Fall 2009

Reflections

YALE DIVINITY SCHOOL

HOW FIRM A FOUNDATION?
CHURCHES FACE THE FUTURE

This is too good a crisis to waste. People are open. Too many are living lives that are shallow and flat.... We are at an evolutionary moment in the life of the Christian church in America. I believe we have a message the culture isn't hearing. We have something amazing that too many people are missing out on. If only they knew!

– the Rev. Nancy Taylor '81 M.Div.

PHOTOGRAPHY: CHRIS MINNICK

Based in Indianapolis, Chris Minnick is an independent photographer with 30 years of experience. His work centers mostly on philanthropic organizations – the life and practices of churches, colleges, community foundations, and other non-profits.

His interest is to preserve the authenticity of the moment, capturing a glimpse of the emotion and energy he sees in the scenes he encounters.

"My subject is real people, real stories," he says.

"I shoot things as they are, hoping to reinforce and enhance the integrity and believability of the moment. I hope viewers come away with more respect for what they are seeing."

Over the years, he has photographed activities in scores of congregations. This Reflections *chronicles a few of those moments.*

"What strikes me when I walk into a church, no matter what the denomination, is the power of community I see there – the capability of a church to gather neighbors and friends. And afterwards, they take with them for the rest of the week a faith and belief that make their lives better."

COVER DESIGN:
PETER JOHNSON, WITH PHOTOS BY CHRIS MINNICK

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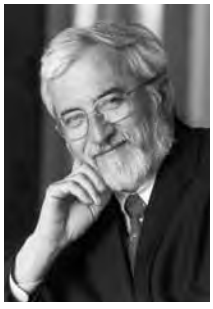
HOW FIRM A FOUNDATION?
CHURCHES FACE THE FUTURE

From the Dean's Desk



Harold W. Attridge

Dean of Yale Divinity School
& Lillian Claus Professor
of New Testament

As this issue goes to press, Yale Divinity School is hosting several visitors – Brian McLaren, well known for his work in the emerging church movement; Sister Nancy Schram, a Franciscan who has been working among the poor in Brazil for thirty-one years; and Robert Sackel, a member of the L'Arche community movement. These guests dramatically exemplify the variety of ways that a religious commitment works itself out in today's world, and this issue of *Reflections* attempts to capture some of that variety.

The focus of the issue is on the venue in which most believers find their religious home, the local congregation. Last spring, in a conference supported by a generous gift from George Bauer, a member of our Board of Advisors, we asked author Tony Robinson and two panels of alums, recent grads and seasoned veterans, to tell us about the lives of the congregations in which they serve. What they told us, and what this issue of *Reflections* reports, is a tale of diverse ways in which congregations of different denominations, sizes, ethnicities, and polities engage the world from a ground of faith. Among many of them there is anxiety about the future as the demographic and cultural shape of the Church changes.

The contributors to this issue offer both reports about the past and meditations on what the "firm foundation" of the future might look like. Martin Copenhaver insists on the importance of recovering tradition; John Lindner focuses our attention on the larger cultural shifts that have affected American Protestantism; Dwight Andrews highlights the unique power of church community; Tony Robinson offers a framework for thinking about future trajectories; and Nora Gallagher provides a searching meditation from the pew.

Some offer some practical hints for immediate application – Tom Troeger on rediscovering beauty in worship, Nora Tubbs Tisdale on the perennial principles of good preaching, Peter Marty on Biblical hospitality, Lillian Daniel on the practice of testimony. Alternative church movements are the focus of Becky Garrison's essay, and Kimberly Knight takes us into the even more extraordinary space of cyber worship.

If there is a theme that runs through these essays, it is a confidence in the resilience of congregations in these challenging times. That lively hope rings clear in the interview about Marquand Chapel, and those of us who attend it regularly can attest to its extraordinary vitality. Confident hope also marks the voices of the YDS grads, the panelists from the spring conference, who here provide their own vivid comments on the elusive, urgent matter of the future of congregational life.

Special thanks go to the Rev. Martin Copenhaver '80 M.Div. and member of our Board of Advisors, who helped to organize the spring conference and served as guest editor for this issue.

Harold W. Attridge

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Back to the Future: "Retraditioning" in the Church Today

by Martin B. Copenhaver

A few years ago I was asked to officiate at a funeral for a young couple who had died in an auto accident.

