

Congregations

SUMMER 2007



CHANGING *the* CONVERSATION

Nurturing a Third Way
for Congregations

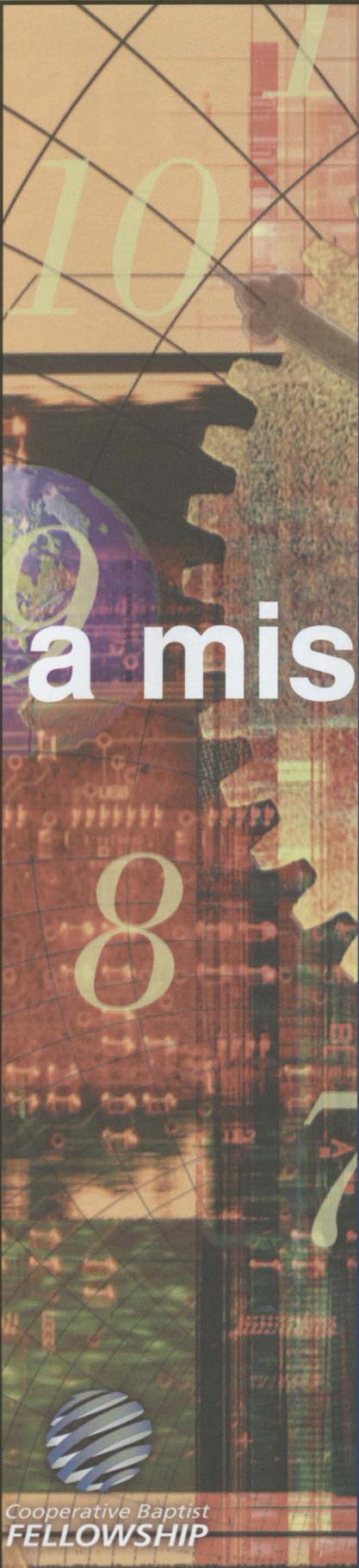
Also in this issue...

Now I'm Found: Restoring Life to a Frozen Call

Cultivating Congregational Growth and Excellence in Times of Tension

Conscious Death: One Church Risks Everything for Resurrection

Finding Abundant Mission: Discovering Faith First

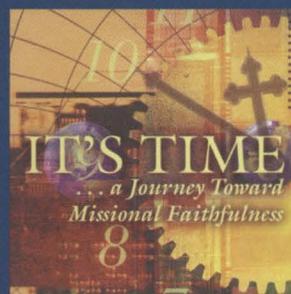


It's Time:

*focusing,
discerning,
becoming...*

a missional church

For churches and communities seeking ways to discern and live out their missional call, the *It's Time* eight-week study provides personal devotional material, sermons, small-group studies, DVD and guidebooks.



Order *It's Time!*

1.888.801.4223

www.thefellowship.info/ItsTime



Cooperative Baptist
FELLOWSHIP

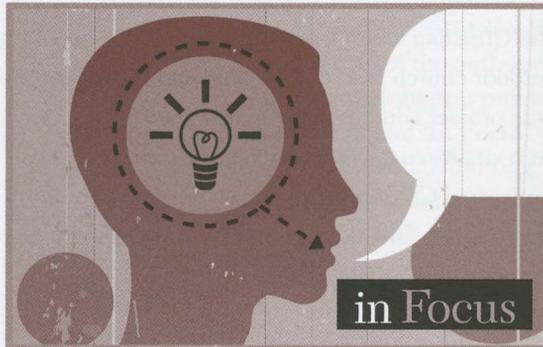
A grant is now available for Fellowship churches that complete the *It's Time!* study.
Learn more at www.thefellowship.info/ItsTime.

Congregations

LEARNING LEADING CHANGING

SUMMER 2007

Changing the Conversation



Noted preacher, speaker, and author *Anthony B. Robinson* offers 10 conversations he believes congregations need to have to learn what it means to be church in the 21st century and to take on the work that God has given them in these times of change

page 23

6 Lost and Found

Michael B. Ross, founder and director of the Pastors Institute, tells the moving story of his passage from living through a call that was frozen in time to one that has come alive to speak to him in new and ever-evolving ways

13 Navigating Congregational Identity

Andrew Warner and *Bridget Flad*, senior and associate ministers of Plymouth United Church of Christ in Milwaukee, describe the gifts of grace that have become available to their congregation as they have confronted the struggle of discerning their identity and mission amid shifting cultures, demographics, and traditions

17 Journey to Jerusalem

Elizabeth Magill, project administrator for the Episcopal Divinity School's Pastoral Excellence Project and the former pastor of Bethany Christian United Parish, a United Church of Christ congregation in Massachusetts, tells how she and her congregation found grace, healing, and resurrection in the conscious death of their church

29 Giving Up the Myth

Pastor and consultant *Sharon Wilson* tells the story of how her congregation transformed itself into a vibrant place of mission and faith through confronting the reality that they weren't who they claimed to be

COLUMNS

5 The Leading Edge

In recognition of the 400th anniversary of the founding of Jamestown, Alban Institute president *James Wind* reflects on the many ways in which this early congregation was influential in setting the American experiment in motion

44 Ask Alban

Alban consultant *Lawrence Peers* provides insight into why the changes we make in our congregations don't always stick

DEPARTMENTS

3 From the Editor

36 Reviews

42 New & Noteworthy

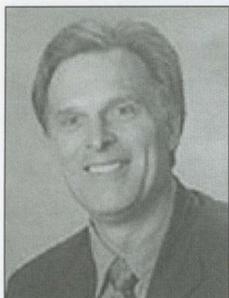
43 Recommended Reading

Volume 33, Number 3. CONGREGATIONS (ISSN 1816-2500) 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.

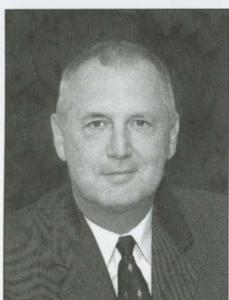
This periodical is indexed in the ATLA Religion Database®, published by the American Theological Library Association, 300 South Wacker Drive, Suite 2100, Chicago, Illinois 60606; e-mail: alla@atla.com; Web site: www.atla.com.



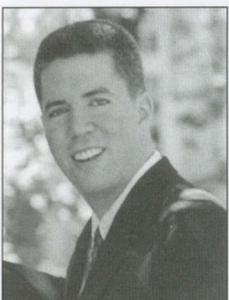
Bridget Mary Flad



Anthony B. Robinson



Michael B. Ross



Andrew B. Warner



Sharon Wilson

Rev. Bridget Mary Flad is the associate minister of Plymouth United Church of Christ in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. She received her master of divinity from Catholic Theological Union in Chicago in 1998. Before her call to ministry in the UCC, Bridget served Milwaukee-area Catholic parishes as director of Christian formation, performed consulting with churches across the country on issues of evangelism, integrating new members, and young adult ministry, and wrote for the journal of preaching *Connect*. **Page 13**

Rev. Elizabeth M. Magill is a minister in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and co-pastor of Worcester Fellowship, an outdoor church reaching isolated and homeless adults in Massachusetts. She also serves as project administrator for the Pastoral Excellence Project at Episcopal Divinity School, as a vitality coach for the United Church of Christ, and as an anti-racism trainer for the Episcopal Church. Liz is the co-author of the Bible study *Seeing God in Diversity: Exodus and Acts* (Morehouse, 2006), which she wrote with Dr. Angela Bauer. **Page 17**

Rev. Anthony B. Robinson is a noted preacher and speaker, a regular columnist for the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, and a contributor to leading church journals. Tony serves as president of the Seattle-based Columbia Leadership Network and has worked extensively throughout North America with congregations, clergy, and denominational groups on pastoral leadership and church renewal. He is the author of five books, including *What's Theology Got to Do with It? Convictions, Vitality, and the Church* (Alban Institute, 2006) and *Transforming Congregational Culture* (Eerdmans, 2003). **Page 23**

Rev. Dr. Michael B. Ross is founder and executive director of the Pastors Institute, an organization providing research-based resources for pastors and their families. An ordained minister in the Church of the Nazarene, he has pastored churches in Indiana, North Carolina, and Florida. Michael has a doctor of ministry degree from Drew University's School of Theology. He is a consultant and a leader of seminars and retreats for pastors and seminar-ians. He also teaches a religion class and a critical thinking seminar at Anderson University in Indiana. **Page 6**

Rev. Andrew B. Warner is senior minister at Plymouth United Church of Christ, a growing congregation in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The congregation is committed to a progressive Christian vision. In 2005 it received the United Church of Christ's Local Church Justice Award. Andrew served on the advisory committee for UCC's Pastoral Leadership Search Effort with the Fund for Theological Education. He has also been active in young adult clergy groups and conferences and regularly writes for various publications. **Page 13**

Rev. Dr. Sharon Wilson is pastor of Windsor Park United Church in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. In addition to her interest in faith at work, Sharon has a passion for rural and environmental issues, which has taken her throughout North America, Britain, and South Africa as a consultant. **Page 29**

Church and Identity: Crisis and Opportunity



Congregations

PRESIDENT & PUBLISHER
James P. Wind

EDITOR
Richard Bass

CONTRIBUTING EDITOR
Marlis McCollum

DESIGN
York Production Services, York, PA

The Alban Institute
2121 Cooperative Way
Suite 100
Herndon, VA 20171
Telephone: 703-964-2700
Fax: 703-964-0370

Editorial Inquiries

To submit articles or letters to the editor, send an e-mail to rbass@alban.org or send a letter to Richard Bass at the address above. Send a self-addressed, stamped envelope for writers' guidelines or visit our Web site at www.alban.org.

Advertising Inquiries

To advertise in CONGREGATIONS, call David Pratt at 703-964-2700, ext. 220, or send an e-mail to dpratt@alban.org.

Membership Services

To become a member of the Alban Institute and receive CONGREGATIONS, call 800-486-1318, ext. 243, or send an e-mail to membership@alban.org.

Reprint Permissions

If you would like to copy material in CONGREGATIONS for use in your congregation or other settings, submit the online form at www.alban.org/permissions.asp or send an e-mail request to drobayo@alban.org.

Other Inquiries

For information concerning Alban Institute membership, publications, education events, or consulting, send an e-mail to membership@alban.org.

Moving?

If you are about to move or have moved recently, please send your address label, along with your new address, to "Membership" or send an e-mail to membership@alban.org.

www.alban.org

When we planned this issue of *Congregations* we aimed for diversity of content—and we got it—but as grace would have it we've discovered that an unintended theme runs through the articles we solicited and selected. In one way or another, all of the authors have addressed the subject of identity.

Tony Robinson provides an overarching view of the need for a revised congregational identity in our "In Focus" feature, "Changing the Conversation." Here Robinson asks us to leave behind old, limiting, and polarizing identifications—red and blue, right and left, traditional and contemporary, liberal and conservative—and to find a "third way" of enhanced purpose, deepened faith, urgent action, and enhanced effectiveness in the world. "For congregations—particularly congregations of the mainline Protestant tradition—the way forward has everything to do with changing the conversation," he writes. "This ... means that we will decline the interpretive formulation being offered by the larger culture in order to change the conversation in ways that permit us to see afresh, to hear good news, and to act faithfully."

This same call to shift our words and view appears in the other articles featured in this issue, where the subject of identity is considered from a variety of vantage points.

In "Giving Up the Myth," Sharon Wilson demonstrates how a congregation sometimes has to face the reality that they are not who they think they are—or want to be—in order to take the steps necessary to reach their goals. And in Liz Magill's "Journey to Jerusalem," the story of the healing and contribution that emerged from her congregation's conscious and intentional death, we find that a shift in identity was an integral part of this church's journey.

Andrew Warner and Bridget Flad also write about identity as they explore the crises and conflicts that can arise when a congregation's identity is in flux, and how sensitively yet unflinchingly grappling with these tensions can bring hidden issues to light and ultimately lead to congregational growth.

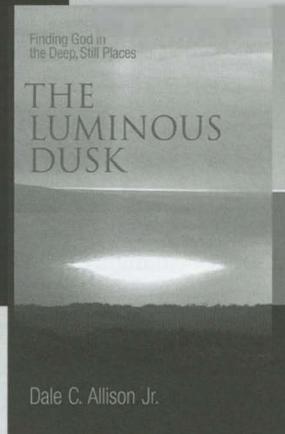
Individual identity is touched upon in this issue as well. We see this in Michael Ross's very personal account of his powerful early call, the painful loss of that call, and the hard-earned discovery of a new and evolving sense of mission. Through the story of his own difficult journey, Ross illustrates how an overidentification with an initial sense of call can deafen us to what God is calling us to in the here and now.

Given the unexpected confluence of all of these articles around the issue of identity, we can't help but wonder if we aren't being guided to examine identity in our own lives, congregations, and communities to determine where we are holding too tightly to identities that are outmoded—and perhaps to let go, making space for a greater good that we are being called to be and do.

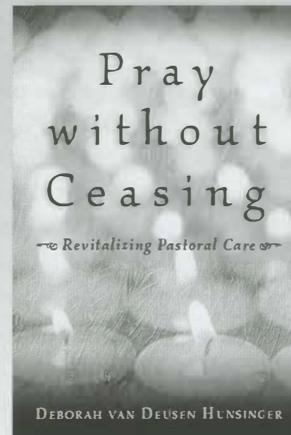
Faithfully,

Richard Bass
Director of Publishing

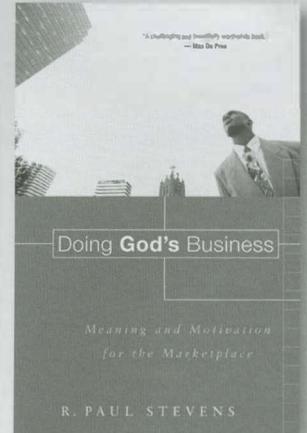
BOOKS FOR Church Leaders



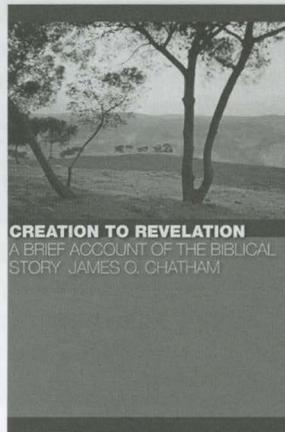
THE LUMINOUS DUSK
Finding God in the Deep, Still Places
Dale C. Allison Jr.
 paperback • \$14.00



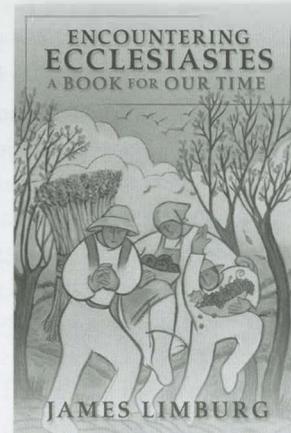
CREATION TO REVELATION
A Brief Account of the Biblical Story
James O. Chatham
 paperback • \$14.00



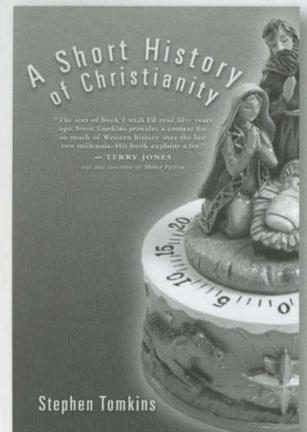
TEN COMMANDMENTS FOR PASTORS LEAVING A CONGREGATION
Lawrence W. Farris
 paperback • \$12.00



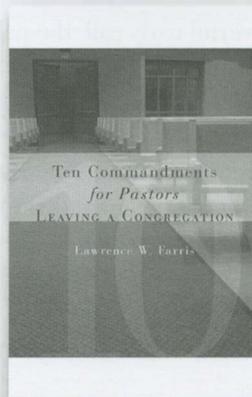
PRAY WITHOUT CEASING
Revitalizing Pastoral Care
Deborah van Deusen Hunsinger
 paperback • \$18.00



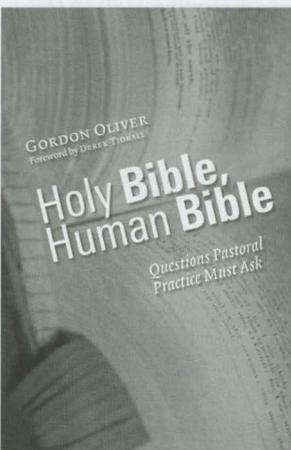
ENCOUNTERING ECCLESIASTES
A Book for Our Time
James Limburg
 paperback • \$14.00



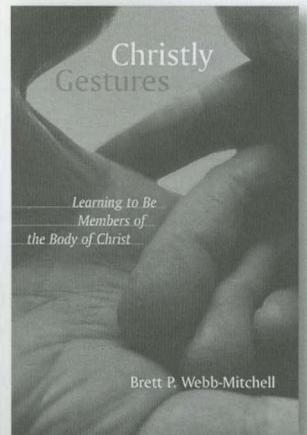
HOLY BIBLE, HUMAN BIBLE
Questions Pastoral Practice Must Ask
Gordon Oliver
 paperback • \$18.00



DOING GOD'S BUSINESS
Meaning and Motivation for the Marketplace
R. Paul Stevens
 paperback • \$14.00

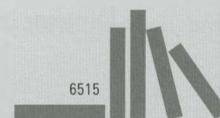


A SHORT HISTORY OF CHRISTIANITY
Stephen Tomkins
 paperback • \$15.00



CHRISTLY GESTURES
Learning to Be Members of the Body of Christ
Brett P. Webb-Mitchell
 paperback • \$24.00

At your bookstore,
 or call 800-253-7521
www.eerdmans.com



WM. B. EERDMANS PUBLISHING CO.
 2140 Oak Industrial Drive N.E.
 Grand Rapids, MI 49505

Jamestown Reflections: A Look at Our Beginnings

AS THIS ISSUE OF *CONGREGATIONS* WENT TO PRESS, MANY IN THIS country marked the 400th anniversary of the founding of Jamestown, the first “permanent” English colonial settlement in North America. Marking anniversaries is such a routine part of life that we often miss the great opportunities to stop and reflect on the great stories that they represent. This time I was ready. The day after Queen Elizabeth visited to mark the occasion, I walked the historic site and sampled the museums that seek to reconstruct and interpret what happened there.

I stood at the place where, in 1607, three small ships tied up to a bank on the James River and unloaded the 104 men (women arrived later) who would set in motion a story that is still unfolding today. As I walked along the riverbank, looked at the archaeological traces, and viewed the historical exhibits, I marveled at the enormous and very mixed legacy left by a group no larger than what today we would call a small congregation.

Parts of the story seem familiar and perhaps even quaint to us. Most Americans hear about Captain John Smith and Pocahontas in grade school years, and the story we remember does not do justice to the collision between a great Native American civilization, the Powhatan, and the English interlopers. Within two weeks of their disembarking, the Proto-Virginians and the Powhatan had exchanged cannon fire and arrows. One exhibit compared two maps, one that showed scores of blue dots along the many rivers and inlets that flow from Virginia into the Chesapeake Bay—each blue dot representing where a Powhatan tribal compound existed in 1607—and another from 1675, which showed hundreds of red dots marking English settlements. Less than a dozen blue dots remained. In less than 70 years, the Native Americans had been forced from their lands and set on what would one day be called the Trail of Tears that is the story of the long tragedy experienced by the original American settlers.

