dill, the way a Monarch unrolls its proboscis to drink at the edge of a puddle, or the way that wings seem to change color as the sunlight flashes upon them. To learn those sorts of things you must sit still and pay attention with all of your senses while the world of butterflies unfolds around you. ... Revelation ... is a lot like butterflies. You have to know about its structure, how it fits together, and about the references it makes to really understand it, but the pieces aren't all there is to it. The real trick here, as with any text from the Bible, is to study it, to learn something about what it means without killing it and pinning it to a board like a butterfly. Because, when you have finished studying, the Word will still be living and you must sit very still, pay attention, and listen as God's Word unfolds around you in flashes of color and light.²

When dealing with the imagery of John's Apocalypse, this is exactly what the interpreter needs to remember. The stories, actors, and images can be unpacked in some detail; the

scriptural allusions are readily identified; and the points of contact with John's churches, the Roman Empire, and the Judaism of his day are all there. Yet it is equally clear that the "flashes of color and light" cannot be reduced to a one-to-one correspondence. Instead, John's use of imagery is like the brushstrokes in an impressionist painting. You can only grasp the artist's intention when the

and social explanations for their existence. He is, instead, intentionally tapping his church's memory and emotions, conjuring up two cities that loom large in the imagination. In this last section of his Apocalypse he turns his attention to each city, announcing that one will be judged (Rev. 17-18) and that the other will triumph (Rev. 19-22). In so doing, he puts the choice between Christ

John's use of imagery is like the brushstrokes in an impressionist painting. You can only grasp the artist's intention when the painting is seen as a whole.

painting is seen as a whole. Stand too close, squint at the individual brushstrokes, and the image is diminished or disappears completely. It is the larger picture that John meant for his hearers to see with their ears.

This is as clear in Revelation 17-22 as it is anywhere in the Apocalypse. The mythic looms large again, but there can be no doubt that we are talking about the human city of Rome and the church in Asia Minor living in faithfulness to their Lord.

John's decision to use cities (Babylon and Jerusalem) as the central metaphor for the choice facing his church is a natural one. The Apostle Paul, his famous predecessor, had consciously chosen to spread the gospel in cities, and they therefore figured prominently in the well-being of the ancient church. The world in which John lived was also city-centered. For six and a half centuries, rulers used them to spread their vision and build a power base, so it is no surprise to find that cities acquired an emblematic significance or that John would cast the choice facing his readers as one between the city of Babylon and the Holy City.

But John's use of the image, like butterflies and impressionist paintings, is not exhausted by historical

and culture before his readers a final time, confronting some and comforting others.

The first of those cities is Babylon. Known to ancient Jews as the center of Mesopotamian society, it is, in one sense, simply another ancient and now bygone city. But as the capital of the empire that captured Jerusalem in 597 BCE, it claims a much larger place in memory and myth. It is the city of exile, a place of bondage, and the enemy of God. John knows this and taps into the visceral, even repulsive set of associations that this ancient city has for his congregations, and he paints a lurid picture that builds on them, characterizing Babylon as a whore who actively seduces all those around her (Rev. 17:1ff.). Lest his hearers conclude that her conduct has little or no bearing on their lives, he notes that she is "drunk with the blood of the saints and the blood of the witnesses to Jesus" (Rev. 17:6).

Then, capitalizing on the surprise that ancient Babylon could be the undoing of the church, John makes it clear that this archetypal city is, in fact, Rome (Rev. 17:6bff.), the city set between seven hills and governed by seven emperors (Rev. 17:9), the last of whom will be a beast—Nero

revisited (Rev. 17:11). With this observation it becomes clear, in retrospect, that the whore John has been describing is the city whose patroness and goddess Roma is worshipped in Asia Minor (Rev. 2:1, 8, 12). According to the world over which she rules she is the source of blessing. Even in the eyes of her enemies and victims she is large, dominant, and defining. In spite of the pain that she inflicts, it is difficult to imagine a world without her, and the water on which she rides—the other nations of the world—are, for that reason, her allies (Rev. 17:2, 15).

But in the war that she is about to wage with her allies against the Lamb, she will be defeated and the victory will belong to the Son and to those that follow him (Rev. 17:14). When the outcome is clear, then even her allies will turn against her (Rev. 17:16-18) and the self-destructive nature of evil will be manifest.

In what one commentator rightly describes as one of Scripture's more poignant passages, John both celebrates and mourns the undoing of Rome (Rev. 18). The ambivalence of this lament may reflect the ambivalence of John's own followers, some of whom no doubt celebrated the promised demise of the Empire. But not all of his followers necessarily viewed the passing of Rome as a completely positive development, and others no doubt objected to this notion (cf. Rev. 18:2, 21-23).

So, here again, the complex shape of John's churches and the pastoral demands he faces are in evidence. The lament acknowledges the pain that some experience at the prospect of Rome's demise, or John may be skewering the self-interest that those who depend upon Rome can display. He may even have been attempting to address specific misgivings—organized as the laments are around the grief of kings, merchants, and sailors—or they may simply reflect the groups who most often depended upon the Empire. Whether that is the case or not, John undoubtedly knew that ambivalent reactions would surface and that, without acknowl-

edging and challenging them, some might not hear his message.

He also clearly felt that the judgment levied against Rome was justified. So the lament outlines the case against the city: idolatrous worship (Rev. 18:3); violence against the church and others (Rev. 18:24); "blasphemous self-glorification" (Rev. 18:3, 7, 9); and the wanton use of its wealth (Rev. 18:3, 11-19, 23).

Anticipating that indictment, the angel who announces the fall of Babylon—a.k.a. Rome (Rev. 18:2)—also cries out to the church, "Come out of her, my people, so that you do not take part in her sins, and so that you do not share in her plagues; for her sins are heaped high as heaven and God has remembered her iniquities" (Rev. 18:4-5).

Then in chapters 19-22, John announces the coming of the Holy City. Each of the major divisions in the Book of Revelation begins with a glimpse into the transcendent, deeper realities that John believes should shape the behavior of his church, and each is followed by visions offered in sets of seven. Here, John takes his readers back to the divine throne room, and following hard on the words of praise and worship uttered around the heavenly throne by the 24 elders (Rev. 19:1-11) are the last seven visions: the parousia, or return of Christ (Rev. 19:11-16); the last battle (Rev. 19:17-21); the binding of Satan (Rev. 20:1-3); the millennium (Rev. 20:4-6); the defeat of Gog and Magog (Rev. 20:7-10); the last judgment (Rev. 20:11-15); and the new Jerusalem (Rev. 21:1-22:21).

Here, as elsewhere, it is a mistake to assume that John has a chronological interest in the events described. Some of them might have been presented in a different order. Some of them overlap or happen all but simultaneously, and he abandons numbering completely.

It is also a mistake to reduce the "flashes of color and light" to a one-to-one correspondence with past, present, and future events, or to focus on the brushstrokes to the exclusion of the image that John is

painting. Unlike the defeat of Rome and other emblematic cities of power, the final triumph of the Holy City is without precedent and without point of contact in history. So, while John has used images of an evocative kind throughout the Apocalypse, here the images he uses are, by definition, rooted in myth and imagination.

John's message to the churches of Asia Minor underlines the urgency of a question that we all need to answer. Anyone who subscribes to the conviction that a person of faith must engage the world will face a choice between the cities of our own making and God's. There will always be questions of where and how those choices manifest themselves and should be made. How much John or the members of his church accurately understood these questions in their own day is open to debate. But in our own time these questions are inescapable, and they are worth facing before our funerals.♦

NOTES

1. Frederick W. Schmidt, *Conversations with Scripture: Revelation* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2005).
2. Natalie B. Van Kirk, "The Difference between Catching Butterflies and the Mysteries of God," an unpublished sermon preached at the Cathedral Church of St. Matthew, Dallas, Texas, May 16, 2004.

Further Reading

For those wishing to learn more about the application of the Book of Revelation to life today, the following resources are recommended:

Amy Johnson Frykholm, *Rapture Culture, Left Behind in Evangelical America* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2004).

Barbara R. Rossing, *The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2005).

Frederick W. Schmidt, *Conversations with Scripture: Revelation* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2005).



Becoming Mutually Accountable

Strengthening Clergy and Congregations through Evaluation

DONNA SCHAPER

A

SSESSMENT IS OFTEN VIEWED AS A DIRTY WORD, BUT IT is a necessity and even a positive tool. Without it we don't know how to measure what has happened to us, through us, or around us.

Assessment, or evaluation, is nothing more or less than mutual accountability: we agree to be and do certain things and to allow others to help us see whether or not we did so. With this simple tool of accountability we can enter a place of comfort, safety, and personal growth. We can open the door to knowing what others really think of us rather than guessing at their points of view.

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But let's face it; there are many things wrong with assessment. The call from the Spellings Commission on the Future of Higher Education for "commonly used tests or other assessments" of student learning is a prime example. In response to these urgings, faculty members complained that higher education is far too diverse to be measured by standardized tests, that common learning measures would lead to costly and unnecessary federal intervention, and that if assessment was used as a consumer information tool it would oversimplify a complex higher education system and lead to comparisons among unlike institutions.¹

In congregations, all the issues about assessment that concern higher education come to an even sharper focus. The clergyperson is seen as set apart and accountable to God first and people second. God, we believe, uses grace as assessment—for all human beings—and many people therefore resist evaluating others, wishing to remain outside each other's critical embrace. But being critical, in the sense of examining something from all sides, can provide a positive moment of recognition. It can be a vehicle for grace, the grace that understands that nobody is perfect, that we all have flaws, that we are all partial, and that we need each other's gifts to complete ourselves.

We clergy are not perfect and we are also much less important to church than churches think. A rabbi friend of mine understands this. When I left my Miami congregation he gave them a message: "The only way we will know how good Donna was here is in what you do now." He got it: the goodness of a parish is in the relationship between the leaders and the congregation, not in the quality of any one leader. A leader is only as good as the fruit of his or her relationships. If the consequences of a person's leadership are that the soil has been prepared for the next leader to enjoy even more trust and mutual accountability, then the leader has succeeded.

Even though some measurements don't apply until long after we are gone, clergy—and congregations—need to periodically be informed as to how they and their performance are perceived. If done right, the evaluation process can have positive results for both clergy and congregations. It can lead congregations and their leadership to focus on what really matters. It can show that church boards are really teams of spiritual leaders and that leadership is the interaction of the system with itself, not just what the minister does—nor, for that matter, just what the congregation does. It is the healthy,

mutually reinforcing, mutually evaluating action of the relationship between the leader and the system, the board and the leader, and each with the wider world in which the system is located.

Good evaluations and legitimate assessments help the congregational system go from fuzzy to focus. They address such questions as: What is it we are doing? Are we doing what we should be? Good assessments also offer the system a way to improve. Through effective evaluation the system is held accountable both to God and to its own constituents. We make mutual the accountability and give each other the grace that God has already given us. But, in order to conduct an evaluation that fulfills this promise, some guidance may be in order. In the following sections are some do's and don'ts to keep in mind.

What Not to Do

- Don't poll the entire congregation about the pastor's performance. General information can be very harmful. However, particular information can be very useful. To obtain such information, have a conversation with five percent of the congregation (for instance, 10 members of a 200-member parish). What is wrong with most evaluations is they are too complicated, too general, and provide information that no one takes responsibility for implementing. Complicated evaluations abuse precious lay and clergy time, and they don't meet the goal of mutual accountability being the vehicle for grace. Simplifying the process by limiting the number of "assessors" can therefore be valuable.
- When asking people for their assessments, do not use a written form. Instead, have a conversation with them, asking what they appreciate about the pastor and what they would like to see more of. Let this question be the place where people can register any of their disappointments.
- Do not make the results public. Consider the assessment a treasured conversation between trusted friends (in both directions).
- Do not link the evaluation itself to the raise. Instead, link the pastor's response to the evaluation to the raise. In other words, evaluate in one season, do the budget in another season. Some congregations annualize the review; others

- do it early and often by means of as pastor-parish relations committee (PPRC) or similar mechanism. Ongoing evaluation has real strengths and creates the “muscles” we need to do it well. At the same time, annual evaluations have a formality to them that can help support positive, open, and diverse communication; they provide opportunities for multiple and divergent viewpoints, make space for difference, and allow for expressions of appreciation for the pastor and all those involved in the evaluation process. A combination of an annual formal evaluation and a regular mechanism for mutual feedback is the best set-up for evaluation. In either case, we need to allow the evaluation’s message time to sink in. For example, if it has been suggested that the minister spend more time editing his or her sermons, allow six months for this to occur. During that time, certain appointed people should provide regular and specific feedback. If the pastor responds appropriately to the feedback, reward him or her with a raise. If not, withhold the raise. Likewise, if you are asking the pastor to spend more time on an activity, be clear where the pastor should spend less time. Should he or she do less parish visitation instead? Make the issue of improvement a collective responsibility, not an individual accusation.
- Do not let the temperature rise in the organization around evaluation time. Instead, quietly announce that an evaluation will be taking place and that anyone who has comments may send them to the PPRC or the personnel committee. Evaluation between congregations and pastors should become normal. Ordinary. The way we expect a very good friend of ours to invade our personal space—early and often.

What to Do

- Do have two units, a personnel committee and a PPRC (or some other group of diverse, appointed people who hold genuine conversations with the minister regularly about what is happening in the parish). The members of the PPRC should serve at least three-year terms and should become known in the parish as the people to whom parishioners can talk if they have a complaint about the minister. The PPRC member should then determine how to deliver the message to the minister, whether one-on-one or in a meeting. The style and feel of these meetings should be one of intimacy, trust, and friendship. The second unit, the personnel committee, should then receive the evaluation of the PPRC and make decisions about raises and the like. There is nothing wrong with formal procedures! Formal procedures would surely avoid some of the crises that accompany organizations today: pedophilia, clergy burnout, misuse of information, e-mail abuse, confidentiality violations, and worries about affirmative action, to name a few. The fact that no one watches clergy is terrible. Formal procedures matter; they just are at odds with the highly emotional, intimate, preciously fragile system that parishes usually are.