The husband had been a member of our United Church of Christ congregation, and his wife was Jewish. The service was to take place in our church. I was particularly eager to learn more about Jewish customs around death and mourning so that I could design a service that incorporated elements of both traditions, where appropriate. So, in addition to consulting with the family, I also referred to a wonderful book, *How to Be a Perfect Stranger*, which describes various religious traditions and how one can participate in them as a guest.[1]

The funeral section of the book on Jewish practices is thick and explicit, reflecting a rich tradition. The book describes the *shiva* period in which the family sits in mourning for seven days after the funeral and receives guests. It outlines quite explicitly what guests should say and not say ("it is customary to sit quietly or talk to other callers, and wait to be spoken to by the principal mourners"). Then there is the explanation of the mourners' *kaddish*, the prayer of praise that mourners repeat for eleven months following the funeral, as well as what is to be done on the *yahrzeit*, the anniversary of the death. There are instructions about what to wear to the service, and what one might say to comfort the bereaved.

A generation ago, the pulpit was obviously central, both literally and figuratively. Communion was celebrated, at most, once a month, and the elements were brought to worshipers in the pews. It was worship from the neck up, a largely cerebral engagement with the divine. Today much of that has changed.

Then, out of curiosity, I turned to the page that deals with the traditions of my denomination. Under the heading of funeral practices there is this question: "Are there mourning customs to which a friend who is not a member of the United Church of Christ should be sensitive?" And this is the answer: "No. Local, ethnic, and cultural customs are more relevant than any particular religious tradition of the church."[2] That statement, although not entirely accurate, was just true enough to make me wince.

And it did not just apply to funeral practices, either. To be sure, our congregations had traditions related to worship and church life, but those traditions were mostly malleable to local custom, the preferences of the congregation, and the proclivities of the minister. Wider church traditions could be, and often were, ignored. So, fifteen years ago, when I arrived at the congregation I currently serve, a member asked, "Are we going to do Lent again this year?" as if that central liturgical season were just another programmatic choice.

Retraditioning Strategy: Fixed or Fluid?

Today that is beginning to change. In some respects, the change is dramatic. It is a movement toward what Diana Butler Bass has described as "retraditioning," through which a congregation adopts, or reclaims, practices and understandings that have been part of the wider Christian tradition, but, for some reason, have been abandoned or diminished in importance. The deliberate reclaiming of Christian traditions looks now to be a central element of congregational identity and renewal in the twenty-

first century. Within a wider culture that breathlessly pursues the next new thing, congregations are experiencing new vitality in old spiritual practices.

Bass is careful to distinguish between two forms of retraditioning that lead in quite different directions, one she terms "fixed" and the other "fluid." She writes, "In its fixed forms, retraditioning translates into religious fundamentalism, sectarian isolationism, or resistance to all forms of change."[3] Fluid retraditioning is something very different, as she explains:

> In its more fluid forms of rejuvenation, adaptation, and invention, retraditioning implies reaching back to the past, identifying practices that were an important part of that past, and bringing them to the present where they can reshape contemporary life. In this mode, congregations will tend toward reflexivity (willingness to change through engagement with tradition and an equal willingness to change the tradition through engagement), reflection (thoughtfulness about practice and belief), and risk-taking.[4]

This fluid form of retraditioning is a source of vitality in so-called "emergent" churches, in an increasing number of mainline congregations, and is evident in the congregation I serve.

Engaging All the Senses

Wellesley Congregational Church (UCC) in Wellesley, MA., is perched on a slight rise on the square of this leafy New England town, as if presiding over the whole village. And, indeed, it is the oldest institution in Wellesley, actually older than the municipality itself. The steeple of the church, the highest point in town, can seem to pierce the clouds. We worship in a space that is characterized by the clear windows and stark, dignified lines of a New England Meeting House. A generation ago, the pulpit was obviously central, both literally and figuratively. It fact, preaching was so central that all other elements of worship could seem like little more than the opening acts that warm up the crowd for the main event. Except when the choir processed or the congregation stood for a hymn, no one seemed to move. Communion was celebrated, at most, once a month (in those days, anything more frequent might have been dismissed as "too Catholic"), and the elements were brought to worshippers in the pews. It was worship from the neck up, a largely cerebral engagement with the divine.

Today much of that has changed. Our fastest growing worship service is not something that our forebears would recognize – at least, not our Congregational forebears. At this service, each week we have: symbols and colors that immediately situate the worship within the flow of the liturgical year (no one has to ask if we are "doing Lent this year"); a renewal of baptismal vows, including aspersion of worshippers with water from the baptismal font; worshippers of all ages who gather around the table to receive communion; members of the congregation who line up to light prayer candles; those who stay to walk the labyrinth that is embedded in the floor. There is a sermon, of course, but it is set within dynamic liturgical practices in which all of the senses are engaged.