The tragic story of conflict and oppression that unfolded from those first encounters was not intended by the first settlers. They hoped for peaceful relations and even included ministry to the Native Americans as one of their first objectives. But, as in many other parts

of this venture, good intentions gave way to very different realities. In addition to the unintended Native American story set in motion on the soil along the James River, are others. The only clergyman who accompanied this odd assortment of adventurers, the Reverend Robert Hunt, is believed by many to have been the carrier of typhoid from England to the New World. Hunt and 49 others of the first settlers died rapidly in the first months after settlement. Typhoid, along with other diseases carried by the new settlers, may have taken more Native American lives than the bullets the new immigrants fired.

Congregational life was an important part of the founding vision of this community. The most impressive structure built inside the small stockade on the beach was a church, one where worship attendance was mandatory for all settlers, and the site where, in 1619, the first general assembly—the democratic prototype for all the legislative assemblies that make our political system work—gathered.

When this congregation was not worshiping or burying its dead, it was scrambling to eke out a living—and some profit for the investors back home in London. The first plan was to find gold. That did not pan out, so they tried fur trading, fishing, and glass-making. Failures again. John Rolfe, the other man in the Pocahontas story, hit upon the solution. In 1612 he imported *Nicotiana tabacum* seeds and soon tobacco farming was the boom economy of Virginia. By 1670 the settlers in Virginia and Maryland had sent more than 15 million pounds of the exotic weed back home. They could not

have harvested all that by themselves. When the privateer, the *White Lion*, docked in Jamestown in 1619 with 20 captives from Angola, a new source of labor—and America’s sad legacy of slavery—began, putting in place great social, racial, and economic inequities that profoundly shaped our nation’s history.

There is much more drama, irony, tragedy, and possibility in these inauspicious beginnings than we can fathom. Today we still live with the consequences of that early settlement, which in some ways was our first congregation. What began on this piece of earth set in motion an American experiment which has irrevocably altered human history—for better and for worse. We are still trying to repair the great damage done to Native and African Americans that began in Jamestown. We are still paying the hospital bills and dealing with the addictions that are the long-term harvest of those first tobacco plantings. The democratic processes unleashed in this place continue to ripple and struggle around the world, being viewed by many at home and abroad as both a source of great human hope and an increasingly mixed blessing. The unbridled pursuit of wealth, so powerfully transplanted at Jamestown, remains part of our national DNA, giving us unprecedented material blessings and an ever-widening chasm between rich and poor. And the local congregation—represented by that first church at the center of the stockade—continues to sit uneasily in the middle of all these dynamics, trying to proclaim a better way. Like the first Jamestown church that was rebuilt many times, American congregations are often overwhelmed

by the strong forces swirling around and within them. But they refuse to go away, giving us, among other things, a special place to stop and think about all that we are a part of.



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



Lost and Found

Responding to the Dynamic Evolution of Call

MICHAEL ROSS

I RECEIVED MY CALLING—TO PREACH GOD’S WORD—WHEN I WAS 13. I didn’t realize it at the time, but the call was so formidable that it became more than the voice of God concerning my future. It became me, and I became it. It was not intentional and probably was not healthy, but the call formed my identity. Pastoring was not just something I did, it was who I was. As a result, when I left my last pastorate over three decades later, at the same time ending my pastoral career, I felt lost, yet at the same time relieved. The morning after my last Sunday I looked in the mirror and was shocked at my appearance. I looked tired and weak, older than my years. But as I stood there, God seemed to be there, saying, “Don’t worry. Your best days are ahead of you.” That day I began a journey that would lead me to a new and healthier understanding of God’s intent for my life, one that others may find has applications to their own lives.

After pastoring a congregation in Florida for nearly 10 years, I began losing confidence in what I believed and interest in what I was doing. I wasn't sure what was causing the change, but I knew I was in transition.

My departure from pastoral ministry was the culmination of a journey that had started several years earlier. After pastoring a congregation in Florida for nearly 10 years, I began losing confidence in what I believed and interest in what I was doing. I wasn't sure what was causing the change, but I knew I was in transition. The shift had characteristics of a change I had experienced nearly 25 years earlier, while attending a denominational college.

I had been raised in a congregation united in its legalism and while I have never doubted the pastor's or the congregation's love for me, I later realized that a distorted view of grace and salvation had been embedded in my faith system. Holy behavior, I had been taught, was the key to enjoying God's favor. Unfortunately, sometimes I wasn't very holy.

Leaving home and the church in which I had been raised to attend college was a shock to my belief structure. I soon encountered people who did not adhere to my strict code of behavior but seemed to love God even more than I did. I vacillated from believing that many of them were phonies to wondering if I had been wrong.

Fortunately, some religion professors gently guided me out of legalism and into an understanding of God's love as all-encompassing and inviting. It was a liberating journey, but it required me to discard some of the childhood beliefs I had considered essential to my own salvation. It was a risky time, but the dissonance was more than I could stand.

Now, after pastoring five churches, I again was seeing what I believed was a better way. I was feeling trapped by a system that seemed to measure a pastor's success by his or her performance and status. More and more I was feeling the need to abandon my exclusive and private religion and broaden my ministry focus to include the community at large. I was increasingly being influenced by the words of Christ to feed the hungry and welcome the abandoned.

I wasn't sure how to maneuver through the change, but I began to take steps to align my ministry with my faith. I started a journey I hoped would lead to wholeness and a renewed passion for God and the church.

At the peak of my discontent, my *alma mater* announced it would be offering off-campus classes toward a master's in religion. Joining the program became an enjoyable escape from my growing dissatisfaction with ministry. Over the long run, however, it actually heightened my disillusionment. Studies of church history and the Scriptures widened the gap between my evolving faith and expected pastoral duties.

After finishing my master's and serving my tenth year as the pastor of the Florida church, I accepted an invitation to pastor a congregation in Charlotte, North Carolina. I was hoping a new start might give me an opportunity to redefine my role as a pastor. I wanted to lead a healthy church into a broader understanding of a congregation's responsibility in bringing redemption to the community.

Within a few weeks of moving to Charlotte, I began introducing new forms of evangelism to the congregation's lay leaders. My sermons often accentuated the importance of treating friends and family as whole persons who cannot be dissected into needy parts and un-needy parts. I soon sensed the church was mulling in their minds the new "angle" to the gospel I was preaching. I knew I was putting myself in jeopardy, but it was a risk I was willing to take. The change I hoped for never occurred, however. The congregation's curiosity about my call for involvement in the community's social woes soon turned to resistance. Further, I was too impatient and too naïve about leadership. My new start in a new place wasn't working.

I continued the education track by entering a doctor of ministry program. Again, attending classes and pursuing my studies brought temporary relief, but I was not able to uncover any long-term solutions to my dilemma. One day in class I admitted to members of my cohort that I believed I was on a path that would soon lead me out of pastoral ministry. I knew I was running out of ideas and that my unchecked disillusionment probably would make me ineffective in the denomination that had educated and ordained me.

In Charlotte, my wife and I often had conversations focused on my discontent with the church and the restraints I was feeling as a result of congregational and denominational expectations. "There has to be more to it than this," I would say. "I don't want to spend the rest of my life doing what I am doing."

I continued pastoring, but I became more agitated and less effective. I stayed in conflict with lay leaders. Tension grew and I didn't know what to do. I realized I had lost my way.

Then one Sunday morning before worship services, my office phone rang. The caller was a middle judicatory leader asking me to visit a large church in his area that wanted to consider me to be their pastor. Within a month I was offered the position of senior pastor at Westside Church of the Nazarene, a 1200-member church in Indianapolis, Indiana. I immediately accepted and

moved for the second time in two years. I was hoping that a large church in which my primary function was to preach would relieve me from the inner tension I was feeling.

It soon became clear that I had made a mistake. It was difficult for me to manage a large staff. I did not take the time to learn the church's ethos, formed partially by a series of effective and strong pastors. Attendance and donation levels began to slide. Even my preaching, which I had been told was my "specialty," became generally ineffective. Several members commented that my sermons should be more forceful and decisive.

I was running out of ideas. I had finished my doctoral program and had pastored three churches in less than three years. My disillusionment continued to grow. I became desperate and withdrawn. I isolated myself from my friends and my responsibilities.

The Westside church was only a few miles from where I had grown up. Nearby were places where I had experienced God and formed my

to lessen the glare, placed my face against the glass of the front doors. The wooden doors leading to the small sanctuary were open, and I could see the center aisle and the ends of the pews. I wondered if they were the same oaken pews on which I had often fallen asleep during long Sunday night evangelistic services. I then focused several minutes on the wooden prayer bench between the pulpit and front rows, wondering how many times I had knelt there as a boy, crying and asking God to forgive me. I relived the childhood feelings of sinfulness and guilt over my youthful inability to live up to the standard of holy living that I was told the Bible demanded.

As I drove home that morning I realized the visit to the little church was more taunting than inspiring. The memories of my childhood frustration from not being able to enjoy and know God's love and approval began to haunt me again.

A few days later, I visited the campgrounds where I had spent many summers as a teenager. As I drove the oval road that circled the

the country church where, at age 16, I had preached my first revival meeting. Seeing the red cinderblock building triggered memories of having believed what I was doing—preaching—was God's call. As I sat in my car in the church's grass parking lot, I prayed for God to restore my passion and my confidence in the Word of God and its power to change lives.

Regardless of what I did, however, I was not able to recapture what I had lost. I was not even sure what was missing. More education and moving to pastor other churches had only aggravated my frustration. Returning to some of my own personal sacred places had failed to spark any zeal or hope. I knew I should not be pastoring.

One Sunday in March, my wife and I rushed home after church. Criticism of my leadership had begun several months earlier, and the tension that morning between me and some of the congregation had been almost unbearable. We sat silently in the car after turning off the engine and closing the automatic garage door behind us. I began to cry.

Finally, my wife spoke. "Just resign, Michael. We will make it somehow."

It was the permission I needed. I wrote my resignation that afternoon and presented it to the church board later that week. My critics in the congregation would have their wish; I would not "ruin" their church, as some had predicted.

The trauma of leaving the pastorate was acute. There were financial concerns, feelings of abandonment and betrayal to work through, and a strong need to face the event that had shaped my life—my call—and what I would do about it now.

For two years I didn't do much. I read some, took daily naps, and watched too much television. I did organize and teach some evening Bible studies, but I soon received a letter from denominational leadership stating that if I did not stop

"God, it is here I received my call to preach over 30 years ago," I prayed. "It hasn't worked out like I thought, but I want you to know that my 'yes' then is good even now. My answer is still 'yes.' I will do your will."

childhood faith and my call. I began to wonder if I might recover some of my early ministry passion by visiting those places.

One Sunday morning I drove to the church I had attended as a child. It was early and no one was there. I climbed the steps to the small front porch and, cupping my hands

dorms and open-sided tabernacle, I remembered the intensity of the sermons preached during the annual two-week camp meetings. I recalled my fascination with the itinerant evangelists who had preached those sermons and how they had piqued my own passion for preaching.

On another afternoon, I drove to

I would be asked to turn in my ordination credentials.

We continued to live two miles from the church, and I tried to avoid anyone who might know me. I would scan the faces at restaurants and refuse to be seated near anyone who knew me. Trips to the grocery store were scheduled for Sunday mornings when I knew any Westsiders would be in church.

One evening my wife surprised me with a birthday party. At first I was angry when I walked into the house and a living room of people shouted "happy birthday," but as the party continued I began to enjoy myself. These were my friends and I was laughing. I began to believe that maybe there was life after pastoring and my best days really were ahead of me.

Another pivotal point came as the result of a phone call from my friend Doug. He offered to pay for me to join a program called Breakthrough, described in promotional literature as "a training experience in spiritual formation and personal effectiveness." Doug explained that he had participated in the program and he thought it might benefit me.

I researched Breakthrough before accepting Doug's offer. I wasn't sure I wanted to get involved in any group event that might push me into a false sense of well-being. I discovered that Breakthrough was a series of four three-day meetings designed to help participants explore and evaluate their past and its impact. It included a strong emphasis on forgiveness. I decided to attend.

I presumed that it would be Westside I would need to forgive during the Breakthrough program. They, after all, had destroyed not only my career but also my identity—or at least so I thought. I soon realized, however, that my forgiveness needed to be extended not to Westside but to my childhood pastor, the man whose twisted view of the Gospel had left me unsure and judgmental.

As I walked one Sunday morn-

ing from my hotel room to the final Breakthrough session, I was grateful for Doug's offer. I felt I had a clean slate and was now ready to use my past as a springboard for building a brighter future. That final session ended with a symbolic release of any grudges. As the 52 members of the group stood in a circle, we were asked to close our eyes and extend our arms in front of us. Then, as we opened our fists and turned our palms down, we were to express our

forgiveness of anyone who might have offended us. I spoke my forgiveness to my childhood pastor, wishing he was alive so I could tell him in person.

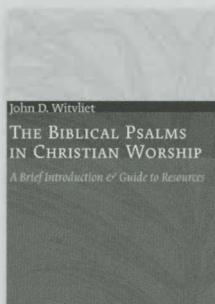
When we were instructed to open our eyes, I was surprised to see Doug standing in front of me. He was smiling. He embraced me and told me he loved me. Later I learned he had driven 250 miles one-way just for that moment. I was moved by his kindness and confidence in me.

I now was ready to start again.

CALVIN INSTITUTE OF CHRISTIAN WORSHIP for the study and renewal of worship

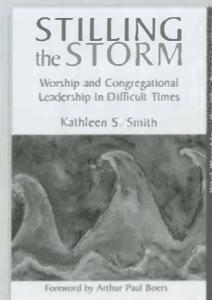
Resources for promoting vital and faithful worship

from the home of the Calvin Symposium on Worship
and the Worship Renewal Grants Program



The Biblical Psalms in Christian Worship: A Brief Introduction & Guide to Resources

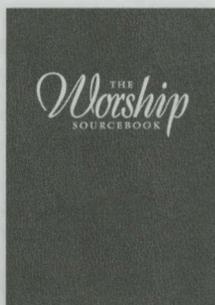
(Eerdmans, 2007) by John D. Witvliet



Stilling the Storm: Worship and Congregational Leadership in Difficult Times

(Alban Institute, 2006)

by Kathleen S. Smith



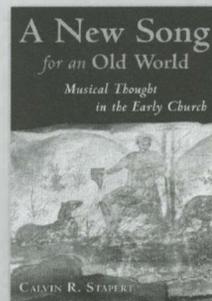
The Worship Sourcebook

(Baker Books, Faith Alive Christian

Resources, Calvin Institute of

Christian Worship, 2004) edited by

Emily R. Brink and John D. Witvliet



A New Song for an Old World: Musical Thought in the Early Church

(Eerdmans, 2007) by Calvin R. Stapert

For more publications & over 1600 pages of worship resources, visit
www.calvin.edu/worship

I still strongly believe that God chose me to be a servant of the church, but I now realize that I distorted my call and misread its meaning. I had allowed the church's common expectations of the pastor to shape my call into becoming a silent trophy on the shelf. Much of what I had been doing had been a subconscious effort to bring it back to life, to find a "speaking call," one that was guiding in the here and now.

I didn't know how or where, but I knew my Monday morning words from God, "Your best days are ahead of you," were going to come true. I was not ready, however, for where that new start would begin.

A few months later, my father, visiting from Florida, asked if we could drive the 30 miles to see "509." That was the street number of the house that was my childhood home until I left for college. My brother, who also was visiting, joined us. I parked in the driveway of 509, and the three of us took turns telling family stories. Suddenly my brother announced that he was going to try and see the inside the house. I watched as he knocked on the door and talked to the woman who now was the owner. He soon turned and waved for my father and me to join him. She had agreed to give us a tour of 509.

Not many changes had been made since my parents had sold the house 20 years before, but we agreed that the rooms seemed smaller than we remembered. In my mind, however, there was one room in the house that was larger than ever. It was the bathroom, the place I had been called to preach. As we passed it, I told the others I would join them in a moment. Here, at 13, while reaching out to turn on the bathtub faucet, I had suddenly had an awareness of God's presence. As I knelt I had sensed God calling me to preach and had answered "yes." Now, so many

years later, I closed the bathroom door and knelt again by the bathtub. "God, it is here I received my call to preach over 30 years ago," I prayed. "It hasn't worked out like I thought, but I want you to know that my 'yes' then is good even now. My answer is still 'yes.' I will do your will."

Within a few months of my renewed commitment at 509, I formed the Pastors Institute (TPI), a nonprofit organization with the stated purpose to "partner with and provide resources for pastors and their families in order to enable them to fulfill their calling." I was not sure what shape my vision would take, but I knew I did not want others to go through alone what I had experienced. Our initial focus was on those who prematurely leave pastoral ministry. We began by gathering small groups of former pastors for a two-day event we called Transition Point. I soon realized from hearing their stories that my experiences were not unique.

TPI's focus on the attrition of pastors resulted in our receiving a grant in 2004 from the Louisville Institute, a Lilly Endowment program for the study of American religion. The project, "Murmurs from the Outside: What Former Pastors are Saying to the Church," was designed to hear what exited pastors might say to the church and its institutions about pastoral education and support.

The two-year project focused on six pastor-attrition studies conducted

in the United States during the last decade, including research by the J.M. Ormond Center at Duke University's Divinity School, Hartford Seminary's Institute for Religion Research, and Christianity Today International.

A final 56-page comparative report, giving a collective voice to thousands of former pastors, included a narrative in which former pastors detailed the circumstances involved in their exit from career ministry. Most of the cited causes were predictable. Study participants told of being unprepared to pastor in a rapidly changing culture. They admitted to lacking people skills, including the ability to resolve conflict. They expressed having felt lonely and unsupported. Afraid they would shatter a presumed ideal, they reported having been unwilling to be open and authentic. And they admitted to not having given priority to matters of self-care and self-discipline.

But one strand in the stream of causes summarized in the report was especially poignant for me. It was the following excerpt, which appeared under the heading "We Lost Our Way":

This may be the most important thing we need to tell you, but it also is the most difficult. Our ministry began with a call—for some mystical, for others an awareness formed by time and circumstances. We felt we were affirmed, encouraged, educated, and empowered

by the church and its institutions. However, we were not led into times of evaluating and understanding our call. We did not realize that our call should not only be validated and reaffirmed but also continually redefined. It was what it was, a trophy on the shelf, and that seemed good enough for us, our families, and the church.

As I was typing this section of the report, I recognized my own experience. I had lost my way. The ambivalence of pastoring had overwhelmed me. I had been rushing to nowhere. I had lost my imagination for the Kingdom. The report's narrative not only described the process of my exit from pastoral ministry, it also gave a clue as to why it had happened. I had been betrayed by the event that had resulted in my entering the ministry in the first place—my call, the life-forming experience I had had by a bathtub.

My call initially served as my ticket into pastoral ministry. Ordaining boards studied it carefully and declared it valid. My answers to their questions seemed to satisfy them, and I was ordained after meeting the requirements of experience and education.

After being ordained, however, my call evolved into a symbol of a past peak experience in which I was chosen from among others to fill a highlighted place in the church. It became a trophy on the shelf. Its value became limited mostly to being a source of inspiration. I often would glance at the trophy, and by reliving my childhood call I would be infused with courage and staying power.