- Do have a formal but simple job description for the clergy person and have all members of both the PPRC and the personnel committee privately complete an evaluation of each part (based on a one-to-five scale) and hand it to the minister. In other words, do use numbers.
- Do anticipate a three- to five-year “break-in” period for this method to work. Becoming “normal,” or ordinary, takes time.
- Do allow the minister to also evaluate the congregation, using its bylaws and/or another device. If there is a “job description” for the congregation, it should be one developed by the congregation. If no such job description exists, ask the minister to do a simple one-to-five evaluation of how the congregation is measuring up to its bylaws. This creates mutual accountability, further strengthening the congregational system. The best pastor in the world can’t minister to a parish that is not focused on its work in the world.
- Finally, submit both numerical evaluations to the PPRC and the personnel committee, who should then name future directions: What do we want to improve this year? In the name of improving these things, what will we eliminate?
- Annually, the pastor’s job description should be weighted and changed, with extraordinary attention to the dilemma of trying to do everything versus doing some things well and others not at all, and compensating for weaknesses through the intelligent use of staff, lay leaders, and consultants or other external resources. This annual reassessment of the job description can be based on the conversations that have been occurring throughout the year.

When assessment is done graciously, normally, and in an orderly way, wonderful things can result. One is appreciation, another is trust, a third is clarity, and the final one is grace. At ordination we clergy give ourselves to God. The same is true for the baptism of the nonordained person, who is also given to God. Reminders of the sacred nature of our relationship to congregation, God, and each other are terribly important. They keep us alive. How we manage our relationships is a sacred activity. Evaluation, as part of that management process, is also therefore a sacred activity. The mutual accountability of assessment makes real our ordination vows and the membership promises of baptism—and is a vehicle to experiencing the deep pleasure of grace. ♦

NOTE

1. Margaret A. Miller, “The Legitimacy of Assessment,” *The Chronical Review*, September 22, 2006.



A Discerner's Guide to Congregational Governance

DAN HOTCHKISS

THE ENVELOPE PLEASE! RUNNER-UP FOR MOST Influential Book as rated by American clergy is ... “Ladies and gentlemen, will it be a book on spiritual practices? Biblical studies? The ever-popular ‘How to Blame Lay Leaders’? No, the topic of the second most important book this year is [drum roll] congregational administration!”

Who’d have thought it? For many seminary students, the course on administration is a pothole on the road to glory as a preacher or a pastoral caregiver. We all know great and successful clergy who never say “administration” without wrinkling their noses.

Rick Warren, among others, changed all that. Riding on the coattails of his phenomenally successful 2003 book *The Purpose-Driven Life*, Warren’s previous and little-noticed book *The Purpose-Driven Church* by now has sold more than 100 times as many copies as there are congregations in America. In a 2005 survey by George Barna, U.S. pastors ranked Warren’s books first and second in their influence.

“Administration” is too horn-rimmed a word for the brawny, visionary style of leadership Rick Warren has in mind. He talks mostly about the pastor and the “ministries” the pastor leads, and not much about the role of other players: boards, committees, bishops, and the congregation itself gathered for business.

And yet, when leaders follow Warren’s model, the shift in the pastor’s role causes what amounts to a new polity: a strongly pastor-led church with a small board, few committees, and a multitude of “ministries” that run with a minimum of organizational overhead. The vision as articulated by the pastor is the unifying force, not bylaws or bureaucracy or voting. This is more than streamlining—it’s an essential shift in governance.

Warren’s ideas have fed a growing hunger among leaders who sense that the old ways of governing and managing aren’t working. Many leaders long to streamline structures so that deliberative processes don’t get in the way of ministry. One congregation coined a slogan to describe its governance reforms: “Fewer meetings, more ministry!”

We live in an extraordinary time of risk, reflection, and experiment in congregational governance. Congregational leaders strain against the force of habit and the requirements of their denominational structures and risk conflict in the hope of overcoming difficulties and frustrations that have dogged synagogues and churches for a long time.

Why Now?

Why this sudden interest in governance?

One reason is that it’s about time. The model of governance in most congregations dates from the latter half of the 19th century, and its weaknesses have become glaring. Compared to successful businesses or charitable groups, the majority of synagogues and churches are sluggish, overcautious, change-resistant, and wasteful in their use of volunteers. Across traditions, long-established congregations are

more similar than different, with many common stultifying features:

- A governing board that spends most of its time listening to reports, rubberstamping proposals, and arbitrating conflicts rather than envisioning the future, creating long-term goals and policies, and ensuring organizational performance.
- A long list of standing committees, each of which makes policy for a program area and also has to do the work. This combination creates a bias against new ideas, which have to be approved by a group too busy to take on anything new.
- The “map” theory, in which every inch of programmatic territory belongs to a standing committee: if an idea involves music, then it has to go before the music committee, and so on. This extends the bias against change to the entire institution, and makes outlaws of creative people who bypass the committee system.
- A short list of “power” committees—usually including finance, personnel, and property—that hold an effective veto over any new idea that encroaches on their turf. A new idea has to be approved by up to four committees and a board, each of which has the power to say “no,” but none of which can utter a decisive “yes.”
- A miserly approach to delegation, in which projects are approved provisionally and then come back again and again for criticism, reconsideration, and approval of next steps. Since no one has full authority to accomplish anything, there is always an excuse for delay.
- A paid staff whose members connect to their committees more than to the staff team. Too often the result is disconnected fiefdoms with no accountability for overall results.

None of these familiar traits of congregational life is mandated by the Scriptures. Religious institutions borrow organizational forms from the society around them: the early church was organized like a Hellenistic mystery cult, the medieval church

resembled monarchy, New England Puritans cloned the structure of an English town. The most important influences on the structure of the contemporary American church or synagogue date from the 19th century, when the nonprofit corporation emerged as an all-purpose container for benevolent work. But while other nonprofits have changed, too many congregations still live in the Victorian world of Robert’s Rules.

People are Impatient

No wonder *The Purpose-Driven Church* has found such a large audience! Leaders have lost patience with the plodding pace of the conventional congregation. Spending an evening talking about tiny budget items, listening to reports, and making group decisions that could easily be made by individuals has little appeal for people who can hardly find time for their families. Even young retirees, our only growing leisure population, are now baby-boomers who ask, “How does this meet my needs?” In such a situation, it is not surprise that leaders look for something better.

Another reason leaders are dissatisfied with the old ways is that religion can no longer count on general goodwill to bring them members. At the peak of congregational participation in the 1950s, all nice people knew that all nice people attended and supported the church or synagogue of their choice. Today most people feel quite free not to join a congregation, and almost everyone feels free to leave one congregation for another.

In this environment, each church or synagogue has to articulate its special calling and actively say why it deserves support. It then needs to produce the promised results. That kind of clarity, accountability, and efficacy requires far more focused, streamlined organizational behavior than most congregations are accustomed to.

Congregations are Larger

A third reason for the recent interest in governance is that the average

congregation is quite a bit larger. The larger a congregation is, the more of its behavior is explained by formal documents like bylaws, books of order, job descriptions, and budgets. A small congregation may have all of these documents (though it may not know where they are), but it makes most of its decisions based on an informal pecking order based on seniority, relationship, and trust. Who happens to be a board member at the moment means little; who happens to be pastor, even less.

In a large congregation, formal understandings matter more. These understandings may or may not be in writing; I have noticed that by measuring the thickness of a congregation's policy book you can estimate the distance to the nearest state or national capital. But in large congregations voting matters, written job descriptions more or less describe real jobs, and agreements about governance actually govern how governing bodies govern. One minister who has remained in place while his church grew from pastoral to corporate size said, "There are people in the congregation I'll have to treat as though we were small until they die." Even in a large church, relationships, longevity, and money still confer informal authority. But as a congregation grows, it can't leave so much to chance.

Leaders don't bump into one another often enough to pass along information, establish an informal hierarchy, or smooth over conflicts by the influence of personal friendship.

Unfortunately, even the formal governance most congregations inherit is optimized for the small congregations of the past. Denominations that prescribe a universal "discipline" or "order" for all congregations generally require structures that work less well as worship attendance (or, in most synagogues, member families) passes the 250 mark. Beyond 400 they often stop working at all. Effective larger congregations have long made their own rules; as more congregations become larger, we need new norms of governance that work in larger groups.

Three Themes in Governance Reform

As congregations grow, they need to rely less on tacit understandings and more on written policies, consistent leadership training, clear delegation of authority, and regular evaluation of results. Roles need to be more crisply defined. In particular, effective congregations know the difference between governance (defining the mission, making policy, setting overall direction, and evaluating overall results) and ministry (program leadership, staff supervision, business administration). Typically the governing board is ultimately in charge of governance, and the senior clergyperson (sometimes as part of a management team) is in charge of ministry.

Clear role definition does not mean people work in isolation. On the contrary, the clearer it becomes where each buck stops, the more easily the players can collaborate without needing to worry about losing control of what they will be held accountable for doing.

Rick Warren's model of the church is popular, but it is only one of several governance reforms explored by synagogue and church leaders. Three themes appear often in these efforts.

Pastors Who Cast Visions

Rick Warren, William Easum, Tom Bandy, and many others call on the head clergyperson to articulate the congregation's unique calling loudly and often. The upside of this is efficiency and the potential to multiply opportunities for service unencumbered by board and committee meetings. The potential downside is that a congregation that relies so much on one person to provide leadership can become brittle and unstable. A congregation that builds muscle in its clergy leader needs at the same time to provide ways for the congregation as a whole to co-create the vision. It also needs to strengthen its governing board to act as a strong partner with—and, when necessary, as a counterbalance to—strong clergy leadership.

Governing Boards that Govern

The effort to strengthen boards is a second major theme in today's ferment about congregational governance. "Boards" of 25 or even 50 members, which are not uncommon, cannot engage questions of purpose and vision with the depth that they require. Even more seriously, scandals in the secular nonprofit world have shown that members of large boards tend to feel less responsible for overseeing the corporation and ensuring compliance with the law. A board of seven to 12 members can represent the interests of a large congregation better than an oversized board.

In addition to reducing board size, many churches are eliminating awkward, multi-board arrangements and replacing them with a clear hierarchy where a single board holds ultimate responsibility for governance.

Sophistication about board governance has evolved greatly in the secular nonprofit world in the last few decades. A wide variety of resources have become available to help boards with strategic planning, staff oversight, policymaking, and keeping focused on top-level governance and out of management. The work of thinkers like John Carver and Richard Chait and resource groups like BoardSource and the Leader to Leader Institute have only begun to inform the work of congregation boards.

The challenge of this work is to remember that a congregation is a congregation first and a nonprofit corporation second. A minister is not exactly like an executive director, and a congregation is not the passive "membership" of a museum or the alumni of a university. So the good new resources on board governance need to be supplemented by reflection rooted in the practical realities of congregational life and in the traditions that make each congregation special.

Congregations that Discern Together

Many congregations, dissatisfied with business meetings as the sole way for the whole membership to engage in its own governance, have implemented various methods of group discernment.

Some of these, like Ignatian decision-making and consensus governance, as practiced by the Mennonites and Quakers, arise from Christian history. Others, like Future Search and Open Space Technology, come from the world of nonprofit, public, and business administration. Still others, like the family-system insights of Edwin Friedman and Ronald Heifetz's work on building an organization's "adaptive capacity," have roots in the mental health professions.

Like clergy leadership and board governance, congregation-based discernment works best in combination with the others. Each congregation must reflect on its own.

Many religious traditions give lip service to the congregation's role in discerning its own direction. Only a few (traditional Quaker meetings, for example) actually require enough time and attention from every member to bring the whole congregation into day-to-day decision-making. The new "technologies" of large-group planning and visioning enable large groups to enter into governance for one or two carefully planned days a year. Each congregation needs to balance the expectations it is willing to place on members with the amount of large-group participation it will lead them to expect.

How to Explore Governance

If your congregation wants to explore governance alternatives, I suggest you begin by designating a small Governance Task Group who will study books and resources like those in the list accompanying this article. I particularly recommend Edward Long's *Patterns of Polity*, which may help you to identify the core values of your own denomination's style of governance. The group might wish to interview past leaders to learn what was satisfying or frustrating for them.

Once the task group has a hunch about the scope and nature of the changes it wants to explore, it is ready to plan its process. The plan should specify the areas of governance that will be looked at, the concerns or goals

to be addressed, the occasions when leaders or members can have input, the approximate date the task group recommendations will be acted on, and the body that will act. It is worth mentioning the hope that, by that time, every interested person will have had a chance to express his or her hopes and concerns, so that the vote itself will be an anticlimax.

Once the process is approved by the governing board, it should be widely and repeatedly publicized. It is always good to overdo publicity. I've found that people will accept a great deal of top-down decision-making if they know well in advance what is under consideration, when they can have input, who will decide, and when.

Next the governance task group should facilitate a series of sessions for the congregation at large and specific groups of leaders. Presentations on governance alternatives, denominational wisdom, and best practices from the nonprofit world should be mixed with liberal amounts of time for feedback and discussion. Between large gatherings, the task group needs time to reflect alone. Periodically it meets with the board to share the questions it is struggling with. Sharing questions is a better way to elicit helpful feedback than presenting fixed conclusions.

Trial Run

Some congregations find it helpful to try out a proposed new system of governance for six months to a year before making it permanent. You may need to make small changes to your bylaws or other documents, but keep these to a minimum. Usually it is possible for your existing bodies, using the powers they already have, to act according to the proposed plan temporarily. The task group then evaluates the trial run, taking note not only of whether people liked or didn't like it (some discomfort is inevitable) but whether it addressed the concerns and goals that motivated the inquiry in the first place.

Assuming all goes well, the task force then presents the proper motions to make lasting changes to the congrega-

tion's governance. As with all actions that come after thorough process, wide discussion, and responsive leadership, one sign of success will be that someone asks, "Didn't we vote on this already?" ♦

Further Reading

BoardSource. Many resources available at www.boardsource.org.