I still strongly believe that God chose me to be a servant of the church, but I now realize that I distorted my call and misread its meaning. I had allowed the church's common expectations of the pastor to shape my call into becoming a silent trophy on the shelf. Much of what I had been doing had been a subconscious effort to bring it back to life, to find a "speaking call," one that was guiding me in the here and now.

In 2005, I submitted a proposal to a global corporation to underwrite a project that would develop a process through which pastors might hear their call speak again.

The proposal included the following text:

A pastor's initial call often becomes a "trophy on the shelf," shaped by the expectations of others. Pastors often describe their call as a past event serving mostly as being an entry point into pastoral ministry. As a result, over time there may be a loss of imagination and creativity. Pastoring may become only a career, and the urgency to learn and to grow is lost.

What would be the result if pastors went back and listened to their call? What if they rehearsed it and described it more in terms of a narrative rather than an event? Then, what if that initial call was nurtured into life and it began to speak again?

I believe if pastors will let their call speak they will experience a freshness of ministry, a new imagination, and a humbling excitement. New life will be formed both in pastors and their congregations.

The proposal was approved, and the project, "Let Your Call Speak: A New Model for Pastoral Development," was designed over the next two years with the help of educators, church leaders, and social scientists.

One of the components of the project included a review of the call phenomenon in the Scriptures. I was interested particularly in the call of Simon Peter. The

four Gospels reference Jesus' initial interruption of Simon's chosen career as a fisherman. "Come, follow me," Jesus told him and his brother Andrew at the Sea of Galilee. "I will make you fishers of men."

John's Gospel also highlights Christ's post-resurrection visit with Peter after he had decided to return to fishing. Again, at the Sea of Galilee, Peter's routine was interrupted, and his future was redirected with the repeated command, "Follow me."

The early church saw value in the discussion between Christ and Peter, yet the story raises a lot of questions: Had the events of Christ's suffering and death resulted in Peter losing his way? Was there significance to Peter's return to his fishing career? When Christ asks Peter, "Do you love me?" three times, is this intended to balance out Peter's three denials at the trial? I don't know.

What does seem clear is that Peter's calling was to care for the sheep. He was to be a servant who fed and protected the weak. His was not a performance-based call but a calling to a life



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



SHALEM
THE SHALEM INSTITUTE
FOR SPIRITUAL FORMATION

GO DEEPER

CLERGY SPIRITUAL LIFE AND LEADERSHIP

- Do you wish to deepen your spiritual life and open yourself more fully to God?
- Do you wish to lead from your spiritual heart and a revitalized sense of call?
- Are you searching for an inspiring faith community of peers?

Shalem Institute's 15-month ecumenical program provides structured support for nurturing spirit-led leadership in both you and your congregation. Two formational 7-day residencies are held in a retreat center outside Baltimore, MD.

For over 30 years, Shalem has been at the forefront of supporting and integrating deep interior experiences, spiritual community, and understanding of contemplative classics.

www.Shalem.org
301-897-7334

of service that could only be fulfilled in community.

His calling was to be shaped by circumstances over which he would have no control. There would be no holy shrines on mountains of transfiguration. The most holy places would be where God led him. Christ's re-visit accentuates that there would be no trophy on the shelf. The cross was to be Peter's mark.

I remember when Christ re-visited me. I hesitate to mention it because I do not want to construct another trophy to be placed on a shelf. I just want you to know it happened. I was driving home from a meeting in which I had been a consultant for pastoral development. Though less dramatic than my childhood bathtub experience, I realized my call had come alive and was speaking to me. It did not suggest that my childhood call had not happened or that it was not of God. It only told me that it had more to say and asked if I was ready to listen.

"Yes," I answered, I was prepared to hear what it said.

My call spoke clearly during the next few months, and what it said was different from my call to pastor at age 13. I was to hear a calling that was ongoing, continuous, and dynamic. It was not in a form I could ever go back and try to recapture. Its life was not in the past but in the future. I was not being called to something, such as a career, but into something—a relationship. This was a calling that could never be private or even personal; I knew it was only a part of a collective mission shared by others. This call, rather than a set-in-stone template, would be continually reformed. Current family, congregational, or cultural situations would have to be included in the interpretation and fulfillment of my call. I understand now that my purpose is not in being able to replicate an imagined past based on ideal ministry models but in serving those God has placed around me. The template for my ministry should be the life modeled by Jesus Christ. ♦

From Frozen to Flowing: A Shifting Understanding of Call

For centuries, the call to Christian ministry has been foundational to the church's ordination and education of pastors. The Rev. Dr. Michael B. Ross has discovered that a new understanding of the call could help pastors feel more fulfilled and sustain long-term effectiveness (see story, page 6).

In the chart below, Ross outlines what years of research and his own experience have taught him about the true nature of the call.

THE STATIC CALL	THE DYNAMIC CALL
<p>A PEAK EXPERIENCE The call is a past event valued primarily for ordination purposes. It is shaped early by self-formed expectations fashioned mostly by what other pastors have modeled. It results in the loss of imagination and adaptability.</p>	<p>A NARRATIVE The call is an ongoing story recognized as part of God's meta-narrative still being fulfilled. It is constantly being re-shaped by always-changing family, congregational, and cultural situations. It is a renewable source of hope and energy.</p>
<p>PERSONAL The call is imagined as having singled the called one out of the crowd and moved him or her to a smaller, exclusive group. It is presumed to be an experience between only the future pastor and God. In time, the pastor becomes the "other," whose identity can be best described as in relationship to the laity.</p>	<p>CORPORATE The call is to be owned and interpreted by the people of God. It is understood as being not only the call of God but also of the church. It forms the foundation of community trust and authenticity needed for sustaining effective ministry.</p>
<p>PROFICIENCY-BASED The call is described mostly in terms of doing—knowing what to do and doing it well. The pastor insulates pastoral duties from other aspects of his or her life, and performance becomes the benchmark of successful pastoring. It often evolves into an unspoken competition with others.</p>	<p>CHARACTER-BASED The call is to "be," not just "do." It invokes the spiritual disciplines of prayer and retreat. With a heightened sense of wholeness, the pastor feels more confident in being a presence for those confused, hurt, or searching for truth and purpose.</p>
<p>DUTY-DRIVEN The call is an obligation—a divine mandate. It requires more than can be delivered. Pastoring becomes a career, a job that must be finished. The pastor may feel trapped and unfulfilled.</p>	<p>SERVANTHOOD-DRIVEN The call is the opportunity to fulfill the commandment of Christ to feed the sheep. Congregants are gifts from God to be loved, nurtured, and sometimes redemptively disciplined.</p>
<p>PASTOR-CENTERED The call is for one to become the center of the church's understanding of God's intent. The pastor is to be the focal point of God's revelations to the church. The pastor can feel threatened and become authoritarian and even abusive.</p>	<p>CONGREGATION-CENTERED The call is to free the laity to discover their calling both collectively as a congregation and individually in their homes, communities, and workplaces. The pastor becomes an enabler and encourager.</p>



Navigating Congregational Identity

Cultivating Growth and Excellence in Times of Change

ANDREW WARNER AND BRIDGET FLAD

NAVIGATING THE CHANGING WATERS OF CONGREGATIONAL IDENTITY IS never a task for the faint of heart. As congregations grow and shrink, neighborhoods ebb and flow, cultures shift, and staffs evolve, churches struggle in overt and covert ways to discern who they are and what they are about. Navigating these rocky waters well can not only avert identity crisis, it can actually demonstrate pastoral excellence and result in congregational growth.

In our congregation, Plymouth United Church of Christ in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, the Ash Wednesday tradition is a prime example of the tensions that can arise when congregational identity is in flux. The service is at once bold and

are becoming more pronounced.

In a congregation that prides itself on its open-mindedness, whether or not something is “Congregational” has become a litmus test of orthodoxy. From clapping during worship to offering a

congregation to move to the more exclusive northern part of the city. There they built a neo-Gothic sanctuary with Tiffany windows that looks more like a lovely English chapel than the white clapboard sanctuary that would have embodied the theological and aesthetical commitments of Congregationalism. Instead, the edifice was a physical reminder that they were English and not like their German, Polish, or Irish immigrant neighbors, thus emphasizing an ethnic identity over a theological one. This is significant because it tells us how important “being English” is to the congregation’s historical identity. The congregation had for a long time sought to assert its Englishness in a predominantly Catholic and Lutheran German city. When current members say something is “too Catholic” or “too Lutheran,” how much of the question is reflecting this long history of ethnic identity?

In the midst of conflict it is easy to forget that congregational tensions can be only the surface layer of deeper issues. As Eric Law observes, we see only the top 10 percent of an iceberg.

faithful. After an imposition of ashes, calling to mind the penitential nature of the Lenten season, worshipers are also anointed with oil and thus immersed in the healing power of the Lenten journey as well. By blending the traditional imposition of ashes with the ancient yet novel anointing with oil, the symbolism of these two acts breaks open the themes of the season in new ways. Yet, for at least one worshiper on our most recent Ash Wednesday, the additional ritual with oil did not serve its intended purpose as an entrée into the multivalent journey toward wholeness and healing that is Lent. Several days after the service, she proclaimed, “Ash Wednesday was just too...Catholic.”

This comment offers particular insight into the tug-of-war going on at Plymouth. Not only are anointings not a part of a Catholic celebration of Ash Wednesday, but Plymouth has celebrated Ash Wednesday with this multi-symbolic ritual for 10 to 15 years. What has changed are the ministers and the congregation. The former senior minister recently retired after 30 years of service, the former associate minister is now the senior minister, and a new associate is on the staff. In addition to these staffing changes, the congregation has been growing; this was our largest Ash Wednesday service in many years. Amidst changes in the culture of the congregation and its leadership, questions of theological identity

sign of Christ’s Peace, all deviations from how things have always been done have become suspect by a small yet vocal population.

Underneath the Water

In the midst of conflict it is easy to forget that congregational tensions can be only the surface layer of deeper issues. As Eric Law observes, we see only the top 10 percent of an iceberg. The vast majority of it is submerged beneath the water. As leaders in our congregation, it was important to search out the hidden issues in the conflicts we faced. To do this we needed to probe the stories of our congregation and our people.

Plymouth was founded in 1841 in what was then the Wisconsin Territory. Our founders came to Wisconsin from New England with the hope of recreating a Congregationalist Zion. Originally, the name of the church was First Church, but it was changed in the 1860s to Plymouth because, as a former minister says, “they wanted a more distinguished name.” We find that detail telling: just as significant numbers of immigrants began arriving in the city, our congregation renamed itself after a Yankee town.

Two generations later this story was repeated. Catholic and Lutheran immigrants from Germany, Poland, and Ireland moved into the church’s immediate neighborhood, spurring the

The Demographic Map

Navigators require maps and sextants to find their way at sea. To understand the connection between our congregation’s history and its current situation, we created a demographic map of our community according to age, race, gender, zip code, family status, faith background, and length of membership. We first did this in 2005, repeating the process in 2007. This allowed us to not only visualize our community but to also observe its changing contours.

We knew that our congregation was changing as we continued to incorporate new members and their families. Now we had hard data on those changes. Several trends emerged as we compared our current demographics to those of two years earlier. Our median age has dropped from 43 to 40. More men than women are joining our community, creating gender parity (49 percent men to 51 percent women). The racial makeup has become slightly more racially diverse, though we remain whiter than our urban neighborhood. While we still draw primarily from the “car neighborhood” of the church (a two-mile radius), we are doing so from more economically diverse places in the city. In short, the map of our demographic changes highlights ten-

sion points of age, gender, race, and class.

The generational tension is key at this point. The former senior minister retired after 30 years of service. In contrast, the current senior minister and associate are 35 and 33 respectively. Many longtime members suddenly find themselves with ministers younger than their children! The influx of younger new members has also shifted the generational balance in the congregation, with Survivors (Generation Xers) reaching parity with the Baby Boomers. This also means that our over-65 generational cohorts make up a much smaller portion of the congregation (14 percent) than they once did. And, as new and younger members assume positions of responsibility, the church's leadership is shifting to younger generational cohorts.

When we focus on the older generational cohort, a striking anomaly emerges. Fully one-third of our members over the age of 65 either went to seminary or are married to someone who did. Almost no members under 65 (other than the congregation's ministers) are theologically trained. The over-65 retired ministers and their spouses were ordained at a time when the mainline was dominant and fundamentalism was politically silent, women typically didn't work outside the home, racial segregation was legal, and Roman Catholic churches worshiped in Latin.

How We're Changing

Analysis of our demographics has given us a more nuanced picture of how growth is changing our congregation. In particular, it helped us to see that our retirement-age members were undergoing significant changes in their experience of church. This group, which was the most concerned with our "Congregational" identity, was frankly grieving: grieving the longtime friends who had died and grieving the retirement of their long-serving minister. They were also grieving their own displacement.

While we can all appreciate the effects of grief, the grief arising from displacement seemed to warrant specific attention at Plymouth. First, many of our over-65 members joined the congrega-

tion when we were a pastoral-size congregation, with about 150 in worship each week, on average. Our congregation has since begun to grow into a program-size congregation, with average attendance now around 200. Continuing this growth trajectory is requiring us to change long-standing patterns of operation and design. In the last few years, new leadership has taken on key lay positions. These leaders are not simply younger than their predecessors, they are also newer to the community. Lay leaders who gave dedicated service to the church when it was a pastoral-size congregation have found it difficult to hand the church over to new leaders now that it is a program-size church.

Adding to this reality, our newer members, regardless of age, almost always come to Plymouth United from outside the United Church of Christ. In the last two years only 10 percent of our new members have been from UCC congregations, and half of those were either returning members or our own youth joining upon Confirmation. The plurality of our new members are former Roman Catholics. This is easy to discern by the number of folks who cross themselves upon entering the sanctuary or when receiving communion. What Congregationalist members called the "organ side" of the sanctuary is known by some of our former Catholics as the "Virgin Mary side."

While the "Catholicity" of our new members and ministers is an often stated concern, we think this is a catch-all for the fact that so few people in our community are, to paraphrase Paul, "Congregationalists born of Congregationalists." Longtime members, especially those who were theologically educated, often find that our new members do not know the unspoken patterns of Congregationalism. For most of our members it is an adopted culture, one in which we bring the gifts and the habits of our former traditions.

A recent debate captured how this issue of cultural identity is playing out in our context. Several members became concerned that the clergy and laity were using the term "pastor" for our ordained leaders instead of "minister." Oft repeated was the concern, "Minister is the only word we've ever used. It's

what Congregationalists say!" Underlying this statement is the belief that "pastor" is a Lutheran term. The assumption was that if Lutherans say pastor then Congregationalists must not. Ironically, one conversation about this happened next to a stained glass window from 1916 bearing the inscription, "dedicated to the memory of Rev. John Miter, our first pastor." Pastor was a word our ancestors had used. In fact, both pastor and minister were familiar terms historically (as were parson and divine). Yet some of our members have told us they will leave the congregation if we continue to use the "un-Congregationalist" word pastor. How many other congregations remember their own traditions falsely? And how many congregations die not for reasons of faith or theology but rather for cultural concepts—even, as in this case, falsely constructed cultural concepts?

Crossing from Past to Future

One natural response to these conflicts would be paralysis. The path of least resistance would be to acquiesce to the desires of a small number of people to maintain the church in accordance with their vision of the past. Another natural response, the deification of the need for progress despite longtime members' concerns, could feel bold and future-focused. We have chosen a middle ground, rooted solidly in pastoral care while at the same time taking serious Jesus's mandate to go make disciples. Thus, our approach to conflict about our identity has involved two core practices: engaging pastoral care principles at a systemic level and clarifying our theological vision.

As can often be helpful in individual pastoral care, we have worked hard to help our grieving longtime members honor our past. We do so by intentionally remembering and celebrating our congregation's history. As stories of significant events and movements that shaped the congregation are told, we ask members to write them down or share them more widely via children's sermons, adult education sessions, or other venues. Whenever possible we strive to tie our new movements to the congregation's historical core. Our former senior minister modeled the importance of main-

taining our historical memory very well when the congregation was debating the acceptance of gay and lesbian people in membership. She framed the question historically, reminding the congregation that it had been on the wrong side of the abolitionist movement. This was a time to get a social question right.

Lifting up the importance of our historical legacy also takes the form of observing the church's anniversary and taking church tours of the cemetery where our founders are buried. We also include stories from our congregational history in sermons. More significantly, as our growth toward program-size requires changes in our use of the building we frame these adaptations as reestablishing older patterns. Since our congregation was once a corporate-size congregation, we have many precedents to draw upon for our program-size adaptations. For instance, we moved the church office to an upper floor in order to reclaim the ground-floor office space for Sunday morning fellowship. We emphasized that this change was a return to how the building was originally designed to be used. It was not change but restoration. Like Nehemiah, we discover things hidden in the temple.

Addressing issues of grief systematically has also meant creating forums to discuss the changes in our congregation. In the last few years we've held congregational meetings more often, publicly addressed concerns, and privately sought to assuage grief arising from displacement and change. Often in these conversations we've found it helps to take people below the surface of their initial concerns to name hidden issues.

Mindful that some of our older members feel displaced by new leadership, we have sought ways to seek the counsel and guidance of these church elders. In the coming year we are forming an advisory team of former moderators as one way to formally cultivate those relationships.

Our second practice is to work with the congregation to clarify its theological vision. This process began as part of a strategic planning process. In our process we trained a group of lay members in our congregation to have one-on-one conversations with members to elicit their hopes, concerns, and core convictions

about our congregation. A core group within the congregation continues to have these conversations with new and existing members. This process was key to helping us identify the congregation's theological vision.

What emerged from the one-on-one conversations, as well as reflection on our heritage, was the importance of basing our community on a covenantal relationship with Jesus (instead of a creedal affirmation about Jesus), the preservation of local congregational autonomy, a commitment to social justice and civil rights, and a renewed energy for evangelism.

Such a theological vision is not surprising for a historically Congregational church. At the same time, our vision is not simply a reenactment of what the oldest generation thought or did. In particular, the renewed energy for evangelism harkens beyond our immediate past, where evangelism was a dirty word, to the values of our founders. What is emerging is a traditional vision reformulated in light of our current experiences. We are working to teach our congregation that fidelity to our tradition is not the same as living as a reenactment society, nor does outreach to new members mean living as if the present was not rooted in the past.

We work with our boards, adult education programs, and in our sermons to explore how we express our theological commitments. For instance, during the last year we've departed from preaching on the lectionary text to do sermon series on the Books of Acts, Ruth, and Jonah. A subtext in these books is inclusion in God's grace of new people. Preaching on these books gave us a way to help our congregation deal with the impacts of evangelism: new people with new ideas. Knowing the theological vision of our congregation along with the sources of grief gives direction to our preaching and teaching.

In all of this we are working to help our members, new and longtime, learn our core theological commitments. When we work this way, our core convictions can help guide how we answer questions like "what do we do about clapping?" or "how often

should we have communion?" Without a theological vision we might mistake clapping for an ultimate value. Instead, mindful of our vision, we can ask how clapping or not clapping helps us live out our commitment to share the Gospel with more and more people.

For us, the key to dealing with longtime members' concerns while at the same time incorporating new members well has been to refine and remember who we are. This has not always been easy. We have chosen to address concerns head on, engage in honest self-assessment, offer pastoral care in a systemic way, and keep sight of our vision. In doing so, we are a healthier church than we once were, and poised to continue growing. The waters are still swirling, but now we have an idea of what lies below the surface. ♦

Navigational Questions

1. **Develop a demographic map of your congregation. You can do this by making a database listing everyone in your congregation and then recording age, race, gender, zip code, family status, faith background, and the year each person joined. Such information can be compared with the demographics generated by the U.S. Census for your zip code. What contours do you notice?**
2. **How do members or regular visitors in the last two years challenge and support the status quo in your congregation? Do their reasons for joining differ from the reasons longtime members remain?**
3. **How and why are longtime members grieving? How can this grief be acknowledged and helped to heal?**
4. **What are the core theological convictions and community virtues of your congregation? Which of these are worth dying for? Are some of your core convictions "good news" that need to be shared?**



PHOTO BY JUSTIN GORING

Journey to Jerusalem

Risking Everything for Resurrection

ELIZABETH MAGILL

THE RESOURCES FOR HOW TO REVITALIZE, REINVIGORATE, REDEVELOP, re-imagine, and re-create the local congregation are plentiful. We can read books and magazine articles on the subject, peruse any number of Web sites, hire a coach or consultant, take a class or a seminar, or participate in online conversations. Starting points include traits of successful congregations, stories of turnaround congregations, studies of mission-based congregations, programs for evangelism or spiritual growth or radical welcome or transforming worship, and on and on and on. I studied them all.

When I began my ministry I felt as if I had cheerleaders beside me—all the authors of these materials, all the faculty who conferred upon me my newly minted seminary degree, all those who had supported me through search and call, and all 15 members of the little congregation that I had agreed to pastor. Each of these voices cheered as I set out to be a turnaround pastor for Bethany Christian United Parish, a United Church of Christ congregation in Worcester, Massachusetts. “You can do it,” they chanted. “You can make it to the finish line.”

We did make it to a finish line, but one that was quite different from what my studies had described. Along the way, I learned that success is not measured by having enough income, or enough people, or enough space, or enough of anything. I learned that our goal is not a place, a time, or even a mission. Success does not come from looking at a line ahead of you but from the way you run the race. We had a successful journey. Our walk on God’s path was about facing loss, finding healing, and learning to let go. Bethany Christian United decided to step out on God’s path. In doing that, we risked all that we had and all that we were. In taking the risk we found death and, ultimately, resurrection.

First Steps

In the 1970s, Bethany was a vibrant, large congregation still full of the excitement created by the merger

of four congregations, the competition of three youth programs, the thrill of overcrowded worship, and the challenge of combining three denominations’ liturgical styles. Thirty years later, the dilapidated sanctuary felt empty even when all of the 45 remaining members were present.

But although the building was crumbling, the people were not. They were determined to do more than wait for the last dollar of their endowment to be spent and the last member to be buried. The church building was sold and a turnaround pastor was hired—that’s me. After my arrival, all of our processes of decision-making were streamlined and our outreach to the local community was fine-tuned. We adopted a local mission, created a new and innovative worship service, and told our friends what we were doing. We had a table at almost every event in Worcester, put ads in community publications, and hung flyers in local businesses.

All of that was simply not enough. We had visitors almost every week, but few returned. Forty-five members voted to leave behind the church building the congregation had occupied for several decades, but only 15 arrived at the storefront where we had agreed to come together again to worship. Newcomers raised our average attendance to 25, but that was not enough—not enough energy to organize the additional worship service, not enough money to reduce our stress, and not enough people to sustain the hope that we could turn

ourselves around.

Still, the congregation was not willing to give up. Perhaps we could merge again, they suggested, join with another church to create something new. Sadly, it was this notion of creating something new that stalled merger discussions. We talked to five different congregations before we found one that was willing to imagine—initially, anyway—a different kind of church. After months of discussion, however, they were not able to envision letting go of things “the way they are.” We voted against merger and began the conversation about how to close.

A New Definition

Local churches adopt many metaphors to describe themselves. One is “people of God,” another is “refuge in the storm.” One congregation in our area thinks of themselves as “the new Jerusalem,” another as “the faithful remnant.” In each case, metaphor communicates worldview. But metaphors also risk miscommunicating the Christian message.

For Bethany, our metaphor was one found in many small congregations: “We are a family.” We take care of each other. Our relationships extend beyond Sunday morning. As “brothers and sisters” in Christ, we try, and sometimes succeed, in holding each other, especially in times of crisis. Churches that focus on their life as “family of God” *can* be healthy, but the metaphor creates some traps for congregations trying to change.

In the face of change, congregations easily pick up family-like dysfunctions: triangulating complaints, maintaining a false peace, and deferring decisions until the matriarch or patriarch has spoken. “Family” churches require a waiting period before new ideas are “adopted”; new members must wait for the matriarch and all the aunts to give the okay. The language and work of turnaround is about change, and change has a hard time finding a place in communities that use the family metaphor.

For Bethany, family language did

Church is . . . a journey, a path of healing and risk taking, of comforting and challenging, of faith and doubt—a road we take together and a process that sometimes pulls us apart.

Bethany Christian United Parish was revitalized, renewed, redeveloped, turned around, and made new by Christ's love. It happened in the journey we took, a journey that required our death.

not adequately explain the changes we had experienced. Why had members left? Where had we been in the face of some personal crisis? How could we deal with grudges and anger in the face of change? Family language does not speak to dwindling numbers and resources. Most of all, at a time when our community needed to take risks, the family metaphor said "don't change." Families are not risk-taking operations.

Changing visions, reaching outside boundaries, developing new practices, restoring historical values, and risking death in the hope of resurrection are all actions outside the metaphor of family. In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus tells his disciples they are going to Jerusalem to risk their lives and, in fact, to die (Mark 10:32-34). Jesus's message is still hard to hear. But it is in risking and in dying that resurrection and salvation take place. Risk-taking is the metaphor of the Body of Christ, not the metaphor of family.

The metaphor of the Body of Christ includes working toward developing spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 12) and combining gifts to express the fullness of Christ in the world. But for a church that wants to revitalize itself, for a congregation that wants to find new life, the Body of Christ metaphor says clearly: "Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it" (Mark 8:35).

The journey for Bethany was a journey toward picking up our cross in the same way that Jesus willingly

carried his. We needed to forget about saving our life and instead turn our path firmly toward Jerusalem. In Jerusalem is the risk of humiliation, beatings, and possibly death. But the trip to Jerusalem brings opportunities to tell Jesus's stories, feel Jesus's healing, know Jesus's presence. It is Christian witness to the power of the gospel to become a church that recognizes that the greatest loss is not death but the loss of God's Kingdom.

Choosing Risk

When Jesus took that fateful trip to Jerusalem, the disciples could not imagine the end result. When Jesus predicted his death the disciples reacted without hope, only with fear. When Jesus was arrested the disciples were afraid. When Jesus was beaten he felt only pain. When Jesus died, his followers believed his ministry was over. Even when the resurrected Jesus appeared, the disciples were locked in a room, afraid for their lives. And yet, in the face of that fear, they continued on, confident that God was doing

something new in the world.

It requires great confidence in God's new thing to look coldly at the fear in a struggling congregation. It is tempting to soften the figures or imagine that miracles will happen. We are inclined to avoid looking too closely at spending or at the endowment. We avert our eyes from the date that this ministry will end. But if we are the Body of Christ we will speak boldly, as Jesus did, of the end. Do not be anxious, but be honest.

Sunday School Material
for All Ages from SMYTH & HELWYS

Formations Series
Leader's STUDY GUIDE
September-December 2007

Uniform Series
UNIFORM COMMENTARY
September-December 2007

Youth Intersection
YOUTH TEACHING GUIDE
September-December 2007

For **FREE** samples call
1-800-747-3016 or visit
www.helwys.com/samples

Also visit
nextsunday.com
for downloadable Christian
resources at the click of a button
www.nextsunday.com

In the risk-taking—in the mistakes and successes, in the fear and the hope—we found healing again and again.

When I arrived at Bethany, our projected end date was July 2012. This was a date that initially offered a poignant comfort to about half of our members, who felt confident that they would die before the church did. They took consolation in the notion that the congregation they had been a part of for so long would bury them. (At this point we measured the doors of our storefront and discovered that we could not, in fact, have a funeral there, so even this small comfort was lost.) And we asked again and again: Is that what we do as the Body of Christ?

Do we hang on so we can bury our members? Or do we stop hanging on and start reaching out? Do we want to take the trip to Jerusalem?

We considered what it would cost to increase our outreach, expand our mission, become involved in the local community, advertise our existence, increase our pastor's hours, and make our space welcoming. The risk involved not merely money but also our energy, gifts, and time. The risk was the fear of telling others our story and meeting people we don't yet know. The risk was that we would change. And the risk was that

we would do all of this and still not succeed in becoming a growing, vibrant church.

We spent time understanding and developing our choices. We could hang on for 10 more years or we could take a risk. If our outreach succeeded our future was promising. If it failed, we would be out of money in four years. The hope was real; so was the fear. In the face of fear, the disciples stayed with Jesus on the journey to Jerusalem.

Bethany Christian United Parish chose to take the risk, too. We chose to embark on our own journey to Jerusalem. We tried a lot of things and we made a lot of mistakes. Some things succeeded and others failed. But more importantly, in the risk-taking—in the mistakes and successes, in the fear and hope—we found healing again and again.

There were little healings, of our bodies, and of our little frustrations with one another, but there were huge healings as well. We named our angers and frustrations with the past; we learned to forgive and to move on. We stopped thinking of ourselves as a group that had failed and instead learned to see the ways we had followed God to hard places. We gained confidence in our ability to present our church to others, learning to name the important ways we were growing spiritually. Mostly we were healed from being victims, beaten on by the world, and became instead deciders, deciding for ourselves which risks to take and choosing as a group to continue to take the risks needed to grow.

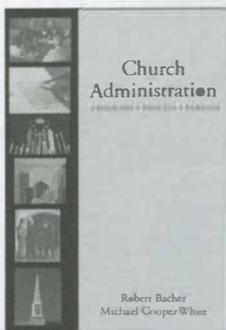
After three years of effort it was clear we were not growing in numbers. We recalculated our end dates. We could close in six months and use our remaining funds for resurrection in other congregations, or we could stay open with minimal pastoral leadership for two more years. Bethany chose to close. It did so six months later, in June 2005.

Finding Resurrection

It is possible to tell the story of Bethany quite simply. We tried to redevelop, we failed to get enough new members to sustain our ministry, and the church closed. That true sentence assumes that church is a place we should go to, a finish line, or a goal that we failed to reach. But I think church is instead a journey, a path of healing and risk taking, of comforting and challenging, of faith and doubt—a road we take together and a process that sometimes pulls

A primer from two experts...

Church Administration



Programs, Process, Purpose

ROBERT BACHER and
MICHAEL COOPER-WHITE

This new comprehensive guide treats each aspect of congregational governance as a sacred calling.

"A creative mix of the very practical with the theoretical... a valuable resource for every pastor and trustee as well as other region level church leaders."

—The Rev. Cheryl H. Wade,
Associate General Secretary and Treasurer,
American Baptist Churches USA

FORTRESS PRESS
An imprint of Augsburg Fortress

At bookstores or call 1-800-328-4648 fortresspress.com

Visit the companion
Web site:
churchadm.com
978-0-8006-3742-2
351 pp
hardcover \$25.00

us apart. We became a church that recognized the journey's passions and resurrections. We were resurrected on the way.

We were resurrected as the Body of Christ. When 15 gathered in our storefront location, we faced our own painful story of loss. Along with the pain of losing the organ, the baptistery, and the church building was the fear that our history was lost. And beyond that was incredible pain about the loss of people. In addition to feeling sadness about our losses, many of us were also really angry: Why did they give up? Why did they leave us? When we discussed our

healing and hope. Family members who hadn't been to church in years joined us and cried with us through the healing. And members of the congregation shared their struggles with alcohol, with their grown children, and about their fear of illness and death.

But beyond individual healing we experienced incredible healing as a community in the creation and development of that worship service. We learned together how to think about the parts of worship, how to plan the flow of the service, how to make space for uplift but also for desolation. Members got a

money to give away, we had grown into a new image of church. Our discussions about money had moved from family budgeting decisions to questions about our role in creating the Body of Christ in the world. We had learned to let go and had found healing on our journey; we had grown into people who believed that Christian churches have money not for the purposes of holding on but in order to reach out. We gave the money away so that it could reach out with Christ's love.

Bethany Christian United Parish was revitalized, renewed, redeveloped, turned around, and made new by Christ's love. It happened in the journey we took, a journey that required our death. We made it to the finish line because we made the decision to risk all that we were, and we made that decision intentionally, thoughtfully, and prayerfully. In following the path we were called to take, we let go of what hurt us, we were healed as a community, and we gave away all that we had. We made it to the finish line: we found resurrection on the journey. ♦

Our resurrection was about letting go. We had to let go of our image of our church as a family.

values, one stood out: we held on. Why did we hold on when others were letting go?

Our resurrection was about letting go. Centuries before us, the disciples had to let go of their picture of Jesus overcoming the Roman authority. Now we had to let go of our image of our church as a family. We talked about what it meant to hang on—about loyalty, integrity, and perseverance. And then we worked on how to let go: How do we let go of our anger? How do we let go of our sadness? Finally, how do we let go of Bethany? In continuing along the journey we were called to make we were led to answers to these questions.

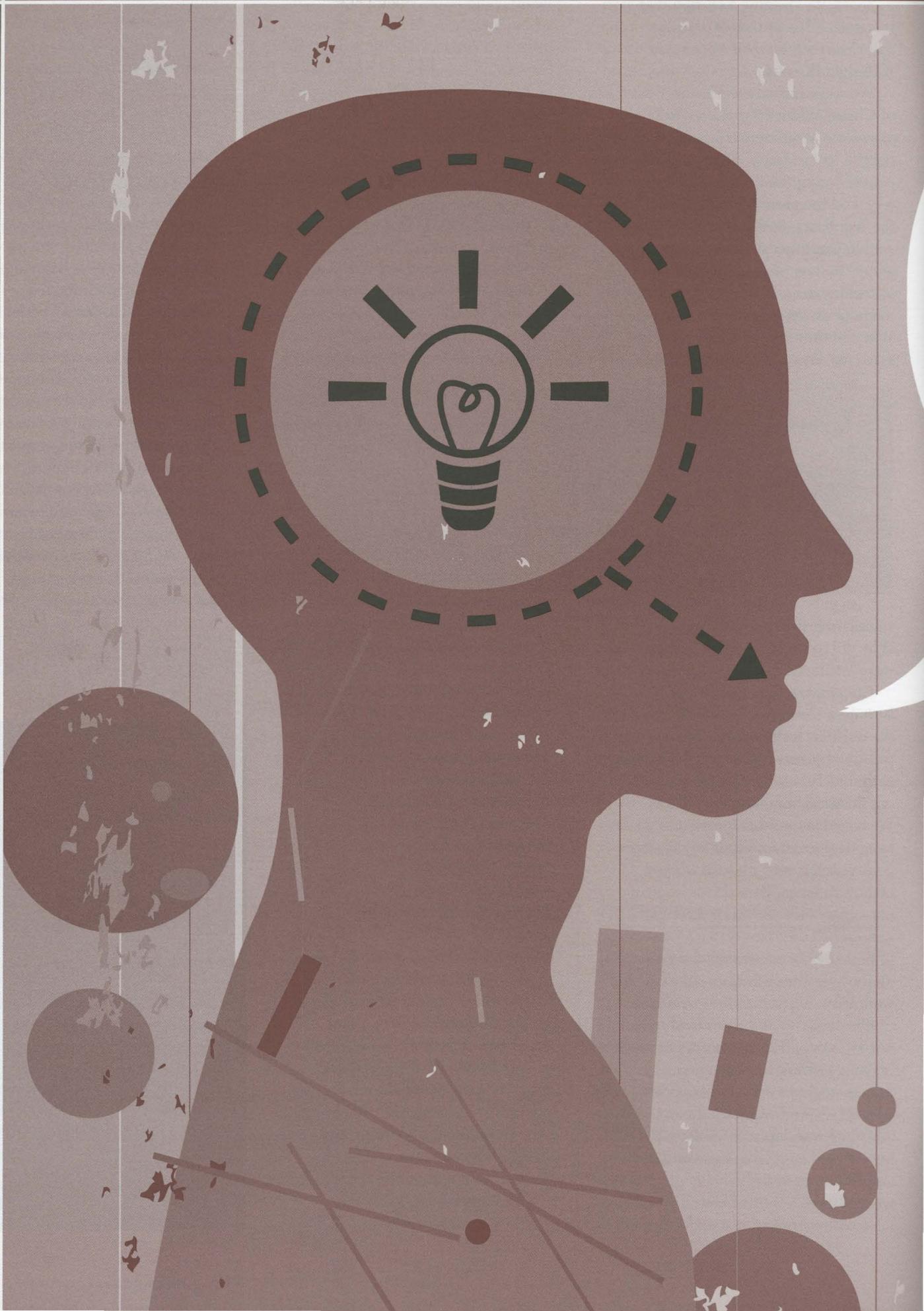
Our resurrection was about healing. As part of our outreach, we began a healing worship service on Sunday nights. (We were supporting a local battered women's shelter, and a healing worship seemed like the logical next step.) We were amazed and unprepared for the way people were healed. Visitors came, calling us later with stories of rest and calm, of

chance to try on different gifts and got feedback as to which fit best. On discovering healers and singers, greeters and socializers among us we affirmed each individual for his or her particular gift. Conversation began to include the parts of our lives that had been hard. Six members of the congregation had a chance to share about times when they had considered suicide. Several others shared what it was like to live with mental illness. The sharing, the new depth, the expanded stories about how God had saved our lives, all of this healed us, both as individuals and as a community.

Our resurrection was also about giving of ourselves. When the members of Bethany took the risk to spend our endowment in the hope of turning our church around, our image was still one of holding onto our church, to a thing and a people that we knew and loved. Three years later, when considering whether to hold on a few more years or to close while we still had

Questions for Reflection

1. What is your congregation's metaphor for itself? Is it one that is helping you move forward?
2. Do you and your congregation know what the end date for your congregation will be if you continue on the path you are on?
3. What criteria would you use to determine whether your congregation is successful right now?
4. What are the risks ahead for your congregation? Do you understand them? Are you willing to take them? What are the risks of the status quo?



CHANGING *the* CONVERSATION

Nurturing a Third Way for Congregations

ANTHONY B. ROBINSON

**Consultant, author,
and pastor Anthony B.
Robinson asks us
to engage with 10
illuminating questions
to re-discover how to
“be church” in our
changing world**

Changing the culture of organizations, institutions, or a society is about changing the conversation. Different topics are introduced, new language is employed (or old language recovered), and alternative ways of framing the situation are offered. One might observe that each week in worship the church seeks to “change the conversation” through the language of liturgy, the stories of Scripture, the proclaiming of the Word, and the celebration of the sacraments in order that we might see ourselves, our neighbors, and the world in which we live in ways that are both new and truthful.