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Friedman, Edwin H., *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue*, The Guilford Family Therapy Series (New York: Guilford Press, 1985).

Heifetz, Ronald A., *Leadership without Easy Answers* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1994).

Leader to Leader Institute. Many resources available at www.leadertoleader.org.

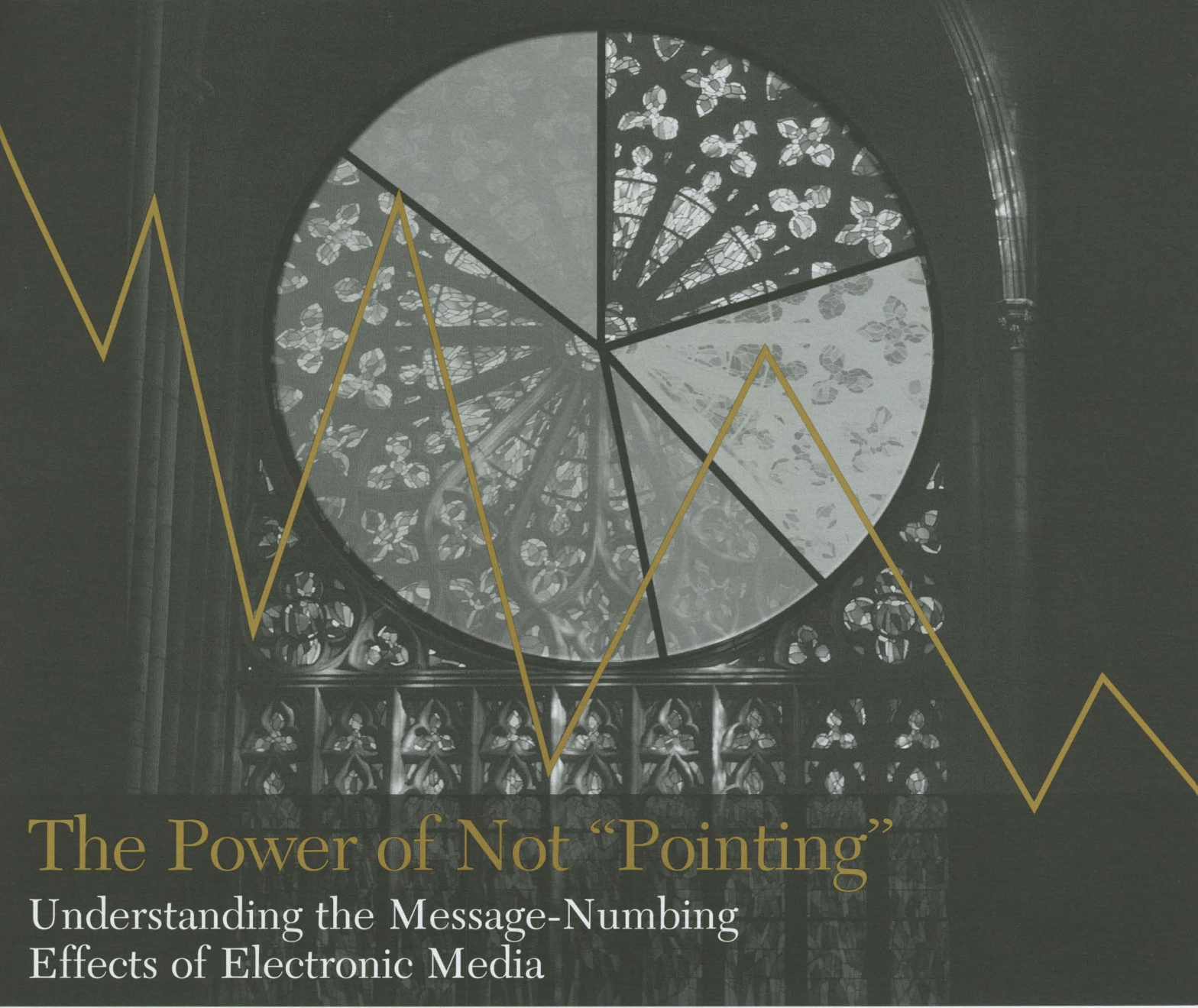
Long, Edward Le Roy, *Patterns of Polity: Varieties of Church Governance* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2001).

Owen, Harrison, *Open Space Technology: A User's Guide*, 2nd edition (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 1997).

Steinke, Peter L., *Healthy Congregations: A Systems Approach*, 2nd edition (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2006).

Warren, Richard, *The Purpose-Driven Church: Growth without Compromising Your Message & Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 1995).

Weisbord, Marvin Ross, and Sandra Janoff, *Future Search: An Action Guide to Finding Common Ground in Organizations and Communities*, 2nd edition, updated and expanded edition (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2000).



The Power of Not “Pointing”

Understanding the Message-Numbing Effects of Electronic Media

PAM FICKENSCHER

A FEW YEARS AGO I VOLUNTEERED to serve on a church-wide committee of my denomination, the kind that meets in the big corporate meeting room, a glass-and-steel box that looks like all the other corporate boxes near major airports. It was a moment of weakness; I had been worn down by flattery. I am not, in my heart of hearts, a boardroom kind of person. I have come to appreciate the people who serve in our church-wide offices to be men and women of deep faith and abiding commitment. But all too often it is not only the location of these committee meetings that mimics the corporate world.

“PowerPoint is a competent slide manager and projector. But rather than supplementing a presentation, it has become a substitute for it. Such misuse ignores the most important rule of speaking: Respect your audience.”

—Edward Tufte

Take Randy, for example (not his real name). Get him in a pulpit or at an altar and he is a gifted preacher and minister. Have a conversation over lunch and his enthusiasm is infectious and convincing. But somehow Randy has decided he must communicate at these boardroom meetings with PowerPoint—and communication is precisely what breaks down. One of the most painful hours I have endured was watching this man, whom I know to be a gifted speaker, read the bullet points on his slides to us. All the advantages of the visual medium—the ability to show a chart or a photograph—were lacking, and the life was instantly sucked out of what I’m sure was a well-outlined, interesting story he had to tell about his ministry. I wanted to scream, “Randy, turn off the projector and just preach!”

I might be a bit more critical than most people on this point because my husband works with projector-assisted presentations all the time. He describes his occupation variously as “policy consultant,” “land use consultant,” and “economist.” Because policy work like his must be grounded in facts and figures, and because the real-life effects of these policies can be shown in architects’ drawings and photographs, the visual medium is really essential to his work. He and his colleagues need to “point”—a lot!

Ironically, however, he often finds himself instructing his coworkers and contractors to “preach.” Much of their work involves offering technical assistance to communities that are trying to curb suburban sprawl. They gather the data, talk to “stakeholders,” and facilitate town hall meetings. They learn

about the needs of the community as it grows, the concerns about preserving quality of life, and environmental challenges to the area. And then they put their expertise to work in constructing creative solutions. There is a great deal of technical expertise and a lot of jargon in their internal conversations as a team. But when the final presen-

tation to the community comes, they need most of all to inspire. “Nobody cares how this plan stacks up technically against any other community’s,” he tells his team. “They need to know that they can accomplish their goals, that these tools will work for them, and that when we leave here it is worth their committing to a plan.” They need,

More on the Effective—and Ineffective— Use of Electronic Media

Author Pam Fickenscher (see story, page 19) has identified the following resources as useful to clergy interested in better understanding how PowerPoint and other electronic media can be used—or are best avoided—in pastoral ministry.

- **Presentation Zen** (<http://www.presentationzen.com/presentationzen/>) is a blog about presentation media, with a critical edge that gets beyond the bells and whistles to what actually communicates.
- A parody of PowerPoint using the Gettysburg address can be found at <http://norvig.com/Gettysburg/index.htm>.
- Edward Tufte, an expert in visual presentation of information, is one of the most outspoken critics of PowerPoint: <http://www.edwardtufte.com/tufte/>. A summary of his critique can be found at <http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/11.09/ppt2.html>.
- For a spirited defense of PowerPoint as a tool (which is nonetheless critical of bad storytelling), see http://www.jnd.org/dn.mss/in_defense_of_powerp.html.

in other words, to be preached to.

Plenty of communications experts have commented on the mind-numbing limitations of PowerPoint, especially when users follow the “templates” that Microsoft provides. The most important “points”—that is, the passion—are lost in bullet points. All too many preachers, attempting to be “relevant,” make themselves the servants of the slides, losing the power of the biblical and community narrative to inspire. Film and photograph can at times serve useful purposes in preaching, but since most preachers are trained to start with word rather than image, the visuals often feel like a tack-on, or worse, an attempt to manipulate emotion because our words have failed to move anyone. Edward Tufte, one of the most outspoken critics of PowerPoint, argues that the software too often becomes the presentation rather than a tool to support the message. In *Wired* magazine, that cheerleader of all things new and

Stand-up comedy is still alive and well, and many of the most successful “emergent” churches have “messages” that go much longer than your average mainline 15-minute sermon. If anything, the familiarity of younger people with digital media should be a caution: they know all too well how easy it is to manipulate images and emotions. They have seen more than enough advertising in their lifetimes to be conscious of spin. I pastored a post-modern/emergent congregation for five years but can count on my hands the number of times we had a projector set up on Sunday morning. For us, finances and space concerns made it difficult to use video, but I rarely felt that our impact was lessened as a result. People came to our community because it was, in their words, “real.”

It is an ongoing ailment of the church that we try to “catch up” to the culture just as it is no longer enamored of the latest fad. The Internet is full of PowerPoint parodies—the Gettysburg

When we put the technology first, we sacrifice our most powerful instruments—our own voices and embodied selves—at great peril.

digital, he has written, “PowerPoint is a competent slide manager and projector. But rather than supplementing a presentation, it has become a substitute for it. Such misuse ignores the most important rule of speaking: Respect your audience.”¹

“But what about younger generations?” the question always arises. “Isn’t it essential to use electronic media to reach people under 30 these days?” Yes, and no. To be sure, youth and young adults are more Web-savvy, more immersed in the images and stories of pop culture than ever before. But my experience is that PowerPoint is too often used, just as Tufte warns, with a disrespect for younger audiences. It is condescending to assume that a person under 30 lacks the attention span for a well-told oral story.

Address, or Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech, bulleted to a fare-thee-well. We are a visual culture, but with the remarkable exception of Al Gore’s *An Inconvenient Truth*, no one is flocking to the theaters to see presentation at work. We go to see and hear stories, to enter into the lives of another for a moment, and to be moved. Preachers have a powerful story to tell, and when we put the technology first, we sacrifice our most powerful instruments—our own voices and embodied selves—at great peril. ♦

NOTE

1. *Wired*, 11.09, September 2003.

Questions for Reflection

Wondering whether presentation software will help or hinder your communication? Here are a few questions to consider:

1. Is your message linear and topical, or more narrative in structure? (Stories don’t lend themselves well to bullet points.)
2. Do you know your message well enough that you will not need to look at the slides as you speak? (Presenters who have to read their own slides can appear unfamiliar with the material, as if they are reading someone else’s manuscript)
3. Are the visual images associated with the message better left to the imagination? Can they be effectively “painted” with words rather than a photo? For example, rendering a biblical story may be done better without slides. Talking about relief work after Hurricane Katrina, on the other hand, may be enhanced by photographs.
4. If you want to use photographs or video, do you have the necessary permissions to use these images? Also, do they “point” the listener to where you want them to focus (the local or the global, the present or the past, etc.)?
5. Will the use of photos or video help your listeners hear the whole of your message, or is there a danger they will overwhelm your story?
6. Are you comfortable enough with the technological medium that you plan to use that you will be able to focus on the audience/congregation members and their responses rather than on making the technology function?



Whatever Happened to Humility?

Rediscovering a Misunderstood Leadership Strength

N. GRAHAM STANDISH

CAN WE BE HUMBLE AND STILL BE LEADERS? AS A PASTOR given the charge to lead a congregation, this is a question that has consumed me for more than two decades. I've been curious about the connection between humility and leadership ever since I started reading the writings of mystics throughout Christian history and discovered how often they

talked about humility.

**Pastor and author
Graham Standish explores
the forgotten nature of
humility, calling upon church
leaders to rediscover the
power of radically opening
ourselves to God's will**

Of course, the emphasis on humility is as old as religion, and all religions emphasize it, but that doesn't mean that humility is practiced or stressed by religious folk in every age. Humility is an "essential" virtue that too many of the faithful forget is essential. Perhaps this is because it is among

the hardest of all virtues, requiring that we willingly put aside ego and pride to embrace meekness. Who wants to do that? Putting aside ego and pride means letting our faith be created in God's image. It is much easier to mold faith to fit our image of what God wants. But humility won't let us do that.



Humility is an “essential” virtue that too many of the faithful forget is essential.

Another mystic, a sixth-century monk named Dorotheos of Gaza, taught that humility and self-accusation were central to the spiritual life. Francis of Assisi, in the 12th century, spoke often about the need to become humble before God. His life was a testimony to the power of humility. Catherine of Genoa, who cared for plague victims in the 15th century, said God taught her that she could overcome her revulsion to the plague victims' sores by striving for humility. And Thomas à Kempis, a priest who lived in the 14th and 15th centuries, wrote constantly about humility as more important than education and understanding. Likewise, the 20th-century mystics Evelyn Underhill, Thomas Kelly, Hannah Hurnard, Thomas Merton, and Henri Nouwen constantly emphasized a deepening humility as the pathway to spiritual growth.

Similar instruction appears in Scripture. Blessed are the poor in spirit and the meek (Matt. 5:3, 5). The humble shall be exalted, and the exalted shall be humbled (Luke 18:14). To be great, we have to become humble like children (Matt. 18:3). In Philippians, Paul tells us to humbly think of others as better than ourselves (Phil. 2:3).

So why do modern Christians of all denominations and sects speak so little of humility? In fact, just the opposite seems to be true. It is not uncommon for Christians today to talk about wielding political and even military power on behalf of God. It is not unusual for contemporary Christians on the right and the left self-righteously to declare their position as “the correct” position and all opposing positions

as wrongheaded or even heretical. Humility in leadership often seems to be in short supply. Why has humility become the ugly duckling of all the Christian virtues?

Prior to my reading of the mystics, I assumed what many in our culture assume: that cultivating a humble life gets in the way of leading a healthy and thriving organization. But the mystics taught me that humility does not mean becoming feeble. Instead, it means bringing an attitude, a disposition of radical openness to God, into our leadership that allows us to become conduits of the Holy Spirit. The mystics demonstrated that to be humble actually means to be strong in a wholly different and holy way. It means to be strong in seeking God's way and then to have the courage to lead others in God's direction despite the resistance and outright opposition by those who want us to follow the ways of the culture and of convention. Humble leaders let Christ lead through them, guiding people to follow God's path.

Can we be humble and be leaders? From years of seeking an answer to this question and trying to lead from a humble foundation, I've discovered that, for me, the answer is yes. I do believe it is possible to be both humble and a leader. In fact, I believe the best leaders always are humble; for it is out of their humility that they find a way to inspire, motivate, and unify those they lead, a way based on first seeking God's way in everything and then on leading others toward God's goals.

At the end of my first year of seminary, a biography of Mahatma Gandhi showed me how humility and leadership work hand in hand.¹ From the first sentence, that book affected me in a way that few other books have, before or since. It transformed my life by changing my perspective on how we can serve God and lead others through prayer, humility, and faith.

It's ironic that a biography of an Indian Hindu would have such an impact on an American Christian, but it shouldn't be surprising. Gandhi based much of his faith and life on Jesus, and especially on the Sermon on the Mount. In fact, he even considered becoming a Christian for a while, until he actually visited a church in South Africa and was refused entrance by a white usher due to his brown skin. Although he walked away from the Christian church that day, Gandhi remained determined to ground his life in the Christ he had discovered in the Bible.

What truly struck me was the way Gandhi led others. He had all the hallmarks of a humble leader. He led people

Humble leaders motivate people to follow *God's* vision. In contrast, conventional leaders motivate people to follow the leader's vision.



both by becoming radically open to what God was calling him to do and by inviting others to follow in that direction. Humble leaders motivate people to follow God's vision. In contrast, conventional leaders motivate people to follow the leader's vision. Leaders such as Gandhi voluntarily give up pride, arrogance, ego, and selfishness to become open to God's guidance and direction. Gandhi had a strength of character, conviction, vision, and faith that was amazing, yet it never led him to become prideful, arrogant, manipulative, or dismissive of others, especially of those who disagreed with him. Gandhi remained humble throughout his life, and steeped his leadership in humility.

For example, in strategy meetings with fellow independence leaders, Gandhi surprised them and the servants by taking the tea set and serving them. In a society structured for over two millennia by a rigid caste system, this was scandalous. Serving the tea was an act of Christ, an act of leading others by serving them, an act rooted in Jesus' admonition in John 13 that to be a follower of him means to be a servant.

In another display of humble leadership, Gandhi shocked British and Indians alike by eschewing western clothing and wearing simple sarongs of homespun cotton. This act of humble defiance was his response to a British stranglehold on the Indian economy, the demand that only British-made textiles be produced and sold.

What was most astonishing, though, was Gandhi's willingness to suffer on behalf of others. While the leaders of most movements try to insulate themselves from suffering, Gandhi embraced it. He was always willing to put himself on the front line to receive beatings from his enemies. In South Africa, as a leader in the struggle for suffrage for those of Indian descent, Gandhi was willing to take terrible beatings from the constables, beatings that left him severely injured. He did so to demonstrate to other Indian expatriates that while their bodies could be broken, their spirit could not be killed. Gandhi led his fellow Indians into a peaceful rebellion in order to secure voting rights for all Indian immigrants.

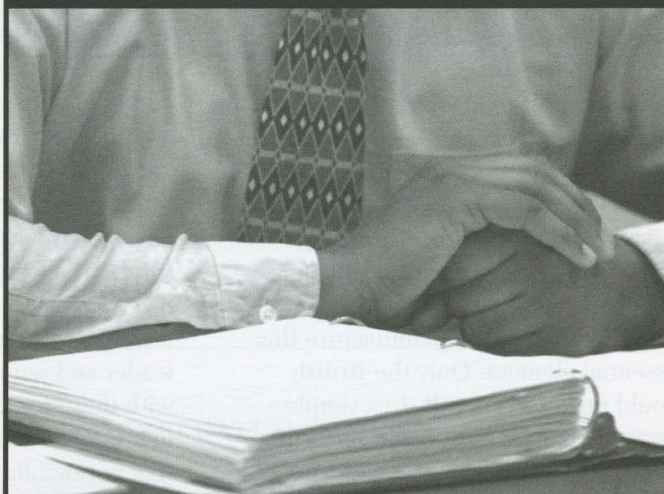
When he returned to India, he led by setting a peaceful, God-focused example. He invited others to protest the British through nonviolent confrontation. He believed that nonviolence was a powerful weapon. And when the Indian people became violent in their protests, Gandhi embarked upon a personal hunger strike by fasting for weeks in protest of that violence. He deeply believed that the use of violence by the Indian people gave legitimacy to the British by giving them just cause to crush revolts violently. When the Indians remained nonviolent, provoking British violence, this gave legitimacy to the Indian people by demonstrating that the British were unjust. So Gandhi fasted until the Indian people halted all violence. As a leader, Gandhi led the Indian people to adhere to Jesus' teaching: "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. If someone strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also" (Luke 6:27-29). As a Hindu, Gandhi may not have been a practicing Christian, but his principles as a leader were thoroughly Christian.

Gandhi led from a strength rooted in humility, and I learned a lot from his example. I learned that there is strength in humility, and that humble leadership exposes self-interest and selfishness in both enemies and friends alike, as it simultaneously purifies motives. When we lead from a sense of humility, willingly putting aside our own motivations and desires in favor of God's call, we create the context in which people are more willing to put aside their own will to seek God's will.

I also learned that whatever we are doing, humble leadership allows us to find the path to greater

creativity and possibility in whatever we are doing. Gandhi demonstrated, time and time again, how humility enables us to discern creative solutions. His solutions to apparent problems and obstacles were ingeniously creative—and creativity made his nonviolent path toward Indian independence a powerful force. The British could never anticipate what he was going to do. Still, Gandhi never led capriciously. He steeped his plans in prayer. For instance, at one point the Indian independence movement was stalling. There was tremendous pressure for Gandhi to do something, anything, to get the movement back on track. Gandhi did something, but it was not what his followers wanted or expected. They wanted quick, decisive action. Gandhi gave them prayer. He spent eight months at his ashram, praying and seeking God's will, despite pleas from millions for action. Suddenly one day, he received God's answer. He told his followers to pack their things, join him in prayer, and prepare to act. After dinner and worship, he and his supporters began to walk. Day after day they walked

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Humble leaders can show people how to experience and follow God in ways they never expected, a pilgrimage that transforms them in ways that they may not anticipate or always welcome.

through towns and villages, and many of the villagers joined the procession. Gandhi kept silent about their destination and objective until he arrived at the sea. With thousands of followers now behind him and many British soldiers surrounding him, he walked calmly to the edge of the water where a large chunk of salt had been formed by the evaporation of the sea water in the hot Indian sun. He picked up the salt, walked over to a British soldier, and said, "I have manufactured salt. You must arrest me!"

So what? Why was this so important? It was important because in this small chunk of salt Gandhi had found a symbol of Indian freedom. A few years earlier, in another attempt to maintain power over the Indian economy, the British had made it illegal for Indians to manufacture this essential element. Only the British could manufacture salt. In a simple gesture, Gandhi had shown the absurdity of British law in India by presenting the British with a dilemma. If they arrested him, they would reveal the oppressiveness of their laws to the Indian people, the British population, and the world. If they didn't arrest him, they would give implicit permission to the whole Indian population to defy the British in this and every other economic concern. They arrested Gandhi, but his imprisonment ended up giving freedom to the Indians as

millions made their own salt by pouring seawater into pans and letting it evaporate on their rooftops.

Gandhi demonstrated to Christians the power of the gospel; he showed how leaders grounded in Christ can transform hearts, minds, souls, and nations when they are willing to become humble leaders. Gandhi also revealed how dangerous humble leadership can be. It can expose the falseness and hypocrisy of the world's ways. Humble leaders can show people how to experience and follow God in ways they never expected, a pilgrimage that transforms them in ways that they may not anticipate or always welcome. At the same time, humble leadership can be personally dangerous to those of us who seek this humble way. It exposes us to our own weakness, powerlessness, fear, and anxiety. It is impossible to be a humble leader and not grapple constantly with these forces. The way of humility invites us to follow God's path, a path that potentially leads to failure—the failure to achieve our ambitions through strength in a world that worships power. When we lead through humility, we are choosing a path that emphasizes meekness and weakness, leaving us open to the manipulations of those devoted to wielding power. If we are to become humble leaders, we have to develop a different kind of strength. This strength is a strength of character that few are willing to form, a strength of the Spirit

that has its roots in Christ's way rather than the world's way. I can think of nothing more humbling than to discover the power of humble leadership from a man like Mahatma Gandhi, who had been rejected by Christians yet lived the gospel more profoundly than most Christians ever will.

I learned a lot about humble leadership from Gandhi. I also learned another important lesson by reading his biography. I discovered that when we humbly do what Christ calls us to do, God finds a way to make things work out in the end. This was the ultimate lesson I learned from the life of Mahatma Gandhi. When we humble ourselves as we lead others, God works through us to do Christ's will. By aligning our will with God's, we invite the Spirit's power to flow through us and into whatever congregation or organization we are leading. ♦

This article was adapted from N. Graham Standish's latest book, *Humble Leadership: Being Radically Open to God's Guidance and Grace*, published by the Alban Institute in March 2007.



A Saving Remnant Vitality in Small Congregations

SHERYL A. KUJAWA-HOLBROOK

SOME OF THE SMALLEST CONGREGATIONS IN NORTH AMERICA are places of subtle vitality and frequent surprises. St. Thomas's Episcopal Church in the village of Winn, Maine, is one such congregation. St. Thomas's has stood on a rise above the Penobscot River for 139 years, its unlocked doors welcoming all those who venture up the hill. Winn was once a bustling town with a hotel, a tannery, and a railroad station. Now a couple of hundred folk share a post office and a general store. The tiny, gothic St. Thomas's Church draws its membership from an area roughly the size of the state of Delaware. Over the course of its ministry the congregation has mothered four other congregations, one of which remains open.

“Vitality is a quality in response to living into Christ. It may be reflected in quantity, but quality is reflected in involvement in activism—not necessarily parish activities—where members live into actions of compassion, justice, listening, and reconciliation.”

—Anita Schell-Lambert, rector of St. Peter's Church,
Bennington, Vermont

The current congregation of St. Thomas's is now composed mostly of elders and half a dozen children. All members voluntarily contribute to the congregation's discretionary fund, but there is wide educational and economic diversity in the congregation. Some members never finished high school, while others have graduate degrees. Some have traveled throughout the world, while others have never left the state of Maine. Some have steady employment, but others have never recovered from the closure of the paper mills. “At the altar, however, all these difference melt away,” says Carolyn W. Metzler, the congregation's vicar. “Then people come forward, kneel—as they are able—and stretch out their open hands.” The smallness of the congregation enables Metzler to know people by their hands alone, “cupped in front of them and waiting for the holy bread. Dimpled, creased, arthritic, calloused, ringed, bony, pudgy, thumbless, tilted, open, all waiting expectantly.”

St. Thomas's is growing in numbers and in faithfulness. The congregation is steadfast in its ministry in the community, particularly to those most in need. Sometimes this ministry is a community effort, but often it is the members themselves responding to the needs around them, often in quiet, hidden ways. Metzler describes the many signs of vitality in the congregation in terms of a spirit of “reconciliation.” Among the 35 to 50 worshippers on a typical Sunday, people with a diversity of life circumstances come together at the altar and reach out pastorally when no one has asked them. Metzler describes the congregation's vitality as “generosity

breaking out.” The signs of vitality she reports from her experiences at St. Thomas's include the following:

- People who struggle financially but have wood left over after winter offer it to others who need it more.
- Members of the congregation each take a week to offer Christian education to middle-school children.
- The congregation voted to embark on a risky and costly project to secure the financial security of the next generation.
- They spontaneously offered to host a benefit supper for someone they didn't know and who would never join the church, but who needed help.
- Noise made by children is not only tolerated in worship but welcomed there.
- The congregation did not flinch but expressed compassion when a visitor shouted in a loud outburst during the prayers.
- Seventeen “old-timers” turned out for a new member's house blessing.

The Faith Communities Today Project of the Hartford Institute for Religious Research states that “half of the congregations in the United States have fewer than 100 regularly participating adults and just over half are located in small town and rural settings. Indeed, a full quarter of congregations have fewer than 50 regularly participating adults, while less than 10 percent have more than 1,000.”¹ Yet public perceptions of vital churches often conjure images of corporate congregations or megachurches. Small congregations are likely to have fewer

resources and consequently may face more difficulty in getting beyond a survival mentality and moving toward a recognition of what vitality means in their context, as well as a grounding in a theology of abundance.

What does small church vitality look like? To be sure, there is no single definition, and in this sense the variations on small church vitality are as numerous as the congregations themselves. Yet there is a broad consensus on factors or characteristics that contribute to small and vital congregations.

“Vitality is a quality in response to living into Christ. It may be reflected in quantity, but quality is reflected in involvement in activism—not necessarily parish activities—where members live into actions of compassion, justice, listening, and reconciliation,” says Anita Schell-Lambert, rector of St. Peter's Church in Bennington, Vermont. “Signs of vitality in a small church which are crucial, necessary, and all-important are caring, liveliness, energy, and strength,” says Judy Krumm, a member of the same congregation.