For congregations—particularly congregations of the mainline Protestant tradition—the way forward has everything to do with changing the conversation. This also means that we will decline the interpretive formulation being offered by the larger culture in order to change the conversation in ways that permit us to see afresh, to hear good news, and to act faithfully. The dominant interpretive framework of American society is on view during each presidential election, when the television networks present us with maps showing the country divided into red and blue, with no alternate colors or shading. This representation constitutes a narrative of polarization. The polarized alternatives it encompasses may be described as left and right or liberal and conservative, or their derivatives, like

the polarized alternatives of either liberal or conservative, left or right, red or blue, traditional or contemporary, praise or classical? If it is possible, is a third way merely a compromise between extremes, a muddle in the middle, or is it a vital center and a new framing of the conversation? One framing of a third way comes to us from Diana Butler Bass in the description of “intentional churches” she offers in her book *Practicing Congregations*. Such congregations are not adequately described as liberal or conservative, left or right. They combine intentional Christian practices and Christian formation with service and justice emphasis. Another way to describe third-way congregations would be as congregations that are “rooted in faith and engaged in the

For congregations that seek such a third way, there are perhaps 10 important conversations that need to be deepened and sustained in their ongoing life. These conversations are all contributions to and different takes on the overall effort to change the conversation in ways that nurture an emerging third way that moves beyond current and tired polarization.

Conversation 1: It's Not about You

Many dis-spirited, bewildered, pedaling-as-fast-as-we-can, struggling, or conflicted congregations have come to believe that what they are undergoing is about them. “We are a bad church,” or a dying church, or a failing church, say leaders and members of such congregations. While there are few congregations that cannot stand some improvement, much of what is being faced and experienced by many mainline Protestant churches is not about them. It is about the end of an era, a sea change in the religious ecology of North America and the role of congregations in our society. American Christendom is over. While this may not be news to most clergy, it remains news for many in our congregations. Church leaders need to do a better job of helping their congregations understand what is meant by “Christendom” and what that era meant in terms of church role, Christian formation, mission, and the role of clergy. While we no longer live in the world of American Christendom, old habits die hard, especially if they are not lifted to a conscious level and examined. Not only is Christendom over, but in crucial ways modernity is too. Because many mainline Protestant churches hooked their wagons to the rising star of modernity in the past, this presents many challenges. In all too brief summary, the end of Christendom means that congregations must learn anew how to do adult Christian formation. The end of modernity means that too highly rational or intellectual congregations need to rediscover spirituality. To put it another way, they need to re-encounter both mystery and a living God.



Is a third way possible—
a way beyond the polarized
alternatives of either liberal or
conservative, left or right, red or
blue, traditional or contemporary,
praise or classical?

“pro-life” and “pro-choice” or “pro-economy” and “pro-environment.” While not an exact parallel to the red/blue interpretive schema, the way this polarization gets framed in churches is often evangelical versus liberal (or progressive), or the megachurch model versus the established church. These polarized distinctions come to the fore particularly with reference to worship and music. In worship, we find “contemporary” worship pitted against “traditional.” In music it is praise music versus traditional hymns or classical music. Working, as I do, with a variety of congregations and denominations, I find this narrative to be both ubiquitous and unhelpful. Often it is worse: it is destructive.

Is a third way possible—a way beyond

world.” In such congregations, spirituality is real, worship is vital, God is alive, and people are engaged in practicing and expressing—living—their faith in their vocations and relationships, in service and advocacy on behalf of the poor and marginalized. In either formulation, these are congregations whose primary identity is not either left or right, liberal or conservative, but “Christian.” Their reference points are Scripture, Word, and Sacrament, life in community, and a social critique informed and shaped by all three. Their reference points are not Democratic or Republican. They are not churches that care only, or primarily, about either personal transformation or the public square. They care about and work at both.

Conversation 2: And Yet . . . It Is About You

It is a psychological and spiritual truism that we do not control what life brings to us, but we do have some control over how we respond to what life brings. If we are preachers, we didn't bring on an end to Christendom with our preaching. If we are church members, we did not cause these changes by not being good enough Christians. We did not cause this, but we must figure out how to respond to it. Often this involves doing some grieving. Christendom was a known world, and for mainline Protestants it was our world. We have lost a good deal. People in our congregations, especially those over 55, are grieving. As we engage in Conversation 1 about what's changed, and as we do our grief work, however, we are also seeking to discern what God is up to in our new time and to respond with as much wit and courage as we can manage. As we do, we may notice that we not only grieve some aspects of Christendom's demise, we are also liberated by that death. We are free to embrace the wonderful, liberating oddity of being Christians, of following Jesus in a life more challenging and adventuresome than Christendom imagined.

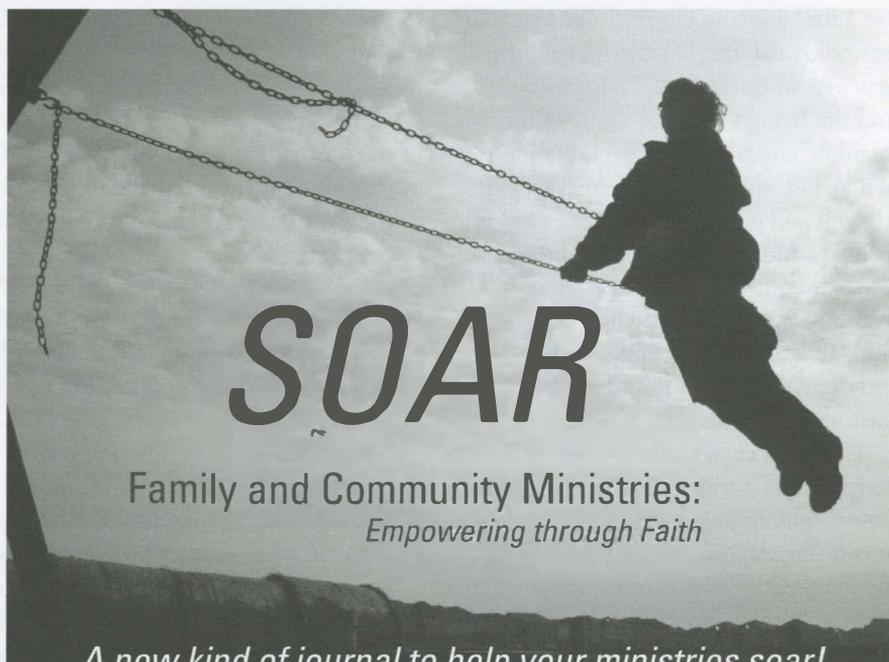
The bottom-line point of Conversation 2 is urgency. Congregations and their leaders can't wait until the dust settles and the smoke clears. It is urgent, if our congregations and denominations are to have a place and a role in North America in the 21st century, to step up to the plate and take on the work that God has given to us in our time. There is, in my experience, a good deal of anxiety in congregations and denominations, but not nearly enough urgency.

Conversation 3: A New Heart

Not long ago I found myself working with the congregations of a particular judicatory. One of their four priorities was "renewing faith," which they told me seemed the hardest to get a hold of, the hardest to make progress on.

I observed that the phrase "renewing faith" implies that we already have faith and need only dust it off or heat it up. Perhaps, I suggested, we might do better to think less in terms of "renewing" and more in terms of "new-ing," or, to use biblical scholar and author Marcus Borg's formulation, "meeting Jesus (again) for the first time." The civic faith operative in many of our congregations is not adequate for this time. Just renewing that will not get us headed in the right direction. Something deeper, something more, is needed—a new heart.

I have come to think that there are at least four key vessels to this new heart. One is that evangelism starts at home and with us. Many mainline congregations rediscovered or tried to rediscover evangelism in the 1980s as a response to membership declines. To them, "evangelism" effectively meant church growth. That's not what it means. It means hearing and receiving the good news about what God has done and is doing in Jesus. Before we endeavor to share this with others, we need to hear it ourselves. The first audience for



SOAR

Family and Community Ministries:
Empowering through Faith

A new kind of journal to help your ministries soar!

Premiere Issue Summer 2007

The Baylor Center for Family and Community Ministries in the School of Social Work is proud to introduce a new kind of journal – academic and practical, inspirational and contemplative, firsthand accounts and personal profiles.

Family and Community Ministries: Empowering through Faith will bring you the latest research and application on how to inspire, create and sustain family and community ministries that can transform your congregation and your neighborhood. Filled with articles and insights, it's all about passion in the pews and on the pavement.

Push off ... and see how high you can fly!

To learn more, subscribe or submit materials:

www.baylor.edu/FCM_Journal
or call 254-710-4496
Call Today!

BAYLOR
UNIVERSITY

 **CENTER FOR
FAMILY AND
COMMUNITY
MINISTRIES**
BAYLOR SOCIAL WORK



There is, in my experience, a good deal of anxiety in congregations and denominations, but not nearly enough urgency.

evangelism, for the good news of the gospel, is us, our congregations.

A second vessel of the new heart is the message about God. The question that drove Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation was “Where can I find a loving God?” In our secular, technological, market-driven age, the new urgent question is “Where can I find the living God?” In many of our mainline congregations we talk much of a loving, welcoming, inclusive God. All well and good. But whether God is loving or judging may not be the question. The question, the real one, is whether or not God is living, powerful, vital, and capable of changing, healing, and delivering us. If not, then quit wasting your time.

The third vessel of a new heart is Scripture. Is Scripture a kind of archaeological relic or anthropological artifact, or is it the trustworthy mediation of the living God? Too often it seems that the Bible is treated as decorative or as “great literature” (that we haven’t read and have no intention of reading) rather than the truth about who God is and who we are.

Finally, to create the fourth vessel of our new heart, theology needs to be de-professionalized. “Amateur” need not be interpreted as meaning half-baked or poorly done. It can speak of something done for the love of the thing itself. For a century or more, theology has been limited to professionals, with the consequence that many in mainline Protestant churches are clueless about the core convictions of Christianity and what difference they might make. Without engaging in this third conversation, efforts toward a third way will forever be underfunded and seen simply as the latest new gimmick or program. When lives are transformed by the mercies of God, energy is produced—energy that translates into new forms, mission, and vitality.

Conversation 4: Who Will Lead Them?

During the era of Christendom, clergy tended to have three roles: chaplain, scholar, and part of the authority structure of the town or community. Note that neither “leader” nor “congregational leader” is on the list. Today, however, clergy must be leaders. That is, they must be capable of helping their congregations identify and make progress on their own most pressing problems and deepest challenges. Moreover, clergy must be teachers of the faith and ministry mentors. Both of these roles mean that the ministry is not done primarily by clergy (as in Christendom) but by the people of the church, the members of the congregation.

If clergy in the Christendom era tended to be chaplains and scholars who did what ministry was done, laity tended to run the church or manage the ministry. This meant large numbers of church members served on seemingly endless boards and committees. Today, particularly for third-way churches, major shifts are in order. Increasingly, leadership needs to be entrusted to the called and elected leaders of the congregation, while ministry needs to be given to the laos, the people, the church.

Conversation 5: Why Are We Here?

Many—too many—long-established congregations have come to see their purpose as being to maintain themselves. The question that goes begging in these congregations is “For what are we maintaining ourselves? What is our mission?” I prefer the word “purpose” to “mission” since the latter tends to carry a good deal of baggage. Why are we here? What is our purpose? Would we be able to tell if we were fulfilling our purpose or not?

I do not think that the purpose of the church is all that mysterious or elusive. It can be adequately suggested, in my view, by responses such as, “Churches exist to change lives,” or “Churches exist to grow people of faith,” or “Churches are here to be and make disciples of Jesus,” or “The Church teaches and embodies love of God and love of neighbor.” What is mysterious is the way churches manage to forget or misplace their purpose. Without much thinking about it, many congregations and their members have come to think that the purpose of the church is the comfort and satisfaction of its members. But this seriously distorts the whole venture. The ongoing conversation about purpose and staying “on purpose” is crucial for third-way congregations.

Conversation 6: Let’s Get (Less) Organized

Some of the best clergy with whom I have worked are saying things like, “I don’t have energy for the institutional thing, but I do have energy for discipleship.” I take that to mean that many Protestant congregations have become burdened with elaborate, nearly Byzantine organizational structures that have assumed a life of their own but do not effectively further essential ministry or core purpose in this new time. The comment of clergy is mirrored in the difficulty that many congregations are experiencing in getting sufficient names to fill out the slate for their boards and committees. In too many congregations, the way the congregation is organized to do business, and the implicit idea that the best way to get people involved is to get them on a committee, is proving counterproductive. Moreover, the elaborate organizational structures of many congregations are designed more for maintenance than mission; they are designed to maintain the status quo rather than respond to new challenges.

An alternative to the typical way in which congregations are organized may be gained from the field of “whole systems design,” in which a congregation is thought of less as an organization and more as a system. If a congregation is a system whose purpose is to

grow people of faith or to be and make disciples of Jesus Christ, what are the key components of such a system? They might be as few as three: welcoming or inviting, transforming and forming, and preparing and sending. People are welcomed to the community, engaged in experiences that grow faith, and sent into the world to serve, in ways that make use of their gifts, as instruments of God's grace and presence. Congregations might restructure around such a simple and integrated systems approach. Unlike the organizational model that often pits one area of church life against another ("more money for music means less for social action"), a systems approach to congregational life requires that each part of the system be healthy because each part depends on every other part for the whole to work.

Conversation 7: Taking on Adaptive Challenges

I find useful the distinction leadership expert Ronald Heifetz makes between technical problems and adaptive challenges. The latter, in my view, require intrinsically spiritual work for they involve loss, risk, and the changing of hearts and minds. The former tend to a problem/solution frame, and typically experts or authorities are called upon to do the work. Once purpose is in place, congregations and their leaders need to ask, "What are the adaptive challenges upon which we need to work and make progress in order to more fully realize our purpose?" Adaptive challenges facing many congregations include learning how to do adult Christian formation, or how to work with God to make Christians, how to make the shift from board culture to ministry culture, and how to move from stewardship as meeting the budget to growing congregations of generous people. Any one of those is a five-year piece of work. Together, two or three key adaptive challenges make up a congregation's vision. In the helpful formulation of Wesley Seminary church leadership professor Lovett Weems, *purpose* stems from exploring the question,

"Why are we here?" and *vision* emerges from asking, "Given why we are here, what is God calling us to do in the next five years?"

Conversation 8: The Church and the Public Square

Once the mainline churches dominated the public square, literally. We stood there, proudly, adjacent to the bank, the town hall, the library, or the hospital. Our preachers addressed and often provided the leadership for reform movements from abolition to civil rights. Today we have shrunk and mainline Protestant churches have mostly opted out of the public square. Oh, there may be denominational offices lobbying in Washington, D. C. or ecumenical agencies advocating for this or that at the state capital, but as for congregations and clergy who are thoughtfully engaged, as Christians, in the public square, little is happening. Instead, one of two things tends to occur: either the church tries to make the world over again in its own image, and wakes up, as usual, to discover that the world (or the Republican Party) has made the church over again in its image, or the church slinks off to the margins with little to say or do save wring its hands.

theme of this article, the church and its leaders must find a way to speak that does not simply say, "I agree with that" or "me too" to the Republicans or Democrats, to the left or right, but speaks Christianly and theologically in ways that are provocative, compelling, and faithful.

Conversation 9: Death and Resurrection

There are some congregations where death is not the worst thing that can happen. It may even be the best thing that can happen, because without a death there can be no resurrection. Some congregations of the historic mainline will be able to make the shifts necessary to become churches of a third way and experience new purpose and vitality. Others, however, will not. In some situations, congregations and denominations need to be about the work of death and resurrection.

Take two examples from my own recent experience. One neighborhood church had dwindled to about 20 members with an average age of 83. Its denomination had poured in thousands of dollars to "renew" this congregation, but to no avail. It had become a kind of club, and efforts at growth tended to be, "Come join our

The question that drove Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation was "Where can I find a loving God?" In our secular, technological, market-driven age, the new urgent question is "Where can I find the living God?"



That is to say, either there is a new kind of triumphalism or there is a bewildered quietism. What is the role of the church in the public square today? Is it not possible that we might play a role that is neither triumphal nor tongue-tied but rather speaking forthrightly and acting resolutely as a voice in the public conversation? In line with the general

club (but don't change anything!)." Not without some struggle a plan was developed that called for closing the church, having a fallow or sabbatical period, and choosing a new name, a new purpose, and a new pastor—all of whom reflected the racially and culturally diverse look of the community around the church. Today, six years

later, this resurrection experiment is a vital congregation of between 150 and 200 active participants. Without death, this resurrection could not have taken place!

Another example, a work in progress, features six congregations in a university district. Taken alone, each congregation was experiencing scarcity: not enough money, not enough members, not enough future. However, when the six looked at themselves in a new frame, as one new congregation with a variety of spiritual traditions and practices, they saw abundance. Together they have land assets valued at over 100 million dollars. They have a rich tapestry of spiritual traditions. But, again, a resurrection will necessitate a death.

Conversation 10: Where Do We Start?

With so much work to do and so many conversations to be had, where do you start? Do you start with exploring the sea change in the culture, the end of American Christendom and its implications for virtually every aspect of the

church's life? That may be the right place to start in some situations. In others it might be the case that people know things have changed, and what's needed is to build a sense of urgency. Still another starting point, should your congregation be in a pastoral search process, is to ask, "Do we want a leader or a chaplain?"

For many congregations, focusing on "purpose" will be a good starting point. If that's the case, keep in mind that arriving at a reasonably clear, theologically sound statement of purpose is only half the battle. Congregations not only need a clear and compelling statement of purpose, they also need a sense of purpose. The two are related but different. A statement of purpose puts the big idea into words. A sense of purpose gets you out of bed in the morning and keeps you going in the face of challenges.

Wherever you start, it's important to hold together two qualities that don't always go well together: urgency and patience. This work, recognizing that Christendom is over and yet the need for the church and gospel is not over

but, if anything, more acute means we can't wait. We have to get on this right now. We have to work to become new congregations with a great sense of urgency. And yet we must be patient. We must be patient with each other because this is tough, demanding work. We must be patient with our leaders as they learn new ways and as they struggle to acquire new skills. We must be patient as old structures give way and we don't quite know what the new ones are. Doing this work means that we don't have the answers in advance. We are learning as we go.

Like the Hebrews who were learning what it meant to be Israel during their long journey in the wilderness, like the church in the Book of Acts learning what it meant to be church, we are in a time of new learning. As we change the conversation we shall come to see this new time not as a time of inevitable decline or disarray but as a new time of learning, of deepening faith, and of a great and godly adventure. ♦

What to Expect from an Alban Event

...Stimulating Experiential Learning

...Creative Problem Solving

...Interaction with Alban Authors and Consultants

Upcoming Events

Discerning a New Vision for the Long Pastorate, Sept. 17 - 19

Senior Pastors: Leading a Multi-Team Staff, Sept. 18 - 20

Balancing Your Ministry, Renewing Your Life, Sept. 25 - 27

Health, Holiness, and Hospitality: Individual and Community in Congregational Life, Oct. 1 - 3

Becoming a Praying Congregation: The Art of Teaching Spiritual Practice, Nov. 12 - 14

"As I mentioned at the seminar, I believe it was one of the best, most informative, and most practical I have ever attended. I think that I can use the information I received immediately and often. I got a lot out of the seminar. Now the challenge is to apply it. Thank you for your time and attention."

Full schedule on our website: www.alban.org





Giving up the Myth

How One Congregation Saw Itself as It Was and Created Itself Anew

SHARON WILSON

NO CONGREGATION WILL EVER ENJOY AN ABUNDANT MISSION LIFE until they have first discovered who they are. Sounds simple enough—a little history and geography and the job's done, right? Maybe not. In the case of the church I was called to serve a decade ago, a lengthy period of self-examination, experimentation, and committed effort was required to discover who we were and what we were called to do—despite what appeared to be a long history of vitality and commitment to mission.