A positive sense within the congregation about its ministry has contributed to the growth of the Church of the Good Shepherd in Houlton, Maine, located a few miles from the Canadian border. “Listening to each other is so important,” says Leslie Nesin, priest-in-charge. She also suggests that, while the congregation struggles financially, the positive spirit within the community makes it easier to close that gap. Congregation members choose to live in a “spirit of abundance,” donate what they can financially, and contribute of their time and talents in innumerable

ways to cover the needs of the church.

Other small and vital congregations report similar experiences. Over 200 people from across the region assisted the congregation of St. Martin's in Palmyra, Maine after a fire destroyed the church building in April 2006. Lev Sherman, the priest of the congregation, attributes the response to the fire to "the incredible level of involvement" in the larger community of the 50 or so members of the congregation. "If someone in the community gets laid off or loses a house, we are there to help," he says.

Samuel J. Wylie, the late bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Northern Michigan, suggested that the norm in style and size for the Christian life is the small community, and others should take smallness, or simplicity, as the model. Wylie's ecclesiology is based more in the first, radically equal, Spirit-filled Christian house communities than current church structures. "A saving remnant was what God used to achieve salvation. And the Savior is assigned a stable instead of a palace and Bethlehem instead of Jerusalem for a birthplace and Nazareth for a home. ... 'Small,' for many of us, suggests words like puny, mean, isolated. For Jesus it meant the mustard seed that grew to great and expansive measure," he writes.²

The capacity for vitality in small congregations is the focus in a recent study of St. Magnus, a congregation in Scotland's Shetland Islands, undertaken by Elaine Cameron. Cameron's work points to the importance of theological education models that are congregational-based rather than based on individual learning. "The curriculum," she notes, "is both content and process, and it engages head, heart, and imagination, aiming to make connections between faith and life more permeable." Cameron also suggests that the way the congregation perceives its mission within its context is critical. "St. Magnus has been asking questions about what they should be doing in a good sequence. For example: In this place, what is mission? What ministry does this require? How do we enable maximum participation? What do we

learn in reflecting on the process?"³

For many small congregations, however, unhelpful perceptions about what a church "ought" to be and the resulting low self-esteem can seriously impede any meaningful discernment about mission and ministry. Small congregations often feel diminished when their community life is compared to the extensive music programs, graded education programs, and active youth groups of larger congregations. Many small congregations face the inability to pay for full-time clergy as a trauma and yet another indication that they are in decline. As concern for survival sets in, the focus of the congregation shifts inward, and along with this shift is a de-emphasis on the type of energy, creativity, and commitment that is likely to attract new membership. As the focus of the congregation and leadership base narrows in a congregation, it is not uncommon for one or two strong personalities with unhealthy and unmet emotional needs to take over, making it even more difficult for the congregation to regain its lost vitality. Leaders in such congregations are often continually struggling to balance constant demands and maintaining crises, with little time for their own personal and spiritual development.


T. Sammie Wakefield, a member of St. Andrews-in-the-Valley in Tamworth, New Hampshire, who also has experience in a small congregation in West Texas, suggests five signs that indicate a lack of vitality in a small congregation:

1. Policies are not written down, so "how we do it" is known to only a few.
2. One or two people do everything


(closely related to #1).

3. "Idols" are made of a part of the church, such as an organ, the layout of the sanctuary, a certain translation of scripture, etc.
4. There is an undercurrent of trouble-making, such as the circulation of petitions, secretive behavior, etc.
5. The congregation sees its main function as supporting the physical plant as a sort of historical monument or museum rather than as a center for ministry and mission.

The Pastoral Excellence Project of the Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts, funded through Lilly Endowment Inc., strives to support small congregations in northern New England and throughout North America through ministry development focused on strengthening the ministry of the baptized. The overall goals of the project seek to free small congregations from culturally dictated standards of viability; to free ministry development from the culture of clericalism; and to shape a




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vision of theological education that is nonhierarchical and committed to the formation of the whole people of God. Since its inception four years ago the project has been in contact with a wide variety of small congregations, many in remote communities.

In the northeastern United States and Canada many small communities have experienced significant out-migration and financial decline due to the departure of industries that traditionally supported the people in the area for generations. For such congregations the prospect for significant numerical growth is modest or nonexistent, and places such as St. Thomas's Episcopal Church learn to measure vitality and growth in terms other than the strictly numerical.

James Pratt, vicar of St. Alban's in

to the realities of small congregations, it is important to note that there are, in fact, situations where such communities can and do grow numerically. One such congregation is St. David's Episcopal Church in Page, Arizona, a tourist town located on the edge of the desert and a dam on Lake Powell. The next largest town is about 130 miles away. Most of the economy depends on the dam, fishing, and boating, and in the off season there is high unemployment. When Page was founded in the late 1950s the government gave land to establish churches, the result of which is 12 churches of different denominations that stand in a line on the town's main street.

When Steven and Jean Keplinger arrived in Page six years ago St. David's was barely open. Six members kept

programs now provide food for 1,500 to 1,600 people per month in a town of 7,000. The original food pantry has now been augmented by a soup kitchen, a counseling center, and financial aid programs. The outreach of the congregation is sustained through the prayer and worship of its members.

St. David's celebrates its Episcopal identity expansively and reaches out to people beyond traditional denominational boundaries. The congregation created new seasonal liturgies and strives to shape its life of prayer and worship in response to the life of the wider community. "The liturgy speaks to who we are in this place," says Steve Keplinger. "We have got to get beyond studying liturgy and speak to people where they are." Keplinger admits that it is a challenge to regularly plan worship that is creative, innovative, and nurturing to people of many different tastes. Like many small congregations, providing a variety of musical styles remains a challenge. Importantly, St. David's continues to look for ways to grow and to change, including building relationships with the nearby Navaho community.

Jim Kelsey, bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Northern Michigan, maintains that for small congregations to become "ministering communities" there must be a transformation. "Our professional leaders (clergy) need to shift their stance from being ministry deliverers to becoming ministry developers. This is a different job description and it calls for different gifts than we might be looking for in a charismatic, lone-ranger parish priest, who is the best preacher and liturgist, the most compassionate pastor, the most efficient administrator, the most dynamic youth leader, and the most prophetic community developer, and so forth. Instead we are looking for people who are excited about teaching others to preach, to teach, to plan and to lead worship, to offer mutual care, use their gifts for ministry at home, in the neighborhood, and the workplace, and within the church community gathered."

"We are no longer a cruise ship, where the professional crew serves the passengers as clients," Kelsey explains. "We are now a cargo ship, in which everyone on board has a share in the

"We refuse not to live in abundance anymore.
We will not buy into any scarcity."

—Steven Keplinger, pastor, St. David's Episcopal Church,
Page, Arizona

Sally's Cove, Newfoundland, a village with 22 year-round residents, where "making do" is a way of life, says visitors to the congregation notice immediately how welcoming it is, especially when members greet the visitors first. The people of St. Alban's have lost most of the physical signs of their community—school, post office, and general stores—hence "they strive hard to keep the one sign they have left, their church."

Pastor John Olsson, III, who serves two other small congregations in Western Newfoundland, notes the importance of shared leadership. "At present," he says, "we are in the process of working a strategic plan for each congregation so that folks realize that they do in fact have a say in the creation of their own future, rather than just sitting idly back and letting the future happen to them."

While the sentiment that bigger is always better does not unilaterally apply

the church going. Some negative publicity focused on the new minister's prophetic preaching attracted some folk to the congregation shortly after the Keplingers arrived. St. David's now has a membership of approximately 160, mostly due to the congregation's commitment to take on the hard work of social ministry in a community of great need. "It can be hard to do in a depressed town," says Steve Keplinger, "but we refuse not to live in abundance anymore. We will not buy into any scarcity."

Today St. David's is known for its extensive social ministries and creative worship. The social ministries began with the congregation's membership "looking outward" and a sense that they could help "fill the gaps" for the people of the area. A food pantry was considered the most pressing need in the community, so the church started one. The congregation's feeding

Twelve Signs of Vitality in Small Congregations

1. A generosity of spirit is grounded in a theology of abundance.
2. There is an openness to creativity and new experience: new people, new ideas, the arts.
3. The congregation has a commitment to the ministry of every baptized person: the ministry of every member counts and is received through baptism rather than confirmation or ordination.
4. There is extensive emphasis on hospitality and keeping the doors open to the community: people in the community know they can come to the congregation for help.
5. Members are immersed in prayer and worship.
6. Formation for all is a key value, with an emphasis on small groups for study and nurture.
7. Intergenerational participation occurs in all aspects of community life.
8. Members experience reconciliation and healing of the disjointed parts of their lives.
9. Shared leadership and decision making occur at all levels.
10. The congregation has a focus on Christ's mission in the world and a commitment to social justice through outreach and service.
11. The church seeks ecumenical and interfaith partnerships, celebrates its denominational identity in an expansive sense, and is open to those beyond traditional boundaries.
12. The congregation practices ecological consciousness through the care of resources, stewardship, and the environment.

Compiled by Fredrica Harris Thompsett and Sheryl A. Kujawa-Holbrook, Pastoral Excellence Project, Episcopal Divinity School, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

mission of the vessel. No one is a passenger. Everyone's gifts and experiences are utilized to help accomplish the work we share."

Just as this transition from "consumer-based" religion to "participatory ecclesiology" requires solid support of the ministries of all the baptized, seminaries, too, need to become centers for ministry development. "Seminaries must not only prepare students for small parish ministry, they must become more skilled in educating their graduates to become ministry developers as a matter of course," suggests Fredrica Harris Thompsett, co-director of the Pastoral Excellence Project. "Given the number of small congregations in the U.S. and Canada, graduating seminarians without particular skills suitable for small congregations lacks educational integrity." Both Kelsey and Thompsett agree that it is past the time when small congregations should try to imitate large congregations ("cathedral syndrome") and consequently attempt to do many things and end up doing them poorly. Instead, small congregations need to discern their calling and their passion and thus do the things they can do well. "These techniques hardly guarantee the transformation we yearn for," says Kelsey, "but we sure do have examples of congregations whose vitality is measured not by their statistical growth but by growth in the spirit, in vision, in mission, in a common life which nurtures and nourishes them, one and all." ♦

NOTES

1. Carl Dudley and David Roozen, "Topical Findings," *Faith Communities Today* (Hartford Institute for Religion Research, 2001), www.fact.hartsem.edu/researchfindings.htm.
2. Samuel J. Wylie, *The Celebration of Smallness* (Marquette: Diocese of Northern Michigan, 1995), 2nd ed., 6–8.
3. "Theological Education with the Laity: The Study of One Congregation's Experience of Local Collaborative Ministry," Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, D. Min. Thesis, May 2006.

Questions for Reflection

1. When have you experienced your congregation at its most vital? When have you experienced "generosity that breaks out"? What did you learn from those experiences?
2. In what ways has your congregation responded to the needs and concerns of your community? What is God calling your congregation to be and to do in your community now?
3. How does your congregation support the ministries of all the baptized?
4. What are some examples of shared leadership in your congregation? How can shared leadership be enhanced?
5. What are some of the untapped resources in your congregation?



What's Systems Theory Got to Do with It? Addressing Congregations' Emotional Processes in Our Preaching

ISRAEL GALINDO

BOWEN FAMILY SYSTEMS THEORY CONTINUES TO influence thinking about the practice of ministry, especially clergy leadership functions. Although many pastors may not realize it, one of those key functions is preaching.

The act of preaching holds a number of interesting “systems” implications. Few leaders have the opportunity to address the system they lead on such a regular public, corporate, and intergenerational manner. But every week, clergy in pastoral ministry are afforded the opportunity to speak to the minds and hearts of their constituents from the position of pastor, priest, and prophet.

Despite the applicability of systems theory to preaching, when the Leadership in Ministry clergy training program (www.LeadershipinMinistry.com) issued a call for “systems sermons” to publish in its newsletter, one reader responded with a legitimate question: “What makes for a good systems sermon?”

I cannot find anything overt on what constitutes a good “systems sermon” in the hermeneutical literature, but I suspect that a good systems sermon is more about incorporating certain qualities than about rigid attention to a definitive set of rhetorical components crafted into the textual structure of the sermon. Specifically, a good systems sermon is not about systems theory; it is about fulfilling the pastoral function that addresses emotional process in the congregation. That said, I think a good systems sermon gives attention to certain aspects of both content and delivery. While there may be more to what makes for a good systems sermon, I believe it incorporates some or all of the following:

- clarity about the pastor’s relationship with the congregation
- redemptive self-definition
- awareness of and respect for the destructive power of emotional triangles
- attention to and respect for the potential for multigenerational transmission.

Additionally, a good systems sermon demonstrates clarity of the function of preaching in the congregational context. A sermon delivered by the pastor of a congregation is not merely a well-honed homily, a polished hermeneutical, or a theological exposition of a text. It has a function by virtue of who is preaching (the pastor-leader), who is being addressed (the congregation, who make up the community—the system), and the context that mediates their relationship (the church, a community of faith). Therefore, a pastoral sermon has purpose in its function: challenge (the prophetic element, including vision), perspective (the particular principles and values that inform one’s stance),

theological content (a confessional stance about corporate beliefs and values), and attention to identity (the unique corporate culture of the congregation). But most importantly, a good systems sermon is, first of all, a good sermon.

Clarity of Relationship

As a seminary professor I get to hear and read my share of “seminarian sermons.” It’s part of the literary purgatory that comes with the job. What most of those novice sermons tend to have in common are an over-focus on content and a lack of attention to the mysteries and vagaries of life and relationships, and a lack of attention to (or awareness of) the relational aspects of the pastor

pastor of a congregation stands before the flock with messages that communicate “I will take care of you,” “I need you to validate my worth and ministry,” “You need me, and would be lost without me,” “I bear your burden,” or “I know it all, I’m the expert,” he or she reflects not only a lack of self-differentiation but also reveals a neurotic pastor-congregation relationship. Self-differentiation allows for the ability to self-define one’s own beliefs and values while allowing the same for the other. Additionally, self-differentiation does not have a need to borrow self unduly from others—individuals, groups, or organizations.