Windsor Park United Church was founded in 1958 in the mud of a new subdivision, and in its early years it thrived. Even though there was no church building for the first five years, the congregation grew steadily from a portable trailer into a nearby elementary school and then into the community's large secondary school. As the suburb grew, families seemed to pour into the church without a whole lot of effort or planning on the part of the church leaders.

Once the congregation moved into its own building, they were able to offer a nursery school program and a seniors' club along with hosting Guiding and Scouting groups. The sanctuary was full for both morning services, and area schools still needed to be used to accommodate the huge Sunday school. It was a heady time. By the 1970s the church board realized that a plan was needed to guide the congregation's growth in the future, so a seminary student was hired to study the neighborhood, which now encompassed another substantial housing development, and to prescribe a strategy for the church's ministry. Despite this foresight, the church later began a period of decline.

of the ministry and mission. In 1989 the church entered a period of intentional interim ministry that lasted nearly eight years. There were a number of reasons for this unusually long sabbatical from called ministry. Most important was the need to stop and reflect after a long pastorate, but there were still conflicts that needed to be resolved as well as patterns of leadership that required reflection. Although the congregation achieved a much healthier calm after several years of interim ministry, the church's leaders still felt that more needed to be done if they were to be in a position to embark on a call to a new minister, so in 1995 a retired minister was invited to give leadership to a vision committee. Over the course of many months a variety of folk from the congregation were gathered for discussions about the future. They wrestled with the lack of youth and young adult programming, the explosion of residential development in the neighborhood without an attendant change in church membership, the challenges of church finances, and the special needs of an aging congregation. For the most part the vision committee was energized by their work and full of hope for the future of the church. I was called in

critical to the congregation's future, there was little or no initiative to act on these findings. When I arrived, I encountered members of the congregation who fondly recalled the years when the church had offered two morning services and boasted nearly a thousand children in the Sunday school, but that was not who we were in the late 1990s. We were a church looking inward and trying hard to survive without changing.

This called to mind a huge debate that had taken place in Canada in the 1960s. The Anglican Church of Canada had commissioned popular writer Pierre Berton to give an outsider's view of the church. What resulted was the bestseller *The Comfortable Pew* (Lippincott, 1965), a scathing denunciation of an institution that had lost its passion for the very beliefs it espoused. (Similarly jolting findings of complacency, irrelevance, ineptitude, and aimlessness emerged from a United Church of Canada symposium held in 1966.) Berton challenged the church to liberalize itself and to engage in the world. This call to mission became the rallying cry for a lot of church leaders, but it also signalled a significant and costly shift in the church. Mission and faith became increasingly distinct from each other, and church membership declined steadily. Too often we substituted social action for an authentic call to mission based on a lively, informed understanding of scripture. We acted as though the Bible and the life of Christ had no relevance to current affairs. In the 40 years following the ferment of *The Comfortable Pew*, we continued to wrestle with fuzzy self-definition as believers and a lack of clarity on why we do mission. This was the situation I found in 1997 at Windsor Park United.

Fast forward to 2007 and we find a very different congregation than the one I came to 10 years ago. The core membership from 1997 remains as dedicated as ever, but there is clearly a transformed atmosphere. Our worship attendance has risen to the point that our unused balcony has been returned to service, with gym bleachers providing seating for nearly 60 worshipers. We've hired a youth minister and are planning with youth and young adults in mind.

The people coming to our church bring a yearning for meaning in their lives. They are young, bright, busy, and successful. Curiously, for all they have attained, there is still something missing. They want their lives to have value on a higher level.

By the mid-1980s, attendance had slipped to the point that only one morning service was required. The congregation had undergone periods of conflict, and it did not have a constitution nor an operating structure that enabled the laity to take full leadership

in 1997 to what I believed was a healthy, vibrant congregation.

While the reports of the study undertaken in the 1970s and the work of the 1995 vision committee named youth ministry, community outreach, and the need for a mission focus as

The message of scripture has to make a clear connection between the faith of the individual and the world he or she inhabits. To me, this is non-negotiable. If people are to address their yearning and find meaning in their lives, the church worship hour must be the place where this happens.

We've committed to a variety of mission projects that involve not just money but the gifts of our time and skill. And we've identified our community, figuring out who lives within the catchment area of our church, and have taken steps to invite them in.

This transformation did not happen by accident or come about without considerable discomfort, but what has occurred is the direct result of embracing who we were and what was needed to get where we wanted to be. When a church stops living by its own mythology and confronts its reality, the potential for faith and mission explodes. We have discovered that when you nurture a faith community you inspire a mission community.

Making the Connection

After coming to Windsor Park United and recognizing its reality, I saw that if we were to change as a faith community then I would have to do some serious soul searching and make some changes in my preaching. Like it or not, the worship hour is the main source of spiritual nurture for most people. In the busy 24/7 world of our culture, many families don't have the luxury of expansive church involvement. This means that in the worship hour we have to feed the souls and send them out with a challenge.

Without a doubt, I preach differently today than I did a decade ago. Having learned more about my congregation, I now know that many of the people

in the pews on Sunday have little or no experience of church, in contrast to churchgoers of decades past. For instance, some of them need the index to find a book in the Bible (not having that informative Sunday school song rattling around in their brains like so many of the rest of us!) Theology and creeds and denominationalism aren't part of their vocabulary. An indicator of this was the response to a sermon I preached in September 2006, which addressed a question a member of the congregation had asked several months earlier: "What are the differences between being religious, pious, faithful, and spiritual?" We received more requests for transcripts and tapes of that sermon than any other sermon I'd ever preached. At the core of the question the sermon spoke to was a desire to know what our Christian faith is and what we are to do with it.

Over time it has become increasingly clear to me that the people coming to our church bring a yearning for meaning in their lives. They are young, bright, busy, and successful. They are populating our growing suburban neighborhood and filling our schools and recreation centers. Curiously, for all they have attained, there is still something missing. They want their lives to have value on a higher level. For many it is a return to the faith left dormant since childhood. For others, embarking on a faith journey is an adventure into unknown territory.

When I realized this, I started to reframe how I approached preaching. I began searching for ways to make scripture more understandable in worship.

I have always used an introduction to preface the reading of scripture, but now I do so assuming that it is all *news* to the congregation. This has added a fresh and invigorating focus to the Word. I also began to use *The Message*, Eugene Peterson's contemporary paraphrase of the Bible, more often. Sometimes Peterson's choice of words or phrases can be quite startling, but this has given me the opportunity to do some comparing with the NRSV right in worship and has intensified how the congregation hears scripture. The Bible has become less locked in ancient times and far more relevant and interesting.

The other major shift for me came directly from the call to know who we are. I have started asking a different set of questions of the people in the church, new and old: What do you do? What are the issues you face at work? How does your faith help you with those issues? At first, most people politely answered the first two questions and looked baffled by the third. Most simply didn't see a connection between their faith and their work. Their immediate reaction was to say that it would be inappropriate to talk about religion where they work. When I agreed, they tended to look even more confused. From there the discussion moved to Christian values and which ones we could name and how important they were to our lives. Then we talked about the discomfort that comes from feeling like we live our lives in distinct compartments so that one aspect does not intrude upon another. What remained—and this was critical for me

Transform Revitalize Empower

AUBURN COACHING INSTITUTE *Learn to thrive in your ministry and life.* Our action-oriented coaching program for church leaders helps you clarify goals and values, communicate effectively, prioritize and complete tasks, and manage stress; it includes two residential modules and regularly scheduled one-on-one coaching sessions. Other options for individuals and teams available. Contact cjm@auburnsem.org for more information.

DOCTOR OF MINISTRY IN MULTIFAITH EDUCATION *Confront the challenges of a complex world.* Auburn has partnered with New York Theological Seminary to offer a new degree for clergy and educators who serve across religious boundaries. With a combination of retreat-style seminars and online learning this affordable program is now open for enrollment. Contact www.nyts.edu for details.

AUBURN MEDIA SPEAKER TRAINING *Convey your message powerfully.* In our daylong workshop on public speaking, media skills, and communications strategy for religious leaders, you will learn how to shape core messages, develop media contacts, handle interviews, and gain comfort with radio, television and print terminology. Customized one-on-one and organizational training sessions are also offered. Contact jmw@auburnsem.org for upcoming workshop dates.

Auburn Theological Seminary
Where Religious Commitments
Meet Contemporary Challenges
Visit us at www.auburnsem.org

3041 Broadway at 121st Street, NYC 10027 T: 212.662.4315

BECOME A PART OF OUR MISSION

If you care about your congregation and want to make a real difference, become a member of the Alban Institute. You will gain access to a wealth of resources, creative ideas, and know-how that can help you strengthen your congregation and your own leadership role.

For more than three decades, Alban's mission has been to build up congregations and their leaders to be agents of grace and transformation. By becoming part of our mission as an Alban member, you will play an active role in helping to shape and heal the world.

An individual membership costs just \$50 a year. Benefits include a subscription to *Congregations* magazine, which you hold in your hand; access to members-only articles on Alban's website, a 25% discount on more than 300 Alban book titles; discounted tuition for Alban learning events; our *Alban Weekly* e-newsletter, and more. Alban members by natural inclination are lifelong learners.

A CENTER FOR LEARNING

Alban is an independent center of learning that crosses boundaries of denomination, faith, and disciplines. We interpret, synthesize, and generate knowledge, making it available to congregational leaders in ways that are accessible and motivating. We are a trusted voice with valued approaches to learning and leadership development. As a safe place to engage in vital work and connect with peers, resources, and expertise, Alban creates vibrant learning communities.

TESTIMONIALS

"Alban gives me the hope that there is someone else out there who is thinking along the same lines as I think but is able to spend a lot more time researching, learning, teaching, and facilitating the creative development of vital new forms of ministry."

"My institutional membership offers me the ability to share excellent resources and links with governing body leaders."

800-486-1318
www.alban.org



as a preacher—was to discover how to remove the dividers and make connections between faith, family, work, and play. That has become the core of my sermon preparation now. The message of scripture has to make a clear connection between the faith of the individual and the world he or she inhabits. To me, this is non-negotiable. If people are to address their yearning and find meaning in their lives, the church worship hour must be the place where this happens.

Meeting New Needs

Another next step toward helping people understand who they are and what they believe was to look at our educational programs. Typically, study groups met in the evening. Attendance was low. The regulars would be there no matter the time or topic, but we had to ask ourselves why all the others were staying away. Family and work commitments were the most frequently heard excuses, so we included an insert in our bulletin one Sunday, asking when people would find it most convenient to participate in study programs. To our surprise, Friday morning at 7:00 a.m. over breakfast was the top pick. So that's what we did. We attracted a few folks who had not attended before.

We implemented other new programs at new times, too. Two years ago we embarked on our Living the Questions¹ program, which includes dinner. We were overwhelmed by the response, which we attributed to the timely subjects covered, such as how to be a mainline Christian in an increasingly evangelical world. This year we added a new twist to our plan. One of the barriers to participation in study groups was the desire of parents to have evenings with their children. In the fall we decided to offer a children's program to coincide with the adult study of Serious Answers to Hard Questions. Again, the floodgates did not open, but we did get several more families involved because their children were treated with the concern and commitment of the congregation. This has been another way of discovering who we are—in our case, a congregation of many young families—and responding

with programming that addresses our members' needs. Now with Saving Jesus, a new 12-part program on the person of Jesus from the Living the Questions resources, we see steady growth in participation and a diversity in our participants that more closely reflects the diversity of our neighborhood.

The other significant shift that has occurred in the last five years is in our membership process. No longer are candidates for church membership teenagers just doing what their parents have told them to do. Instead, we have had to make adjustments to accommodate the people who are now presenting themselves as candidates, many of whom are between 30 and 50. Some have never been baptised and others come from traditions different from the United Church of Canada. In many instances they have been active in the church for a

difficulty in obtaining suitable supplies of clean water for preparation. One of my high school friends got very involved in the boycott and found a means to participate through a church. I was surprised by this turn of events given that she had not attended church while we were growing up. Curiously, when the boycott ended, she left the church. Her reason to be there had disappeared. This confirms my belief that it is hard for any church to do mission if the congregation is not acting out of a mature, nurtured faith. If we are not constantly feeding the quest for spiritual meaning and connecting it with the real world, then we will have succeeded in producing only contemplatives or ungrounded do-gooders.

This is where the fun begins. As one member of the congregation described it, "We're finally being the

When a church stops living by its own mythology and confronts its reality, the potential for faith and mission explodes.

long time but are only now making this very official declaration of their faith and commitment. This is hugely significant. It is indicative of a deepening of their faith, and that is a reflection of what is happening more broadly in the whole congregation. Our faith, collectively, is intensifying in a significant way.

Enlivening Mission

So what does this have to do with mission? When I was a seminary student, a boycott of Nestle was in full swing. Advocacy and social justice advocates within and outside churches discouraged the purchase of Nestle products in an effort to stop the company from supplying baby formula to mothers in developing nations. Baby formula was seen as a poor alternative to breastfeeding given its price and the

church we said we were in our mission statement!" He's right about that. Our mission statement declares that we will embrace diversity, reach out to others in the surrounding community, and work together in service to Creation. As recently as a decade ago these aspirations always took a back seat to looking after ourselves. Not anymore! Now this church is abuzz with activity. Even more important, people are living their faith with joy!

Let me give you just a sample of what's happening now. We decided that our growing neighborhood needed to know where to find us. After several tries we finally found a communication vehicle that works. Three times each year we send professionally designed postcards to all 13,000 households in our catchment area. These postcards outline upcoming events at the church

and feature pictures of past activities. The response they've generated has been amazing. We get a dozen or so phone calls and e-mails in the week

challenges in life who would benefit from a style of worship that is focused more on healing. That inspired the worship council to develop monthly evening

We have discovered that when you nurture a faith community you inspire a mission community.

after the mailing. Our Web site gets more hits. Families arrive at our door for worship. It works!

We now offer contemporary worship about six times per year as part of our Sunday mornings, complete with music from our teen Praise Singers and Praise Band. Those who said there would be a mass exodus on contemporary Sundays have been forced to squeeze into their favorite pews, which are now overflowing with newcomers.

These contemporary services stemmed from an outreach ministry we spent three years doing in the newest suburb adjacent to us. That effort involved holding evening services in a newly built school. While this gave us a chance to worship in a new way and to explore new music and drama, it didn't result in a sustainable worshipping community. Rather than see this as a failure, however, we instead brought in a staffperson from our presbytery to help us evaluate the ministry. By doing so we discovered a long list of things that we'd learned and did not want to abandon: We wanted to continue to explore new forms of worship. We wanted to keep trying new ways to reach out into the neighborhood. We wanted to discuss issues that mattered to us that were happening outside the church. We were excited about our lives as Christians and wanted to share this with others. This led us to institute our periodic contemporary services. Thus success emerged from what had initially appeared to be less than successful.

In the spring of 2006 our pastoral care team reminded us that there are people grieving or dealing with

services beginning in the fall of 2006 based on the Taize and Iona traditions. (Taize is an ecumenical community in France that grew out of the World War II that focuses on healing, justice, and renewal through worship and service. Iona is a religious community born in the late 1930s from the Celtic tradition that also places emphasis on worship and justice.) Our musical leadership for these events comes entirely from within the congregation and is made up of young adults whose gifts were not being utilized previously. An invitation to these services is offered to neighboring churches, and the response has been most encouraging. A church in our neighborhood has a very good, well-established grief program to which we send our members. Now they send their participants to us for the healing services. In this way, our churches are collaborating, to the benefit of both congregations.

Ten years ago we talked about our commitment to our youth. Now we are walking the talk. Three years ago we hired a youth leader. Upon his university graduation we offered him a half-time position as youth, education, and outreach minister. We have all flourished since he has come on staff. Suddenly our youth are popping up all over the church, not just at their Saturday night gatherings. They have served food at a congregational dinner, collected board games for one inner-city mission and craft supplies for another, and they have taken a prominent role in the design and leadership of our worship. The energy entering our congregation from this component of our membership, for so long untapped, is exhilarating.

Like most churches, at Christmas we prepare and deliver food hampers to needy families. A few years ago, however, the same people who prepare the Christmas hampers asked themselves if it was fair for families to go without at Easter. After a few phone calls to local schools, we were able to identify families who needed Easter hampers. The members of the congregation who delivered these gifts after Palm Sunday worship were moved to tears by the thanks they received. When you believe in the way of Christ and you get a chance to act on that belief, your life is forever changed. Once again, we have had a profound experience of connecting "I believe" with "how I live."

We also have a tireless team of knitters who make afghans for women's shelters and homeless agencies. Hundreds are produced every year by a group of people in the congregation. As word has traveled through the community, others have offered to pitch in, moving this program beyond the confines of our own congregation.

Likewise, our refugee committee is bursting at the seams. It has become a place for many in our congregation to find an outlet for their service. We have welcomed families from Vietnam, Bosnia, Afghanistan, and the Congo. Every aspect of this work—planning with government settlement agencies, gathering household goods, finding accommodations, making the transition with language, school, and work—happens almost magically through the untiring efforts of the team. We have learned so much about injustice and tragedy from our refugee families. Their stories often frighten us, but their courage drives us to do more. While we are committed to our work as partners in the resettlement of refugees to Canada, we have also discovered other new and rewarding ways to be a part of the transformation of the lives of others.

In 2000 I embarked on a great adventure that ultimately led the congregation to other mission work. I had been asked by the Diocese of Grahamstown in the Eastern Cape

Province of South Africa to work on their Land Reform Project, which involved identifying all the church-owned land in the diocese and developing a process to turn it over to South Africans. Because of apartheid, land ownership was only a dream for the vast majority of South Africans. During my visit to South Africa, the head of the project, Rev. Jesse Sage, took me to visit a preschool in the area. Jesse's late wife Gil had seen the need for a program for young children, so, with the help of some local volunteers, she had had a shipping container moved to land next to the nursing station (the only safe public space in the shantytown), had doors and windows cut into its walls, and transformed it into a nursery school. In 2005, with help from the European Union and local officials, a much larger preschool was constructed. It now serves nearly 200 children, many of whom are AIDS orphans. When I returned from South Africa, I invited the congregation to consider being a partner in this project—over and above the support they were already giving to the United Church Mission and Service Fund. The congregation embraced the project. Our first fundraising effort went toward financing the school's construction costs. Later efforts went toward paying tuition for the many children who have been abandoned. Now we provide the funding for the school's noon meal each day.

In the fall of 2006, our Outreach Council decided we could do more. Some of the council members had met Akim Kambamba, who had talked in our adult membership classes about his life in Sudan and his work with the African community in Winnipeg. As a result of the inspiration Akim provided and our Outreach Council's vision, we held our first African Night in January to a sell-out crowd. Participants in this event enjoyed food from Sudan, Ghana, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, and South Africa, as well as dancing, music, and inspiring messages. Most important of all, the night closed with a passionate commitment to do more. Out of our celebration of African culture we discovered that the local African community had a vision for a cultural

center. We have now joined with them to work toward that goal.

There are many other ministries I could tell you about as well, such as our Little Moccasins program for mothers and young children, which touches families in need. We also offer computer training, a program especially popular with area seniors. We furnish the food for a meal program at an inner-city mission and drive their clients home from the book bank. We've hosted informational sessions on a wide variety of topics, including racism, human rights, drug addiction, estate planning, and the perils presented by a hog processor proposing to set up shop nearby. We have let it be known that our doors are open and we will respond to the expressed needs of the community.