Preacher and professor Barbara Brown Taylor offers some good advice on self-definition: “My rule for public truth telling is simple: only say ‘I’ when you

A good systems sermon is not *about* systems theory; it is about fulfilling the pastoral function that addresses emotional process in the congregation.

and the flock that should inform the function of the sermon. These liabilities are understandable since seminarians tend to be young and have not yet experienced much of life, and most have not been in the position of pastor long enough (if at all) to have experienced the unique role of pastor to a congregation. For the majority of seminarians, preaching is performance grounded in textual exposition rather than a pastoral function grounded in a congregational context mediated by the relationship between pastor and flock.

Redemptive Self-Definition

A good systems sermon reflects both self-differentiation and self-definition on the part of the proclaimer. When a

are reasonably sure that those listening to you can say ‘me too’. . . . There are several good reasons for following this rule. In the first place, it provides a helpful check on a preacher’s natural exhibitionism. In the second place, it recognizes the difference between an audience and a congregation. An audience gathers to be entertained by someone else’s peculiar take on truth, and to talk about it afterward. A congregation gathers to be engaged by the common truth that makes them who they are, and to do something about it afterward.”¹

Emotional Triangles

Leaders occupy the anxiety point of multiple systemic triangles in any system.

And clergy who serve in congregations—systems of chronic anxiety—find themselves perpetually a part of the emotional triangles in the congregational system. Some of these triangles are inherited by virtue of office (and are, therefore, systemic) and some come about due to acute anxiety or personal issues. When caught in a triangle, the pastor may be on the receiving end of anxiety or may be the one dishing it out.

The mature and self-differentiated pastor has the capacity to monitor his or her own anxiety and resists bringing anxiety triangles into the pulpit in a willful way. Scholar Walter Brueggemann has warned about the dangers of triangling scripture, God, and the congregation when preaching. Anxious triangles inevitably lead to willfulness. When that happens in preaching, Brueggemann warns, “in the place of the text, stands the voice of the pastor. That leaves the pastor vulnerable and exposed, for it is only one person’s voice. People are not fooled by the substitution when they receive the word of the pastor instead of the voice of the text.”² But a pastor may also self-define his or her position in the triangle through the sermon without being willful (by not making demands, assigning blame, giving ultimatums, or insisting on conformity), thereby shifting emotional process. Defining self serves to give responsibility back to whom it belongs—and sometimes anxiety and responsibility belong to the congregation rather than the pastor. Typically, an anxious congregation will ask the pastor to assume its anxiety and responsibility, but the wise and mature pastor knows when to give it back. The capacity to do this in a responsible and redemptive manner makes for some of the most powerful and transformative moments in a congregation or, at the very least, in the relationship between a congregation and the pastor.

One pastor, facing an episode of acute anxiety related to a financial shortfall in his congregation, worked at addressing the symptoms of that anxiety (triangling, blaming, hostage-taking, and attempts at scapegoating) by identifying the real issue (it wasn’t about the money) and getting clear about his pastoral function related to his position as leader in his congregation. After coaching his staff, addressing

his lay leaders, and dealing with a few members who were acting out, it came time to avail himself of the preaching function that the pulpit afforded him as leader. He preached a sermon to address the financial crisis, but he did it by repositioning himself through clarifying his role (he wasn’t a fundraiser for the congregation), clarifying functions (it was not the responsibility of staff or of certain committees to reach into people’s pockets for money), and putting the responsibility back onto the congregation for their stewardship in giving. He challenged both the overfunctioning givers who facilitated irresponsibility on the part of others to give less, and the large percentage of non-giving families for their failure to act as responsible members. It became a defining moment for the congregation—one family left the church, the deacons took responsibility for their personal stewardship of giving to the congregation and started talking, for the first time, to the members and families under their care about stewardship, and the congregation stopped focusing on money as the issue.

Multigenerational Transmission

The best systems sermons I’ve heard give attention to the power of multigenerational transmission and the family projection process. In the family projection process, individuals in the system may become the focus of anxiety by parents in a family, or by leaders in a congregational system. That projection may result in the assignment of functional roles to the person occupying a certain position in a system. For example, in a family, a firstborn child becomes a standard-bearer, charged with carrying on the parents’ life goals or

dreams. A youngest daughter may be assigned the role of family caretaker, ultimately bearing the burden of caring for aging parents (even if she lives 40 miles away and another sibling lives just two miles away from the parents!). In a congregation, the projection process may assign functional roles to the pastor, certain committees or groups, or to certain staff members. The emotional process of multigenerational transmission can turn those projections into systemic patterns that become part of the structure and culture of a system generation after generation. The result can be that no matter who the individuals are in the system, as a group they will tend to function out of the functional roles assigned by the system. This phenomenon helps explain how a group of highly competent professional individuals can turn into a dysfunctional, incompetent committee that serves as a point of anxiety in the system. When those individuals become part of the committee, they become a part of a multigenerational projection process

(continued on page 36)



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



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Where Family Systems Theory and Preaching Intersect

Bowen Family Systems Theory (BFST) shares with pastoral theology two concerns of fundamental interest: the universal issues concerning the nature of human relationships and the question of what it means to be human. It is no surprise, then, that the eight basic concepts of BFST (and Bowen's undeveloped ninth concept) seem to lend themselves to themes and pastoral responses through the sermon. Below are examples of possibilities for the intersections between BFST and the functions of the pastoral sermon.

SYSTEMS CONCEPT	POSSIBLE SERMON THEMES AND RESPONSES
Multigenerational Transmission <i>(the way patterns of relationship, values, and beliefs are passed from generation to generation)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Address and interpret biological family multigenerational issues (faith, habits, practices, pathologies, etc.) • Address multigenerational systemic issues of the congregation • Interpret multigenerational faith issues • Interpret how family of origin influences faith formation through generations • Interpret multigenerational transmission issues in biblical and theological themes
Self-differentiation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Defining the function of the pastor • Defining the identity, culture, or values of the congregation • Defining the theological or doctrinal distinctive of the congregation • Offering a prophetic stance on social or ecclesiastical issues • Modeling self-differentiated thinking and speech through message and illustrations
Homeostasis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dealing with change • Challenging resistance to change • Celebrating and interpreting congregational cultural rites and traditions • Interpreting ecclesiastical and liturgical practices that perpetuate positive homeostasis
Triangulation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Defining one's position in triangles with congregation and issues • Illustrating and interpreting triangles in biblical narratives • Speaking to ethical behavior and choices in relationship triangles in family, church, and work • Modeling positive functioning in triangles
Emotional Cut-off <i>(a reactive distancing response to unresolved interpersonal anxiety)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Healing, confessing, or addressing denominational cut-offs • Addressing cut-off issues with: founding of the church, a church split, former pastors or staff members • Interpreting a Christian redemptive response to family or relationship cutoffs
Nuclear Family Emotional System	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dealing with personal pastoral family issues related to calling, ministry, functioning • Sharing insight into how congregations work on an emotional-systems level • Interpreting biblical texts related to Bible families
Birth Order	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Awareness of how one's birth order may give "voice" in a sermon or message • Awareness of how to use illustrations related to birth order and functioning in marriage, family, and church
Societal Emotional Process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interpret how societal context, issues, and emotional processes affect the congregation • Speak to how faith responds to societal emotional process • Speak to how the church responds to societal emotional process
Supernatural Phenomenon	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interpreting faith and reason related to the experience of faith • Lending validity to the experience of the unknown and unexplainable • Celebrating the mystery of the experience of life and faith

that has been in place for generations. Harried pastors soon discover that no matter who gets assigned to that committee, it will always function in the way it was programmed to do in and for the system.

Those are examples of the “hidden life forces” that are so determinative of relationship systems, yet most people remain unaware of how they affect their functioning in the systems of which they are a part.³ For example, often a pastor’s family birth order influences the “systems” relationship component of his or her preaching more than does the delivery style or the textual hermeneutics. It is quite dramatic to hear the voice of a firstborn, middle child, or a “baby of the family” come through in moments of transparency in a sermon delivery or other pastoral functions. For example, I received a call from a pastor who had just moved to a large, corporate-sized congregation with multiple staff members. He called for a consultation because he was feeling “stuck” when leading staff meetings and leadership council meetings. He could not figure out why he felt intimidated by certain individuals in those groups, most of whom he “outranked” as the senior pastor. It got to the point that he realized he was not being effective in providing leadership to those groups. After some conversation and introspection, the minister, who is in his mid-fifties, came to the awareness that what he was experiencing in those meetings was his family-of-origin role of “the baby in the family.” The youngest of four brothers and one sister, despite his education and senior rank in his work setting, he was functioning out of his “follower” and designated “baby” family role. This was confirmed when I asked him to identify the birth order of the persons on his staff and committees that he was most challenged by (some who were chronologically younger than he)—they all occupied “older” sibling positions in their families! Because birth order and family projection process are so much a part of what constitutes self-identity, pastors often define and position themselves from that orientation in their relation-

ship with their congregations, including in their preaching.

Multigenerational transmission and family projection process have two facets every pastor must give attention to. The first is the pastor’s own family of origin related to each. The second is the congregation’s multigenerational transmission and “family” projection issues. On the positive side, the pastor can remind the congregation that, as church, it does not stand alone nor does it exist disconnected from its past—its saints and sages, its Abrahams and Sarahs. But a congregation is also a living community that suffers the ghosts of its Jacobs and Cains. A congregation always exists in the middle of the story, and their pastors enter, minister, and leave from that point. Legacies are celebrated or endured in the present, but they also shape the future.

On the negative side, the pastor may have to navigate the family projection process that is inherent in the congregational system—for example, a tendency to make a martyr or saint of its pastors, to make scapegoats of its staff, to overfocus on the appearance and behavior of the pastor’s family, or to get stuck over “power” issues or ideology issues. The fundamental dynamic in the projection process is a lack of respect for the boundaries of self in relationship to the persons who make up a system. Any pastor who buys into the projection needs of his or her congregation, and therefore denies his or her authentic self, loses the capacity to be prophetic in the preaching function. Instead, the (homeostatic) reciprocal stance may become, “I will be what you need and want me to be.”

Preaching is not performance, although it includes that element. Preaching, at heart, is a pastoral function that is contextual. And it is a pastoral function that is both informed and shaped by the pastor-congregation relationship of the context—the congregational relational-emotional system. Simply put, the sermon is as much about the preacher, the congregation, and their relationship in the context of being church as it is about the text. Until that concept becomes clear, and

until systems thinking becomes a part of the way a pastor functions, the sermon event may never provide an opportunity to address the emotional process of a congregation. ♦

NOTES

1. Barbara Brown Taylor, “Telling Truths,” *The Christian Century*, July 25, 2006, 31.
2. Walter Brueggemann, “The Preacher, the Text, and the People,” *Review & Expositor*, Vol. 102, No. 3, 495.
3. For the concept of “hidden life forces,” see Israel Galindo, *The Hidden Lives of Congregations* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2004).

Questions for Reflection

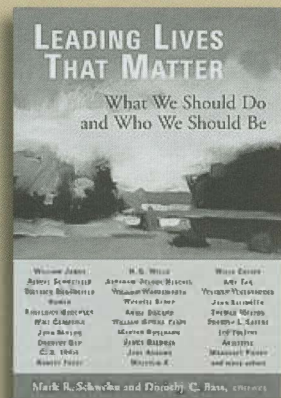
1. Which of the theory components on the chart do you most regularly address in your sermons? Are there any that you have never addressed?
2. The author states that the sermon is as much about the relationship of the pastor with the congregation as it is about the text. Do you agree? Can you define your leadership relationship with your congregation?
3. Have you ever preached an “I have a dream” sermon? What was your congregation’s response? Was it a defining moment? For you? For your congregation?
4. Do you believe that part of the function of the sermon for pastors is about addressing the emotional process of the congregation? If not, why do you believe so? If so, how have you done so?
5. Not every sermon needs to be a “systems sermon.” Can you identify occasions, events, or seasons that are most suitable for using a “systems sermon” in your congregation?

Leading Lives that Matter

WHAT WE SHOULD DO
AND WHO WE SHOULD BE

Mark R. Schwehn and Dorothy C. Bass

Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2006



review book

Leading Lives that Matter humanizes the sometimes daunting task of self-discovery and the work required to live a life of purpose. This anthology focuses not only on the practical issues of finding meaningful work but also cuts to the heart of the human quest to find our life purpose. Mark Schwehn and Dorothy Bass's anthology touches the pulse of man's desire to discover the "why I am and who I am."

This body of work adds depth and light to this quest in a culture

concerned primarily with me and mine and the worship of celebrities and money. But, as the editors acknowledge, there is a shift happening: more people in the church are talking about gifts and purpose. Schwehn and Bass cite statistics from the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, which states that most young adults will change careers seven to 14 times during their lifetimes, as opposed to their parents, many of whom spent their entire lives with one company. This statistic in itself emphasizes why this book serves not only as a resource for young adults and those seeking a career change but also for teachers and leaders of ethics courses, undergraduate students, guidance counselors, and participants in spiritual reflection groups.

The book is divided into two sections, "Vocabulary" and "Questions," each of which opens with an essay by the editors that unpacks the section's key points. The first half of the book asks the question: How should I think and talk about my life? It challenges readers to seek out their authenticity. The editors challenge the readers to break loose of all external factors in order to experience true joy and contentment.

Schwehn and Bass devote the last section of the book to the doubts that plague many people in the midst of a transition. This part of *Leading Lives that Matter* addresses questions such as: Should I follow my talents as I decide what to do to earn a living? To whom should I listen? How do I find a balance between the personal

and the professional?

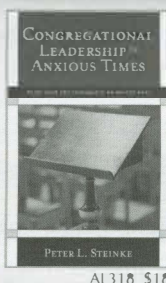
This book even touches upon the concerns of those in the sunset of their lives: What if I had married a different person? What if I had chosen a different career? Does my life matter? These questions, while targeted to a younger audience, serve as a witness for the entire faith community.

Each section's contributors provide advice from a variety of perspectives. Schwehn and Bass's contributors come from various walks of life, including philosophers such as Augustine and Rousseau, poets like Robert Frost, noted authors C.S. Lewis and Bonnie Miller-McLemore, and activists like Malcolm X and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. While this anthology is primarily written from a Judeo-Christian ethic, it is ecumenical in nature. People of any religious persuasion would gain something from this reading. *Leading Lives that Matter* is a companion volume that follows an earlier anthology on Christian vocation. Although these two volumes are grouped together, I believe this anthology can stand on its own as a body of work that touches the core of the human experience: discovering one's authentic self.

Teresa M. Howell

Interim Associate Minister

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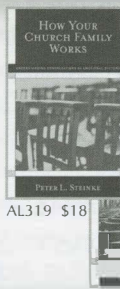


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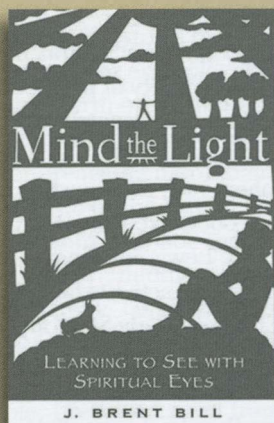
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Mind the Light

LEARNING TO SEE WITH
SPIRITUAL EYES

J. Brent Bill

Orleans, MA: Paraclete Press, 2006



review book

Mind the Light: Learning to See with Spiritual Eyes is a post-

modern prod, a handbook for those who want and need to slow down to make sense of their soul's inherent light. In the context of a society dominated by electronic bandwidths, domains, and fiber-optic wire, the impersonal, increasingly fast pace of telecommunications encourages many to believe in the promise of a quality of life too often eclipsed by the rush of daily communication. When we sing "this little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine," we need to remember that the light will not come without proper rest, nutrition, and spiritual renewal.

The heart of J. Brent Bill's book is simple enough: "without light, we die." He uses science to illustrate his point: the energy provided by sunlight—adenosine triphosphate photosynthesis—is the fuel used by all living things. Bill adapts this process of photosynthesis into a new metaphor for understanding the nutrients required to feed the soul. This modern-day sentry implores us to "mind the light" we routinely fail to notice or heed in the hurry of our lives.

The book's discussion of the Quaker custom of minding the light comes

from a lifetime of personal practice for Bill, which continues to enhance his work in ministry. However, the opportunity to mind the light is greater than any single denomination. Every faith community, every person of faith, and even the well-read abstainer from faith will find Bill's book and the "illuminating moments" scattered throughout it rousing. Reminders to breathe and relax are redundant after a while, but the questions are stimulating, serving their purpose to slow the reader down to observe the light or the absence thereof: Have you ever smelled, felt, tasted, or heard light? Have you ever felt God's light like a searchlight—harsh and pointing out things you would just as soon not see? What impact does artificial light have on your spirituality? What is a lesson you learned in the dark?

In the chapter titled "The Light Around Us: Seeing Creation," Bill concedes that it was artificial light, a light shining in the dark of night across the pasture from his father-in-law's home, that led him to walk across the pasture to meet his wife. When he arrived he discovered that there was something sacred beyond the artificial light that had drawn him to his wife, who had needed him at that moment, having found her father deceased when she arrived at his home.

Spiritual enlightenment—learning to see and acknowledge, learning to listen and obey God's light—is the goal of this easy-to-read, 140-page volume. Bill is the protagonist in the book, but his reflections are rich and include a range of perspectives from other writers, photographers, poets and such. Through this exploration he clearly demonstrates that light, a creation of God, is a way-marker and guide for all of God's children.

This book is a great self-help tool and a solid resource for pastoral counseling, preaching, and teaching.

Iona Smith Nze

Pastoral Resident

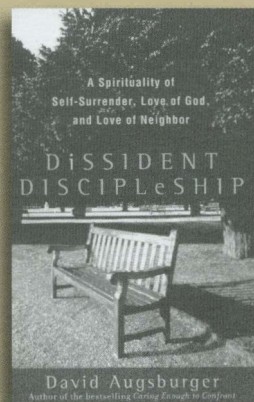
Charles Street African Methodist Church
Boston, Massachusetts

Dissident Discipleship

A SPIRITUALITY OF SELF-SURRENDER,
LOVE OF GOD, AND LOVE OF NEIGHBOR

David Augsburger

Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006



review book

According to David Augsburger, spirituality is "one of our fuzziest

concepts." In *Dissident Discipleship*, this Anabaptist professor of pastoral care and counseling at Fuller Theological Seminary draws deeply from his own countercultural tradition to challenge readers with a spirituality that centers more upon praxis than piety.

Spirituality, he contends, is discipleship, a "three-dimensional kind of discipleship that I call tripolar spirituality [that] links discovering self, seeking God, and valuing people into a seamless entity."

"This is a spirituality of action on behalf of the neighbor, not just reflection on the desirability of being neighborly, of involvement in a committed life of relationships, not withdrawal and solitude," writes Augsburger. "It is a spirituality of the feet, the knees, the hands, and the spine as well as the heart and the head..."

In contrast to other contemporary books on spirituality, *Dissident Discipleship* does not describe contemplative disciplines such as scripture meditation, solitude, or centering prayer as paths toward Christ knowledge. Instead, tripolar spirituality emphasizes "...praying as you act, loving as you serve, meeting God in

those you serve, and following Christ in taking the form of a servant..." According to Augsburg, this approach "stresses action as the place where true reflection takes place."

Augsburger structures *Dissident Discipleship* around detailed explorations of seven this-worldly spiritual practices. The practice of imitating Christ is foundational to the others which he summarizes as "...humility in self-valuation, stubborn solidarity with co-travelers, commitment to service as a life goal, enjoyment of serenity as surrender to a higher call, pursuit of nonviolence as a way of caring, witness born in lived integrity..."

With its precise description of what embodied spirituality looks like, *Dissident Discipleship* calls clergy and laity alike to self-examination. One cannot escape from this book without feeling convicted about affluence, privilege, participation in unjust systems, failure to love the enemy, or any of a host of other compromisers of Christian witness.

Those engaged in social ministries may find the lexicon associated with tripolar spirituality valuable in putting words to the grace they receive, and in discerning—and perhaps even repenting of—the inner motives for the service they render.

As a minister engaged in continuing education for clergy and as a trained spiritual director, it troubles me that Augsburg implies that dissident discipleship is not one way of being spiritual but *the* way. He dismisses other approaches as "...standard spirituality of comfort, support, self-validation, and optimism." The confrontational tone of the book, coupled with the exaltation of Anabaptism, may also distract some readers as they seek to understand Augsburg's message.

Ultimately, I see *Dissident Discipleship* as a book to wrestle with rather than to swallow whole. Augsburg gifts his readers with a "radical alternative" that confronts and challenges, as well as affirms and instructs those who seek to deepen and balance their spiritual lives.

Rev. Sherry A. Johnson

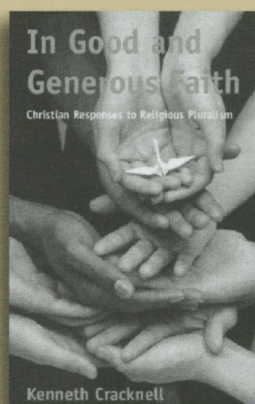
Center for Ministry
Jackson, Mississippi

In Good and Generous Faith

CHRISTIAN RESPONSES TO
RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

Kenneth Cracknell

Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2005



review book

In this well-written and accessible work, Methodist minister

Kenneth Cracknell sets out to deal with an historic change in the religious landscape of western Europe and North America: the rapid influx of people of non-Christian faiths into the area formerly known as Christendom. The author has the experience to deal with this topic, having been involved with this issue for about 40 years, including time as a consultant for the World Council of Churches on interfaith dialogue. His goal in this book is to use biblical resources to facilitate dialogue with other faiths and Christian evangelism.

The book opens with a discussion of creation. Cracknell is correct in pointing out that Protestant theology has neglected the doctrine of creation. He argues that a different kind of salvation history emerges if one begins not with Abraham but with God creating all people and filling them with God's life-giving Spirit. In this chapter he engages in some significant exegetical work on the book of Genesis, especially chapters 10 and 11. His goal here, as well as with other parts of the Bible with which he deals, is to show that God's presence and love have

never been absent from those outside of the house of Israel.

In the second chapter, Cracknell develops his Word/Spirit/Logos Christology. Once again, the emphasis is upon the universal presence of the Word. It is here that the author deals very honestly and creatively with John 14:6, writing, "So we may offer an implicit answer that is given in John 14:6 to such questions as: Does God hear the prayers of Jews and Buddhists? Is the devotion of Hindus and Buddhists acceptable to God? Is the worship of Muslims and Sikhs a living link between them and God? And the answer is yes. 'I am the way, and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me,' as words spoken by the Logos, carry a further dimension: the Word is the means through which all of us 'come to the Father.'"

The third chapter is devoted to the importance of dialogue. Here the author outlines four principles of dialogue: it happens when people meet each other, it depends upon trust, it makes joint service in the community possible, and it is the medium of authentic witness. The goal of this sharing is not to discuss disembodied doctrine but the lived faith of the participants.

In the fourth (and weakest) chapter, Cracknell develops a spirituality for religious pluralism that includes purposefully engaging with another faith with a spirit of openness and then returning to one's own faith enriched.

In the fifth chapter he outlines a missiology for religious pluralism. Here he talks about creating a safe space where the non-Christian can reflect upon the meaning of Jesus. He also stresses the importance of Christians sharing their own faith. Without this Christian sharing, he says, there is no dialogue.

Complementing the text are two appendices. One deals with the World Council of Churches' interfaith dialogue from 1938 to 1999. The other is the Bossey Declaration: Religious Plurality and Christian Self-Understanding.

I liked this work. It is a useful book for both clergy and laity to read in our changing circumstances.

Rev. Gerald A. "Rusty" Butler

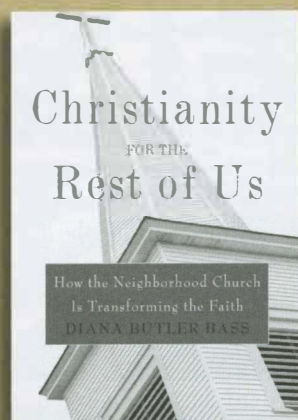
Pisgah Presbyterian Church
Somerset, Kentucky

Christianity for the Rest of Us

HOW THE NEIGHBORHOOD CHURCH IS TRANSFORMING THE FAITH

Diana Butler Bass

San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006



review book

In this age of evangelical megachurches with 24/7 programming and “relevant Bible teaching” (which is usually conservative and literalistic), one wonders if there is a place for smaller, more progressive, mainline Protestant churches. Diana Butler Bass takes the reader on a tour of just such communities, ones that are rooted in ancient Christian practices that transform individuals, congregations, and the world itself. Words like change, journey, practice, pilgrim, and transformation permeate this book, which is the culminating piece of a three-year project that includes two other Alban Institute published books: *The Practicing Congregation* (2004) and *From Nomads to Pilgrims* (2006).

This tour begins with a bit of history and a cultural analysis that envisions the creation of a “new village church,” a church that is communal and therefore both spiritual and religious. Although statistical data stand behind this book, Butler Bass gives context, nuance, and definition to these numbers

by telling the stories of vital mainline Protestant congregations. These are pilgrim congregations, made up of people walking together and finding “a home in tradition, practice, and wisdom.”

The concluding section of *Christianity for the Rest of Us* develops the way of transformation—individually, congregationally, and globally. Such transformation, Butler Bass shows, occurs in congregations that are “mission” focused. But mission is not defined in terms of “saving souls.” While it is spiritually based, it is also earthly minded. Butler Bass, being Episcopalian, likes the term “via media” for this venture that cuts between a narrow and exclusive religious vision of the world and a secularist one that allows no room for faith. It is a vision that is “open, inclusive, and tolerant” and seeks to persuade “by goodness, service, and beauty, not by condemnation, force, or violence.”

Linking these two sections of the book is a middle section that explores 10 Christian practices. These signposts of vitality range from hospitality (welcoming the stranger) to justice, from healing to testimony. Each is intentional and not happenstance, but this is not a prescriptive program that says “do this and you will succeed.” Instead, it urges congregations to be true to their congregational identity and tradition and to act in ways that are transformative.

This book comes as good news for mainliners like me who have long heard that conservative Christianity has won the day. Yet here are congregations that are vital, progressive, welcoming, open to change, and committed to becoming agents of transformation. Such congregations help spiritual nomads/tourists—who wander aimlessly looking for God—become pilgrims who journey together toward transformation. This is no lock-step, one-size-fits all journey, and while most congregations are politically engaged, this is not a one-party state but one where everyone is centered in Jesus.

Rather than a quick-fix church growth manual, this book is instead an exploration of new and vibrant ways of being church in the 21st century. Butler Bass is not only a good observer and storyteller, she is also a believer in this new way of being church, a way that transforms adherents, congregations, and creation. Such is the “Christianity for the rest of us.”

Rev. Dr. Robert D. Cornwall

First Christian Church
(Disciples of Christ)
Lompoc, California



Alligators in the Swamp

Power, Ministry, & Leadership

“Power” is a daily reality in congregational life that rarely gets discussed. Leaders may want power or fear it, but all too often they fail to understand the nature of power and the challenges it poses for effective ministry.

Join noted educators and authors Beverly and George Thompson to explore the skills and perspectives needed for leaders to exercise power for the benefit of all of God’s creation.

Based on their popular book by the same title, *Alligators in the Swamp* is designed for lay and ordained congregational leaders, including pastors and members of church governing bodies (local and regional), as well as denominational officers and executives.