The congregation here is fueled for its mission. You can feel it in the air. This is a congregation of faith and passion that connects who we are with a life of purpose.

When I began writing this article, I asked the members of my congregation for their input. Not surprisingly, I received a lot of e-mails. Let me share this response from Dorothy Talman, who came to Windsor Park United about six years ago:

I remember reading once, a long time ago, that "to lose yourself in others is to find yourself."

I have found that by getting involved in our various church groups/outreach work, I can make a difference, perhaps even change the lives of strangers who need help.

I have found that working alongside members of our congregation, listening to their chatter that goes on when in the kitchen/attending meetings/participating in outreach work, I am able to share in the sorrows and joys that take place in their lives, and as a result become closer with each of them.

I have found that, because of my involvement in mission work, I am not alone, but have learned, through my church

family, to be as caring and compassionate as they are, and can forget about "me."

I have found that I have become more aware of the needs in our community, city, and world, and to respond to these needs as best I can.

I have found my involvement in the mission work of Windsor Park United Church a very humbling experience.

Dorothy's comments touch the heart of our experience: We have found ourselves at Windsor Park United. We have discovered who we are, where we are going, and what we will have to do to get to our destination. We have become a church that has made all the connections necessary so that faith, family, work, and service are part of a continuum that blesses the lives of our members with meaning and purpose. In finding ourselves as children of God we have discovered our call to the world—and we will never be the same again. ♦

NOTES

1. Living the Questions (<http://www.livingthequestions.com>) is a source of courses and media designed to help people explore the future of Christianity and what a meaningful faith can look like in today's world.

Questions for Reflection

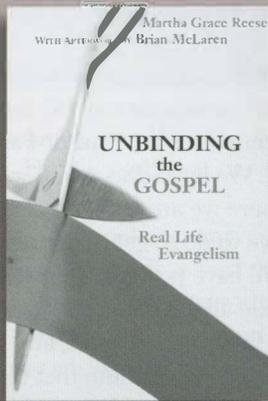
1. Who are you as a person of faith? Where do your values and sense of purpose in life come from?
2. Describe your church—its strengths, its weakness, its mythology, its aspirations.
3. Do you believe you can have faith without mission or mission without faith? Why or why not?
4. What do you do to connect faith and mission in your church?
5. When people are grounded in faith, how does mission transform them?

Unbinding the Gospel

REAL LIFE EVANGELISM

Martha Grace Reese

St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2006



review book

“For the purpose of this book,” writes Martha Grace

Reese, “evangelism is anything you do to help another person move closer to a relationship with God, or into Christian community.” With those freeing words, the Gospel already feels a little more unbound, and likely so will anyone who reads *Unbinding the Gospel*. Throughout this engaging book, the author relies on a combination of creativity, humor, straight talk, keen organization, and most importantly, the power of prayer to help us reframe what it means to be faithful disciples through evangelism. She reveals the heart of what it means to share good news with others.

Based on a four-year evangelism research project that included 150 churches and more than 1,000 interviews, the book is written in three parts. The first examines the state of evangelism in mainline churches today, the second provides examples of “great churches sharing their faith,”

and the third explores what Reese describes as “the possibilities God has in mind for you.” Each part carries a helpful reminder of where one is in the “map” of the book, imparting Reese’s clear sense of direction and purpose in writing the book in the first place.

Though an excellent and practical study book for an evangelism team, it would be a shame if this volume gets pigeonholed as one more book about technique. In the end, Reese helps us take a long, hard look at what it really means to *be* church—to be the living, breathing, effective Body of Christ in the midst of a world so desperately in need of the kind of peace Christ gives.

The overall feeling one gets from reading *Unbinding the Gospel* is that of having a real heart to heart conversation with the author, one that is long overdue. Her delightfully conversational style is so punctuated with exclamation points that from time to time I had the feeling I was reading Mark’s gospel. But her sense of urgency is well-founded, as she illustrates. Citing sobering statistics, such as the fact that “in 2000 there were only half as many mainline Protestants as there were 40 years before,” Reese prepares us for a hard landing by putting the numerical losses in human terms. In the next decades, she says, millions more will join the ranks of those who have never attended a church. “They won’t have memories of a Christian grandmother, father, or next-door neighbor. The thought of ‘going back to church’ when they’re in trouble will never occur to them, because they have never been inside a church building in the first place. For them, a church is an alien, possibly intimidating place—not a cradle of comfort and hope.”

But if you think this is another shrill warning of the ecclesial sky falling, it’s anything but. With a great deal of optimism, hope, and honesty, Reese helps us sort through the tangle of issues surrounding

evangelism and distills one poignant question for us to ponder: What difference does it make in your own life that you are a Christian? Reese believes this is the pivotal question for those who follow the Risen Christ and is the foundation on which any evangelistic efforts must stand. For, if we don’t know or can’t articulate what is profound and transformational about Jesus in our own lives, how and, more crucially, *why* would we tell others?

Reese has written a deeply insightful book that isn’t simply another set of pages to chew on and place on one’s bookshelf with the afterthought, “Well, now, that was interesting.” Instead, what one finds in *Unbinding the Gospel* is a spiritual workbook, a comprehensive manual for those wanting to begin or jump-start the intentional work of equipping people to tell the gospel news in word and in deed.

Evaluative criteria, practical measuring sticks, and provocative questions at the end of each chapter draw us deeper into the serious consideration of becoming bold witnesses. With clarity and sound theological grounding, we are invited into a grand adventure, one in which, Reese promises, the Spirit will be faithful.

Reese has called upon her parish ministry experience as well as her work as a lawyer, consultant, and coach to produce what very well could be a watershed book for mainline Protestantism. “The holy is encased in the pragmatic,” she writes regarding strategies for evangelism. It’s not a bad description of her wonderful book, either. Readers will come away feeling nourished and inspired.

Rev. Rebecca Gummere

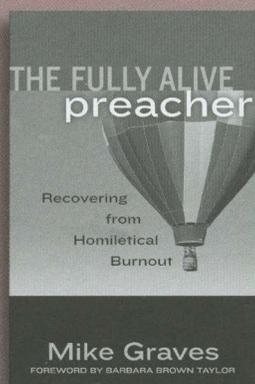
Grace Lutheran Church
Boone, North Carolina

The Fully Alive Preacher

RECOVERING FROM
HOMILETICAL BURNOUT

Mike Graves

Westminster John Knox Press, 2006



as he encourages us to rekindle the spark of the Holy Spirit in our lives in order to once again bring God's Word to the local faith community. The book is divided into four main sections discussing what Graves refers to as the four "stages" of preaching: studying the scriptures, brainstorming stories, creating a sequence, and embodying the sermon. Each section includes short vignettes from the author's own preaching life or stories from famous preachers such as Barbara Brown Taylor, William Willimon, and Fred Craddock, among others. At the end of each section readers are presented with a short verse from scripture and asked to reflect on several questions about their own preaching experiences. Space is provided for those wishing to record their thoughts right in the book. I found the inclusion of these reflection questions very fruitful in that they encourage deeper reading—or re-reading—and more profound comprehension and application. In many ways, *The Fully Alive Preacher* is a workbook to which the reader will return again and again for further reading and reflection.

As professor of homiletics and worship at Central Baptist Theological Seminary, Graves certainly knows his topic. However, I found his writing style so colloquial as to be distracting. The text also seemed in need of some general editorial fine-tuning. Nevertheless, I believe this book will be a welcome contribution to pastoral renewal for both the pastor as well as the entire church.

Rev. Dr. William C. Mills

Nativity of the Holy Virgin
Orthodox Church
Charlotte, North Carolina

review book Books on homiletics generally fall into one of two categories: those dealing with a theological or methodological foundation and those that deal primarily with pastoral or practical concerns. However, in *The Fully Alive Preacher*, a lively and informative work addressed to pastors whose spiritual and pastoral wells have run dry after years of ministry and service, Mike Graves does justice to both topics.

This book is not for neophytes in the pulpit but for pastors like myself who sometimes have a difficult time proclaiming the gospel to the same faith community season after season and year after year in creative and inspiring ways. So often, pastors find themselves overwhelmed by the volume of administrative work they are responsible for, tasks that hinder their creativity and de-energize them for other work.

In *The Fully Alive Preacher*, Graves seeks to bring pastors back to the basics in preaching

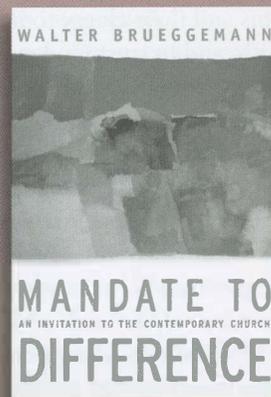
Mandate to Difference

AN INVITATION TO THE
CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

Walter Brueggemann

Louisville, KY: Westminster

John Knox Press, 2007



review book The ability to bridge biblical texts and contemporary situations is a hallmark of Walter Brueggemann's work. His latest volume, a collection of essays and addresses given over the last several years, is no exception. In these selections, Brueggemann provocatively explores the complexity of faithful living and ministry amid the complex and powerful forces that vie for the control of Christians' minds and hearts. These essays are wide ranging, with probing explorations of such topics as forgiveness, welcome, hope, Sabbath, the need for theological certainty, and the use of the Bible in American Christianity. Brueggemann's discussions of the dangers the current political and economic climate poses for faithful living mince no words. He notes that the need to produce and consume has made Christians forget the gifts of rest and Sabbath. At the same time, he decries the therapeutic nature of so much of American religion, which he believes creates a society and

church full of “self-indulgence without fidelity and manipulation without gratitude.”

With that central danger and problem in mind, Brueggemann carefully but boldly interprets Old Testament texts in order to force us to question favorite assumptions about faith and the church. He urges Christians and their clergy to have more faith, and to trust God over technology, economic power, and the national security state. He worries about the existence of “red and blue parishes and red and blue clergy,” noting that welcoming those who are different is central to the Christian life.

Brueggemann consistently urges Christians to realize the complexity of both the biblical and contemporary world. He warns against the dangers of theological certainty, arguing that “a subset of singular silence occurs when individual persons arrive at absolute certainty and claim to identify their own view with the mind of God; such persons are characteristically engaged in profound denial about the complexity and conundrums that constitute the self.” Brueggemann asks why we Christians trust our own devices and schemes. “Our faith is not about pinning down moral certitudes,” he writes. “It is rather, about openness to wonder, and awe in glad praise.”

Seriously engaging this work will cause readers to take a close look at the work of ministry and proclamation. This is a book that urges risk over comfort, rest amid tiring consumption, and recognition of complexity over “black and white” certainty.

Brueggemann refuses to read the Bible in isolation from the realities of the world as we find it. In so doing he leaves the reader challenged, critiqued, and changed.

Aaron Klink

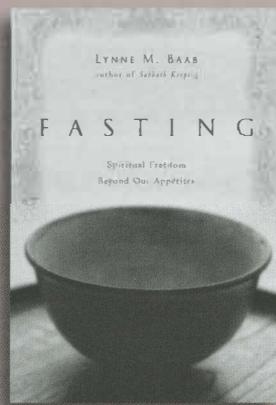
New York, New York

Fasting

SPIRITUAL FREEDOM BEYOND
OUR APPETITES

Lynne M. Baab

Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2006



review book With this text, which successfully combines a self-help format and a quite navigable academic approach, Lynne Baab offers readers an introduction to a spiritual practice that is enjoying a revival among contemporary western Christians. Baab presents fasting as an exercise in freedom from subjugation to habit—particularly cultural and personal tendency toward excess—as a means to gaining new experience, awareness, and insight into the presence of the divine in our lives.

The construction of fasting presented in this text—“the voluntary denial of something for a specific time, for a spiritual purpose, by an individual, family, community or nation”—renders more timely and accessible what may seem to many of us a rather arcane or irrelevant endeavor. Integrating scholarly research with shared and personal anecdotes, Baab makes a persuasive case for the development of a concept of definitively Christian fasting that is biblically based and historically informed. This is offered to readers as one element in the rhythm of a spiritually aware life that includes feasting—the practice of rejoicing in

abundance—as well as fasting, the time during which we acknowledge and mourn the empty and broken aspects of our lives.

Baab explores the contemporary western aversion to fasting, citing consumer culture and its concomitant self-indulgence as primary culprits in the creation of a negative view of self-denial. Other identified complicit influences include historically variable cultural notions of propriety around issues of diet, food consumption, body weight, appearance, and correct attitudes. The aggregate of these influences, Baab asserts, has brought us to a point of virtual enslavement, occupying our minds and lives to the detriment of spiritual pursuits.

To her credit, Baab does not attempt to make things easy on herself by advocating a generic “try fasting—it’s good for everybody” type of approach. She unflinchingly examines the particularities of sex and gender in relation to food, including the preponderance of eating disorders that tend to afflict more women than men and may therefore affect women’s experiences and conceptualizations of fasting. She also makes the astute observation that fasting may offer men the opportunity to move beyond limiting cultural notions of maleness and manhood as necessarily centered in personal strength and power over others. Incorporated as well is the important observation that fasting is not limited merely to partial or total abstention from food, thereby opening up the practice to all spiritual seekers, including those who are precluded from food fasts by medical or other types of conditions.

Rather than emphasizing our fallen condition and fear that our human appetites must inevitably lead us into evil, Baab encourages a positive view of fasting as the creation of available space in our lives for increased spiritual awareness. Her book offers a practical and scripturally grounded guide for reclaiming what was, throughout biblical history, an integral element of spiritual practice.

Ginger Carter

Freelance writer
Decatur, Alabama

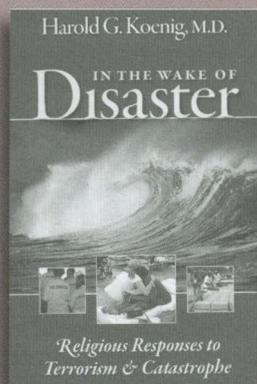
In the Wake of Disaster

RELIGIOUS RESPONSES TO
TERRORISM AND CATASTROPHE

Harold G. Koenig

Philadelphia: Templeton

Foundation Press, 2006



review book For some years now, Harold Koenig has been a familiar name to those of us involved in end-of-life care research. Nearly a decade ago, his work influenced foundations to begin designing and funding studies that branched beyond investigating isolated medical decisions to include the intermingled moral conundrums faced by patients and families.

In this book, Koenig, director of Duke University's Center for the Study of Religion/Spirituality and Health, focuses his thoughtful and thought-provoking eye on the role of churches and faith-based and community organizations in the immediate and long-term wake of natural disasters and terrorism. His central thesis is that governmental leaders need to integrate religious organizations more completely into formal disaster response systems. To support this thesis, Koenig writes a public policy book that principally addresses federal, state, and local government leaders, and

secondly, religious leaders.

Koenig begins by exploring the psychological, social, and spiritual responses to disaster, emphasizing the stages that victims go through. "The aim," writes Koenig, "is to help victims of disaster to better cope with the stresses they face, as well as help direct care workers (firefighters, police, health care providers, etc.) to deal better emotionally with the trauma to which they are exposed so they can remain effective and functional on the job." He further suggests that understanding the normal pattern of response to trauma will help faith communities know where their help is needed most and what kind of help is needed as time goes on.

After a dry section outlining the systems of emergency management and response at the local, state, and national levels, Koenig provides details on how faith-based efforts can be coordinated with such systems. As in politics, Koenig rightly suggests that all disaster is ultimately local and so emphasizes the coordination of faith communities at the local level, with the specifics of those coordination efforts depending on the size of the community affected. He includes advice from disaster experts about who should lead such efforts in order to maximize the contributions of religious communities.

The most novel and helpful sections of the book are next. In the first, Koenig presents a disaster plan, showing faith communities how they can ready themselves to ensure the survival of their own members as well as meet the needs of others. Koenig emphasizes the future impact that individuals and communities of faith can have in helping communities not only bounce back after disasters but also become more resilient in general.

The second section tackles the reality that lack of cooperation from local and national organizations,

territoriality, competition, and other factors often prevent faith-based organizations from fully contributing to disaster response efforts. Koenig offers specific recommendations that emergency management agencies, public policy makers, mental health organizations, and faith communities can implement in order to address barriers to integration.

This book is at once educational and practical. It educates those new to the area of disaster response coordination, and it provides guidelines and advice grounded in real-world experience. As past executive director of the West Virginia Council of Churches, I learned firsthand and on the job about the beautiful potential of faith communities to help with communities' immediate response, long-term recovery, and ongoing resiliency to disasters. Koenig's book gives substance and witness to all three.

In the Wake of Disaster would be useful for policy leaders to connect and utilize the volunteer systems already in place in religious communities, for religious leaders to better understand emergency response systems, and for all people of faith to learn more about the role they can play in responding to disasters and terrorism.

Rev. Nathan Day Wilson

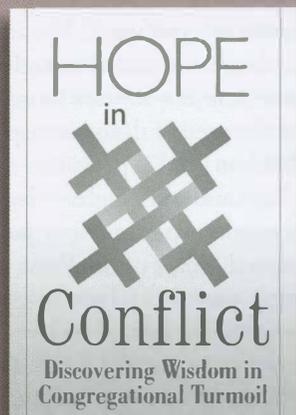
Clintonville Christian Church
(Disciples of Christ)
Paris, Kentucky

Hope in Conflict

DISCOVERING WISDOM IN
CONGREGATIONAL TURMOIL

David R. Sawyer

Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2007



review book

Hope in Conflict is a well-written, easy-to-read handbook on how to manage church conflict. Its premise is that in the midst of church conflict God is at work bringing about, even calling for, transformation of the congregation. Throughout the text, David Sawyer, an ordained Presbyterian minister and a practitioner of family systems theory, encourages the reader to look for the emerging hope that lies beneath the chaos of conflict. The surface issues of conflict, he says, are nearly always symbolic of other complaints, usually those of a faction of the congregation that perceives failure on the part of the pastor.

Sawyer uses family systems language to help the reader understand the root causes of conflict and the hidden meanings of its manifestations. Comparing family dysfunction to congregational conflict, he makes the case that just as families develop problems when old methods no longer work, so do problems develop

in churches when old methods or practices no longer meet the needs of the congregation. Through case studies of churches undergoing conflict, he outlines the course of problem development as it unfolds around a “stated complaint,” which typically focuses on the pastor as the “identified problem.” While the issues of the churches presented in the case studies differ, Sawyer helps the reader see the common strand among them all—that conflict is best understood through the unraveling of a congregation’s *structures* (the way a system is ordered), *stories* (the narrative life of a congregation), and *symptoms* (a sign pointing to something else). This is a simple formula that uncovers the enigmatic nature of conflict while bringing purposeful meaning to the chaos.

By “mapping” the interconnections that exist within the congregational structure, Sawyer also leads the reader to see that finding the hope in conflict emerges when the congregation can be understood as an organism, where a condition affecting one part affects the health of the whole.

The author further assists the reader by providing reflection questions at the end of each chapter, as well as a number of worksheets and other practical tools that conflict resolution teams or pastors can use to measure the effectiveness of any interventions they implement. One particularly useful tool is the leadership maturity scale, which suggests that the factor most significant to the success of conflict resolution is the degree to which a leader is able to remain engaged with and continue nurturing the system while at the same time challenging its symptom patterns.

A shortcoming of the book, as the author acknowledges, is that the strategies it outlines do *not* work in dysfunctional churches. Ostensibly this is because the triangulation in these churches is so entrenched that the pastor is not able to both eluci-

date the problems and intervene in a way that is helpful. Because of the dysfunction, the congregation is unwilling to see the problems underlying the symptoms and instead locks onto the idea that the pastor is the problem.

That said, *Hope in Conflict* is an aid to growth and recovery for churches that are healthy, albeit in conflict. It is useful because it defines the nature of conflict, identifies strategies to manage and resolve it, and helps the leader/team measure the effectiveness of interventions and leadership *in vivo*.

Rev. Dr. Sandra J. Taulbee

PCUSA

Menifee, California

Consulting



IS YOUR CONGREGATION READY TO BUILD ON ITS STRENGTHS?

Alban’s team of experienced consultants care deeply about congregations and their leaders. Our whole systems approach will engage your strengths instead of weaknesses, health instead of illness, and opportunities instead of roadblocks. We will help you build capacity, see the big picture, and move forward.

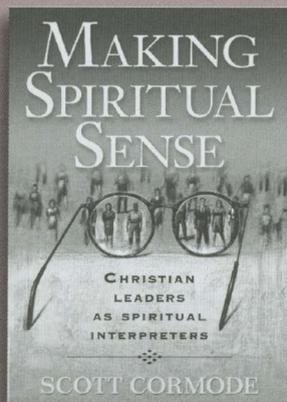
1-800-486-1318 Ext.283
www.alban.org

Making Spiritual Sense

CHRISTIAN LEADERS AS
SPIRITUAL INTERPRETERS

Scott Cormode

Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006



review book

Beginning with the laudable proposition that the church and preaching should speak to those situations that “keep people up at night,” Scott Cormode writes to pastors who are trying to figure out how to do that. Cormode puts preaching and, in fact, all of pastoral ministry in terms of theological interpretation. “The first duty of a Christian leader,” he writes, “is to provide a Christian perspective, an interpretative framework for people who want to live faithful lives.” Cormode contends that our theology

tells us that God is the Lord of All Life, and yet the theological frameworks that we use are not as helpful for financial decisions, job-related stress, and other “Monday to Saturday” concerns as they are for salvation and justification.

In *Making Spiritual Sense*, Cormode mixes theological writing, cultural/psychological analysis, first-person experience, and excellent fictional scenarios about a character he calls “Pastor Charlotte Robinson” to convey his message. It is in these stories and their analysis within the framework of meaning-making and theological interpretation that Cormode’s work shines. Parish pastors will recognize their own experiences in those of the fictional “Pastor Robinson” and will benefit from receiving, from the safe distance of unmeshed observer, the theological and theoretical analysis provided about the challenges she faces.

Cormode summarizes in eight points how Christian leaders can provide theological/spiritual interpretation for individuals and communities encountering new situations:

1. Change people’s expectations: individuals and communities naturally seek to provide familiar interpretations for each new situation until a new one is provided or discovered.
2. Draw from a different repertoire of cultural resources: the interpretations of new situations that resonate the best draw from cultural resources that are familiar and already legitimate.
3. Weave the resources together using narrative and story: spiritual interpreta-

tion is all about the story we tell ourselves about who we are and how we live.

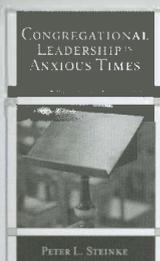
4. Ensure clear actions based on the narrative interpretation: the stories we tell shape us and help us to determine how to respond to each situation.
5. When possible, use “pre-legitimized” interpretations: a new interpretation based on accepted cultural norms and stories is much more likely to be accepted.
6. On the other hand, sometimes leaders need to legitimize fresh interpretations: this requires deep knowledge of a community and what will help to make an interpretation legitimate.
7. Help people to internalize the new interpretation: we give meaning to the world around us without analyzing it.
8. Leaders cannot control the meaning that people will make of situations: all that a leader can do is guide and offer alternative interpretations.

This book provides a healthy mix of hypothetical scenarios, practical advice, and theory from a theological and sociological framework. It would be especially helpful to a pastor entering into a new congregational relationship, providing tools and fresh reminders for how to read and to change the culture of a community of faith.

Rev. Seth Moland-Kovash

All Saints Lutheran Church
Palatine, Illinois

ENHANCE YOUR LEADERSHIP WITH THESE BOOKS BY PETER STEINKE



AL318 \$18

NEW!

CONGREGATIONAL LEADERSHIP IN ANXIOUS TIMES

Being Calm and Courageous No Matter What
PETER L. STEINKE

“It is a faithful book, full of insight and illustration. If you are a congregational leader, read it when things are going smoothly. Then re-read it when you hit a troubled patch. You’ll be glad you did.” —Bishop Rick Foss



AL319 \$18

NEW EDITIONS OF THESE ALBAN CLASSICS!

HOW YOUR CHURCH FAMILY WORKS

Understanding Congregations as Emotional Systems



AL320 \$18

HEALTHY CONGREGATIONS

A Systems Approach
PETER L. STEINKE

“Pete Steinke effectively offers the lens of family systems through which to see congregational life. His style is witty, clear, and loaded with insight.” —Dr. W. Craig Gilliam

The content you’ve come to rely on in an exciting new format.

800-486-1318 x244

WWW.ALBAN.ORG

New & Noteworthy

Winning Grants to Strengthen Your Ministry

JOY SKJEGSTAD

AL331; \$18.00

Joy Skjegstad shows how fundraising can be an integral part of ministry—forcing us into deeper conversation with God, expanding our relationships with others, and building both our faith and our discipline. Providing detailed guidance on the practical aspects of seeking grants from foundation and corporate funders, Skjegstad describes approaches for researching potential funders, developing a case statement, putting together an effective grant proposal, and following up with grant makers. She helps faith communities identify their own cultural beliefs, follow spiritual disciplines, and cultivate generous hearts as they work toward integrating their faith and their fundraising.

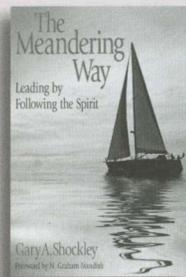


The Meandering Way: Leading by Following the Spirit

GARY A. SHOCKLEY

AL332; \$17.00

This book is one pastor's story of his journey from a success-oriented drivenness to a significance-oriented, meandering style of life. What you will find are reflections from a fellow traveler who is now less desirous of doing something spectacular *for* God and is instead committed to doing something significant *with* God—who is discovering a more grace-filled, Spirit-led way. Being a meandering leader is about being on a journey with God—personally and corporately slowing down the pace of our lives and following God's Spirit. This book is an invitation to journey into the depths of your own soul and to follow the Spirit's lead in your life.

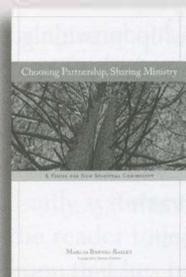


Choosing Partnership, Sharing Ministry: A Vision for New Spiritual Community

MARCIA BARNES BAILEY

AL333; \$18.00

Marcia Bailey invites pastors and congregations to a new understanding of ministry, leadership, and the church that involves fully sharing responsibilities, risks, and rewards in mutual ministry. This model took shape over 10 years as Bailey, pastoral colleague Marcus Pomeroy, and the congregation they served began writing their own definition of partnership—one that incarnated Jesus's example, was widely inclusive, delegated power, shared authority, and thrived with the multiplication of gifts. Partnership invites us on a journey that can transform us as leaders, as human beings, and as the church by unleashing the Spirit to create a new vision and reality among us, moving us one step closer to living into God's reign.

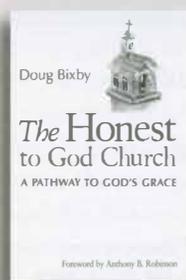


The Honest to God Church: A Pathway to God's Grace

DOUG BIXBY

AL334; \$17.00

Doug Bixby knows that many of us have had enough of the liberal vs. conservative battles in the church. In *The Honest to God Church*, he demonstrates how these extremes have distracted us from our true calling as conduits for God's grace—both individually and as congregations. He recommends we embrace the teaching of Martin Luther that we all are saints and sinners simultaneously. Churches that do this raise disciples who readily admit their sin and brokenness and see God's grace as the only means for straightening out their lives. Bixby encourages all congregations to live this way—authentically and transparently—so that we do not have to pretend that we are okay when we are not. He challenges us to respond to Jesus's call to come as we are, not as we think we ought to be.



SUMMER 2007 READING RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE CONGREGATIONAL RESOURCE GUIDE

Abernethy, Bob and William Bole. **The Life of Meaning: Reflections on Faith, Doubt, and Repairing the World** (New York, NY: Seven Stories Press, 2007). Bob Abernethy and William Bole have collected and edited a series of commentaries from people who have appeared on *Religion & Ethics Newsweekly*. Thoughts from Madeleine L'Engle, Desmond Tutu, Diana Eck, Martin Marty, William Sloane Coffin, Harold Kushner, and others focus on prayer, suffering, spiritual paths, the nature of reality, and "lives well lived."

Battle, Michael. **Practicing Reconciliation in a Violent World** (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2005). Michael Battle holds that we practice reconciliation by affirming and acting on the belief that God is always and everywhere present, even when the world's situations—and our own—suggest otherwise. This book offers an assessment tool that will help individuals and communities understand how we approach peacemaking in different ways.

Collins, Francis S. **The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief** (New York, NY: Free Press, 2006). Francis Collins—geneticist and former leader of the Human Genome Project—examines what science says about the origins of the universe and life. He then critiques philosophical stances that have been offered in response—including atheism, creationism, "intelligent design," and "biologos." His conclusion: "principles of faith are, in fact, complementary with the principles of science."

Comins, Rabbi Mike. **Wild Faith: Jewish Ways into Wilderness, Wilderness Ways into Judaism** (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2007). Rabbi Mike Comins—founder of TorahTrek Spiritual Wilderness Adventures—draws on ancient and contemporary Jewish wisdom to address the connections between Torah and nature. *Wild Faith* features more than 40 exercises that deepen our spiritual awareness of the natural world. Such exercises include journaling, practicing solitude, walking contemplatively, and creating wilderness "blessings."

Lee, Chang-Rae. **Aloft: A Novel** (New York, NY: Riverhead Trade Reprint, 2005). Jerry Battle, an early-retiree, escapes life's challenges regularly in his airplane (although he flies only in fair weather when he can see

the white X painted on his roof). While aloft, Jerry copes with family, aging, and his own lingering ennui. This novel is a funny, profound, and surprisingly real look at commitment and less-than-perfect love.

Mercer, Joyce Ann. **Welcoming Children: A Practical Theology of Childhood** (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2005). Drawing on her experience as a scholar, parent, and director of the Children in Congregations Project, Joyce Ann Mercer writes of her search for a theology that affirms children and a church that welcomes, nurtures, and advocates for them. Such a church enables children to fully participate in its missional activities and honors children's ideas and initiatives.

Peterson, Eugene. **Eat This Book: A Conversation on the Art of Spiritual Reading** (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2006). Eugene Peterson uses the metaphor of "eating" to discuss how Scripture is intended for not only our study but also our lives. He explores *lectio divina* as an approach to Scripture—focusing on what it means to read, meditate, pray, and live the text. Through this practice, we are urged to encounter God in God's terms, not ours.

Standish, N. Graham. **Humble Leadership: Being Radically Open to God's Guidance and Grace** (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2007). Graham Standish offers a model of congregational leadership grounded in humility, one that says to God, "I will seek your will and way as I lead others to do the same." Humble leaders are self-aware (acknowledging their ignorance), prayerful (listening for God), unifying (seeking the "common good rooted in God's good"), and spirit-led (following God's call).

Vecchione, Patrice. **Faith and Doubt: An Anthology of Poems** (New York, NY: Henry Holt, 2007). Patrice Vecchione's anthology is a thought-provoking exploration of belief, spiritual affirmation, and the nature of God. An award-winning poet and collage artist, Vecchione gathers poems from around the world to help readers clarify their own faith and sources of strength. This collection is well-suited for personal meditation or group discussion.

Congregational Change: What it Takes to Make it Stick

Q: Why is it so hard to change things in a congregation?
Why don't the changes stick?

A: Let me begin to answer your question by asking one: Have you ever visited a congregation where you were told to take a brightly colored mug at the fellowship hour so that members would know you were visiting and could make you feel welcome? What was your experience?

Occasionally this works and members provide visitors with a warm and inviting welcome. More often than not, though, the multicolored-mug-toting visitors report that they are avoided like the plague!

I offer this example to illustrate that change within congregations is much more complex than we want to acknowledge. Surface changes, like providing a special mug for visitors, do not typically bring about what is hoped for—unless there are accompanying changes at a deeper level.

One large urban congregation I once worked with wanted to be the “friendliest congregation” in their large city. Indeed, the congregation had more visitors in a few months than some congregations receive in a full year! In spite of this, the congregation showed only a moderate membership increase year after year. In exploring some of their patterns of interaction with visitors to the congregation on Sundays, it became clear that even with their special mugs, other things inhibited their growth.

This was an urban congregation that drew its members from a wide geographical area, most of whom did not want to travel to the congregation during the week. Consequently, most of the church's meetings and programs were held right after worship on Sunday mornings. When I asked members to describe a

typical Sunday morning, they told me this was a time to say hello to a few of their friends, make photocopies of meeting minutes, and rush off to committee meetings or programs. They immediately realized that this left their visitors, mugs and all, standing around watching the active members scurry about.

After making an agreement to not start any meetings until a half an hour after the worship service, church members agreed to use that half hour to “be present” to their visitors. We practiced various ways of interacting with visitors and with being a welcoming presence using some intentional conversations and listening practices.

A few weeks later I received a phone call from one of the congregation's leaders. “You'll never believe what happened,” he said. “Last week I followed through on our agreement to engage with visitors intentionally during the first half hour.”

“Great!” I said. “What happened?”

“The moderator and I approached this small group of visitors who were holding the multi-colored mugs. We used the questions that we had practiced and listened to them. Then, after a few minutes, one of the visitors said, ‘This is the *friendliest church* my wife and I have ever attended.’”

This congregation began to become what it wanted to be—“the friendliest church in the city”—by stopping their ineffective behaviors and intentionally adopting practices that were more in line with their goals. Likewise, change in any congregation requires discontinuing what doesn't work and committing to new practices tailored to the changes being sought.

This story also illustrates another point about change. The members in this story not only made intentional changes in what they did, they also changed their *way of being* with visitors on Sunday mornings. In our prior discussions, they had realized that their “work” as a congregation was not limited to rushing off to participate in committee meetings. It

also involved being a welcoming presence to their visitors. We had reflected upon the biblical passage, “Show hospitality to strangers, because you may be entertaining angels unawares.” They realized that their visitors may indeed be “angels” whose messages to them would never be received if they did not practice hospitality.

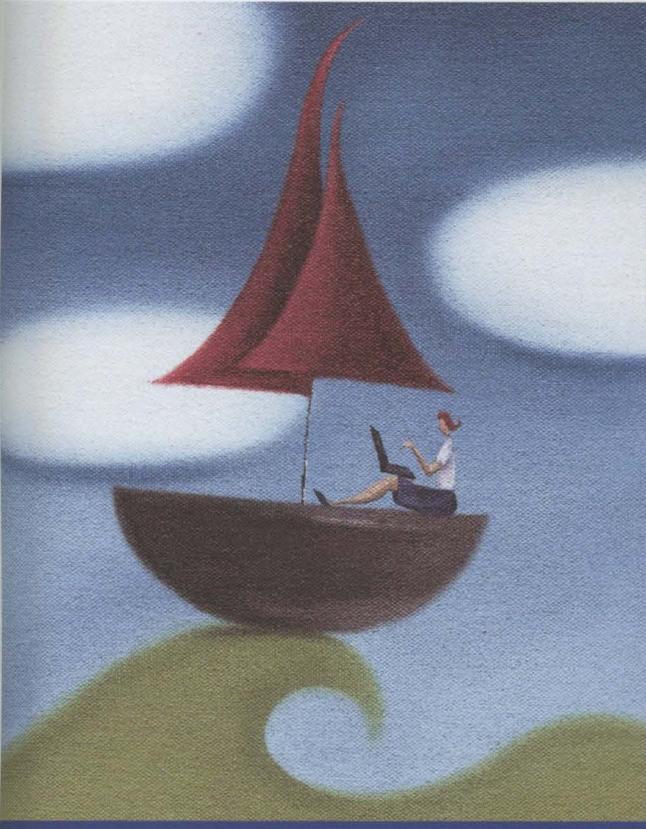
Change is complex. It is multifaceted, and we can never achieve the desired results if we focus on only one level of change. It requires discontinuing what doesn't move toward the desired change, intentionally engaging in practices that embody the change, and shifting how we understand some aspect of congregational life. In fact, changing how we think about a particular area of congregational life may bring about more sustained change—and create more transformative action over time—than just doing new things.

One approach to change that I have used often with congregations, Appreciative Inquiry, is designed not only to get a congregation to do new things but to also think differently about themselves, to ask different questions of each other, to look at the kinds of stories that the members of the congregation tell each other, to find generative images of the future that shift the focus from merely problem-solving to what the congregation wants to be and to become—in essence, to create new possibilities. Research shows that such approaches bring about more self-organizing or improvisational processes of change than are typical of more planned approaches to organizational change.



Lawrence Peers is an Alban Institute consultant who works with congregations using whole system approaches such as Future Search Conference and an Appreciative Inquiry Summit.

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



Awash in a sea of resources? We'll help you navigate.

Looking for a way to sustain your thriving congregation? Curious about current trends? Consult the Congregational Resources Guide—a free online guide to more than 100 topics, complete with resource recommendations, overviews, links to books, associations, special reports, online tutorials, downloadable materials and more.

The CRG draws on the expertise of The Alban Institute, the Indianapolis Center for Congregations, and other specialists. Hosted by the Alban Institute; offered as a free gift by Lilly Endowment Inc.

www.congregationalresources.org

“Will Our Children Be Stewards?”

2007 Leadership Conference: Stewardship Staff, Christian Educators, Youth Leaders

November 26-29, 2007
TradeWinds Island Resort
St. Pete Beach, Florida

- Identify the culture of materialism that targets children
- Understand the spirituality of children
- Explore ways to teach stewardship to children

For more information, including updates and a schedule, visit the Ecumenical Stewardship Center website at www.stewardshipresources.org.

Presented by the Ecumenical Stewardship Center
1100 W. 42nd Street, Suite 225, Indianapolis, IN 46208
office@stewardshipresources.org; (800) 835-5671



Nathan Dungan is president and founder of Share-Save-Spend™, an organization that helps people of all ages develop and maintain healthy financial habits. His book *Prodigal Sons & Material Girls* was released in 2003.



Rabbi Sandy Sasso is an award-winning children's author, columnist and teacher focusing on children's spirituality.



Bryan Sirchio will lead worship and offer ideas and music for teaching children and youth about stewardship.



Dick Hardel will offer a hands-on model for linking children's faith and stewardship that is adaptable for families and groups.

About the Alban Institute

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.

www.alban.org

Coming This Fall...

- Congregational Web sites as windows to congregational identity
- What recent research shows about clergy strengths, areas of vulnerability, and the need for re-focusing clergy education and training
- Congregational discernment and decision making as a spiritual practice
- How to give feedback to difficult members of one's congregation

... and much more



2121 Cooperative Way
Suite 100
Herndon, VA 20171