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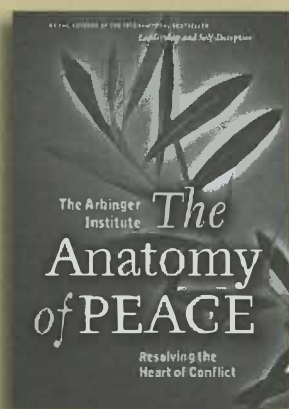
The Anatomy of Peace

RESOLVING THE HEART OF CONFLICT

The Arbinger Institute

San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler

Publishers Inc, 2006



review book

Recently a respected colleague questioned whether seminarians need the semester-long course that I teach on conflict, communication, and conciliation. "One can learn everything a pastoral leader needs to know about conflict in a weekend workshop," he argued. I disagree ... and not simply because I want to protect my turf. My experience now as a seminary professor and previously as a pastor indicates that teaching skills is not enough. Conflict is too often deeply rooted and seemingly intractable. We require more than

techniques. People need to grow in self-awareness, especially in understanding what makes them reactive and why they keep repeating unproductive conflictual patterns. That kind of work is seldom achieved in a short workshop.

The *Anatomy of Peace* is not written with church settings per se in mind. Rather, it focuses on the home, workplace, or other settings. It rightly suggests that the onus for working productively with conflict falls on each of us first and foremost. We can only change ourselves, not others. Our primary challenge is to grow more healthy in functioning.

This is the most unique book I have ever read on conflict transformation. Told as a story, this fictional narrative revolves around a charitable organization that works with troubled teenagers and young adults in a wilderness experience and counsels parents on more effectively addressing family differences. (The latter program is the focus for this book.) The fictional leaders of the project are a Palestinian and an Israeli who now reside in the U.S. after various traumas at home and who experienced a remarkable reconciliation with each other. This is really teaching disguised as a story: page after page, one or the other instructor makes a point or wins an argument in a debate.

The narrative style is risky and does not entirely work. The fiction is forced—no great literature here. The characters are not entirely believable. Neither are the remarkable insights that subjects achieve in two days of workshops. I would not be able to use this book at seminary, but it might work with lay adult

groups, ones who prefer not to read straight theory.

The book's strength is that it calls for people to see themselves and their conflicts in substantially different ways. It points out that too often we get preoccupied with the few things that seem wrong when we could more productively invest ourselves in the healthier enterprise of helping things go right. It astutely observes that often we invite from others the very behaviors we most dislike.

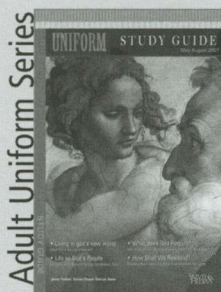
This rightly asserts that each of us needs to claim our own ability and be an agent of change. It insists that Buber's distinction between I-Thou and I-It attitudes affects how we function. It makes a difference whether we treat others as objects to alter or as subjects worth hearing. Paradoxically, if we back off from deciding or determining how we want others to act, their behavior may be more comfortable for us. And there are other paradoxes as well: the surer we are about being right, the less likely we are to listen, and thus the probability increases that we are wrong!

Both young seminary students and middle-aged pastors, not to mention other church members, resist these kinds of lessons. Thus they bear repeating often. While this volume will not be a textbook, it provides helpful illustrations and background.

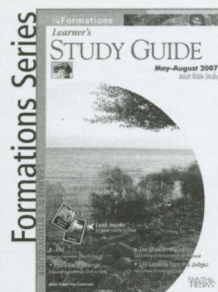
Rev. Dr. Arthur Paul Boers

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

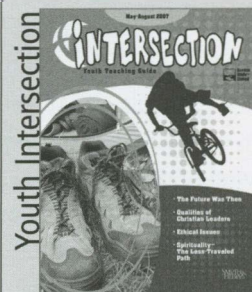
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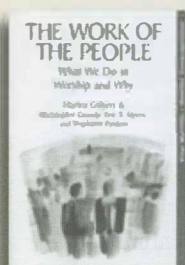
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New & Noteworthy

The Work of the People: What We Do in Worship and Why

MARLEA GILBERT, CHRISTOPHER GRUNDY,
ERIC T. MYERS, AND STEPHANIE PERDEW

AL327; \$17.00

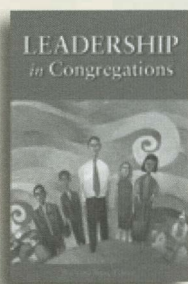


Worship is the work of the people of God. Patterns of worship shape how we pray and how we live. Despite its centrality to church life, worship is too often taken for granted as something a congregation experiences rather than collectively creates. *The Work of the People* simply and clearly explains the structure of worship, the actions and words we use in liturgy, the environment in which it all happens—in other words, what we are doing and why. This book will guide congregations in worshiping in a way that encourages participants' spiritual growth, welcomes new participants into faith, and sends people out as the body of Christ to transform the world.

Leadership in Congregations

EDITED BY RICHARD BASS

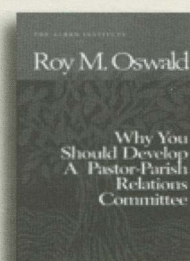
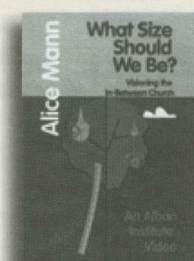
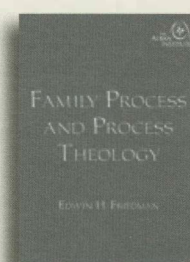
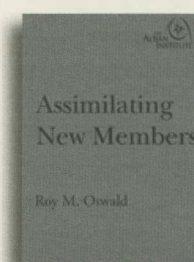
AL324; \$18.00



This new book in Alban's Harvesting the Learnings Series gathers the collected wisdom of over 10 years of Alban research and reflection on what it means to be a leader in a congregation, how our perceptions of leadership are changing, and exciting new directions for leadership in the future. With pieces by such diverse church leaders as Graham Standish, Diana Butler Bass, Jeffrey Jones, Donna Schaper, Gil Rendle, Ann Svennungsen, Mark Lau Branson, and many others, this volume gathers in one place a variety of essays that approach the leadership task and challenge with insight, depth, humor, and imagination. The book also includes the full text of Alban's 2001 special report, "The Leadership Situation Facing American Congregations" by James P. Wind and Gil Rendle.

DVD Releases

Four of Alban's essential VHS resources are now available in DVD format. *Assimilating New Members* (AL328; \$35.00), by former Alban consultant Roy Oswald, identifies the common characteristics of congregations that are warm, inviting, and growing and trains leaders to cultivate those qualities in their own congregations. *Family Process and Process Theology* (AL329; \$50.00), by the late family systems expert Edwin Friedman, connects family process to process theology in a groundbreaking examination of three theological questions: How can evil exist when God is good and all-powerful? How can one strive for self-identity yet teach the limits of self? Does all idolatry stem from the quest for certainty? *What Size Should We Be? Visioning the In-Between Church* (AL338; \$30.00), by Alban senior consultant Alice Mann, helps congregations to recognize six possible size transitions—three resulting from growth and three resulting from contraction—and explains what it will take to navigate the change from one size to another. *Why You Should Develop a Pastor-Parish Relations Committee* (AL316; \$35.00), by Roy Oswald, puts forth a new vision for the role of the pastor-parish relations (or "mutual ministry") committee, suggesting that the group's sole task is to monitor the quality of the relationship between the pastor and the congregation.



SPRING 2007 READING RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE CONGREGATIONAL RESOURCE GUIDE

Bookman, Terry and William Hahn. **This House We Build: Lessons for Healthy Synagogues and the People Who Dwell There** (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2007). Rabbi Terry Bookman and psychologist William Kahn draw on the realities of synagogue life to illustrate the components of congregational vitality. Vital congregations are "healthy houses" that are mission-driven, not market-driven. They foster healthy congregants committed to building community, healthy clergy committed to leading effectively, and healthy relationships between leaders and followers.

Canada, David. **Spiritual Leadership in the Small Membership Church** (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2005). David Canada believes that pastors must develop their own sense of God's presence before they can truly support spiritual development in those they lead. Two signs of such development are inclusiveness and hospitality. This book explores ways that worship, Bible study, prayer, and acts of mercy can contribute to a small congregation's spiritual growth.

Friedman, Edwin H. **A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix** (New York, NY: Seabury Books, 2007). This book distills wisdom from the late rabbi and therapist, Edwin Friedman, to explain how chronic, systemic anxiety—in families, institutions, and society—operates to derail leadership. After examining five aspects of chronic anxiety, Friedman shows how the well-defined leader can deflect and lessen anxiety by maintaining a "modifying, non-anxious, and sometimes challenging presence."

Horn, Dara. **The World to Come: A Novel** (New York, NY: W. W. Norton, 2006). Benjamin Ziskind—a depressed, divorced game-show researcher—recognizes a Chagall sketch while attending a cocktail party at a local museum. Believing the sketch was wrongfully taken from his family, he steals it. From there the novel breaks into a variety of interwoven theological and moral stories that span the 20th century and several continents.

McKinney, Lori-Ellen. **Getting to Amen: Eight Strategies for Managing Conflict in the African American Church** (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2005). *Getting to Amen* acknowledges that conflicts have arisen in African American churches as their members have become increasingly diverse. The first

section is a primer on managing conflict; the second applies conflict management strategies to particular issues; and the third invites African American Christians to explore ways of honoring their common history and faith.

Neuger, Christie Cozad. **Counseling Women: A Narrative, Pastoral Approach** (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2001). Christie Cozad Neuger has developed a counseling framework that reflects her theological values: "empowerment, justice, grace, and integrity." It also reflects her training in narrative counseling—an approach that focuses on the realities we construct through the meanings we give to our experiences. This book will enable counselors to help women gain clarity and make fruitful choices.

Rollins, Peter. **How (Not) to Speak of God: Marks of the Emerging Church** (Orleans, MA: Paraclete Press, 2006). Peter Rollins presents theological themes being explored by the "emerging church"—such as the allowance of doubt, the significance of silence, and the paradox that God is always both concealed and revealed. These themes are given flesh through a variety of creative liturgies, including the use of sackcloth and ashes during penitential seasons.

Roozen, David A. and James R. Nieman, Eds. **Church, Identity, and Change: Theology and Denominational Structures in Unsettled Times** (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2005). David Roozen and James Nieman ask how denominational structures are affected in times of change. After reviewing the literature on this topic, they examine eight American denominations (four mainline and four evangelical) in detail, having recruited an interdisciplinary group of scholars to present a historical overview, a sociological case study, and a theological essay for each denomination.

Smith, Kathleen S. **Stilling the Storm: Worship and Congregational Leadership in Difficult Times** (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2006). When congregations go through difficult times, worship can be an important instrument of healing. This book explores three types of difficulty congregations can face: crisis, transition, and conflict. Kathleen Smith considers their differences, similarities, and implications for worship. For each type of difficulty she suggests themes and liturgical resources for congregations and their worship planners. ♦

Re-inventing Boards that Bore: Overcoming Micromanagement

Q. Our board spends too much time reviewing and approving work that should be done by staff and committees. We know we shouldn't micromanage, but we can't seem to help it. How can we change?

A. You have a lot of company. Most boards criticize themselves for "micromanaging," and rightly so. This happens because tiny issues are more interesting and understandable than large ones, and more gratifying to address because they can often be solved quite quickly. Preference for micro-issues is so universal that C. Northcote Parkinson formulated it into one of his famous laws: "The time spent on any item of the agenda will be in inverse proportion to the sum involved."

What can be done? Boards slip into triviality for two main reasons: because they don't know how to delegate and because they don't know how else they would spend their time. A third reason is that some people are so used to boards that deal with trivia they don't recognize the problem.

The solution is for the board to learn the art of delegation and then to fill its agenda with more important and appropriate work.

To delegate a task involves more than simply finding someone who will take it on. The board needs to articulate clearly the result it wants, the extent and limits of the resources and authority it is prepared to approve, and the plan for evaluation and accountability. Authority and responsibility need to match. Having done all this, it can assign the job once and for all. By dealing with these questions up front, the board actually enhances its control over the ultimate

outcome and frees itself to look ahead to the next challenge.

These principles apply in congregations of every size. In small groups, the board functions as a coordinating body and may even be composed of chairpersons of major committees, so its agenda tends to consist mainly of a round-robin of reports and requests for approval. This often bores most of those present, because they have to hear much more about other people's work than they want to know. Worse, it tempts the board to second-guess or meddle in work already assigned to others.

The same thing happens in large congregations, except that the staff often produce more of the reports and approvals the board spends its time on. Board members feel disappointed to be following rather than leading, as most of them hoped to when they agreed to serve.

One tool to help a board refocus its efforts is the consent agenda. To use a consent agenda, all reports need to be due well in advance, strictly limited in length, and with proposed action items clearly identified at the top. The board empowers someone (the chair, the clergy leader, or both) to decide which proposed actions will go onto the consent agenda and which will go onto the discussion agenda.

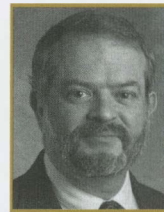
The reports go out by mail at least a week in advance of the meeting. On the meeting agenda, all consent items are listed. The chair says, "Board members, you have all received the

board packet, with the consent agenda. Does any member wish to move an item from the consent agenda to the discussion agenda?"

If any member requests it, an item is moved. (By courtesy, advance notice would be given to the board chair.) The chair then says, "Without discussion, then, the consent agenda is ready for a vote. Those in favor? Opposed? All items on the consent agenda are adopted."

Most of what most boards spend most of their time on is now done! All that remains is to fill the board agenda with important questions about mission, congregational identity, goals, and strategies, and the important work of teambuilding, group reflection, and discernment.

Helpful tips for setting an effective and efficient consent agenda can be found on the Alban Institute's Web site at <http://www.alban.org/conversation.aspx?id=3730>.



Rev. Dan Hotchkiss, a Unitarian Universalist minister, is an Alban Institute senior consultant who speaks, writes, and consults

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DO YOU HAVE A QUESTION YOU'D LIKE US TO ANSWER? PLEASE SEND IT TO RICHARD BASS AT RBASS@ALBAN.ORG.

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

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

The Alban Institute encourages dialogue with many faith traditions, people of diverse ethnicity, men and women, large and small congregations, and urban and rural congregations. We invite you to join in conversation with us by becoming a member or writing an article for CONGREGATIONS – or both! Please call us at 703-964-2700 or send an e-mail to membership@alban.org.

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