One might characterize this development as appropriating traditions from other parts of the church, particularly those with a richer liturgical tradition than is evident in many Reformed churches. And, in ways, that might be an accurate description. But it is also true that we are learning how to claim wider church traditions as our own. In this sense, "our" tradition reaches back before the Congregational church in colonial New England, back before even the Protestant Reformation. Yet we consider this to be "fluid retraditioning" in action: these liturgical practices are not merely adopted, they are also adapted to our time and circumstance. It is also an example of what Becky Garrison (in this *Reflections*) calls "an ancient-future faith," which searches the storehouse of Christian tradition for spiritual treasures, while seeking to interpret these traditions faithfully into new contexts.

Preaching and worship-planning have readjusted themselves around the Bible. Today sermons are not as likely to wander out of earshot of the Biblical text.

The movement toward retraditioning can be seen as well in the increased emphasis on distinctive spiritual practices, as championed in the work of theologian Dorothy Bass and the Lilly Endowment's Vice President for Religion, Craig Dykstra, and a growing literature on the subject. The focus on spiritual practices seems ubiquitous in church life these days, so it should be no surprise that it is reflected in these pages as well. Lillian Daniel makes a compelling case for recovering the practice of testimony, and Peter Marty is determined to rescue the practice of hospitality from confusion with mere friendliness. Even Kimberly Knight's description of a church

that meets in cyberspace shows commitment to the spiritual practice of living in community. Though some of us might want to protest that a meeting of avatars is not quite the same as a meeting of fleshly creatures, it is concern for community that drives many of the innovations Knight describes.

Repositioning the Bible

The preaching we hear today also reflects this movement toward retraditioning. A few years ago, on the sixtieth anniversary of the journal *Pulpit Digest*, I was invited to reflect on the changes in preaching that have taken place during that dramatic time span. In preparation, I read many back issues from each decade. Amid the points of continuity, and the occasional faddish excursion, I noticed one epochal change. Until about twenty-five years ago, the sermons were largely topical, and generously sprinkled with quotes from virtually every human endeavor. The preacher might cite the words of a poet, the findings of a sociologist, the research of a scientist, and the observations of a contemporary journalist to support the sermon's point. References to Scripture often were made as if they were little more than a summary of all that had gone before. The gospel was treated as the capstone of human experience. A curmudgeonly friend once summarized this musty style of mainline preaching: "You hear what the psychologist says, what the historian says, what *The New York Times* editorial writer says, and then the sermon concludes with, 'And perhaps Jesus said it best…' "

Within a wider culture that breathlessly pursues the next new thing, congregations are experiencing new vitality in old spiritual practices.

Since the 1980s, preaching and worship-planning have readjusted themselves around the Bible. Today sermons, often based on the lectionary texts of the day, are not as likely to wander out of earshot of the Biblical text, and scriptural imagery tends to ripple through the liturgies as well.

This development might sound surprising at a time when our culture seems no longer to be even vestigially Christian. Yet Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann has observed that it was during times of exile that Israel became a textual community. Living as strangers in a strange land, Israel's very identity as a people was threatened, so they read and listened to stories to remind them of who they were and where their true home was. The novelist Flannery O'Connor made a similar point when she observed that Southern storytelling began to flourish only after defeat in the Civil War. When a community of people is no longer in charge, when the sources of identity are vanishing, the community turns to its texts and stories as the wellsprings of life. Surely this is part of what we are observing in our churches today.

One of the reasons that Jewish funeral traditions could be described in such minute detail in that book, while the traditions of the United Church of Christ could be described briefly in an almost offhand manner, relates to the cultural place of the two traditions. Jews, living in exile and in diasporas, have clearly defined traditions, in part at least, because the expressions of their faith are not supported by the culture at large. Jews never could assume that a child growing up in this country will learn to be a good Jew simply by growing up as an American. If a child is to become a faithful Jew, it was only by being intentionally brought up in the tradition. By contrast, at least during the era of Christendom, when the secular and religious institutions seemed to be shoring up different ends of the same civic project, distinctive expressions of a specifically Christian tradition did not seem as necessary.

The movement toward retraditioning is one indication that all of that is changing – and fast. For those of us who have found retraditioning to be a source of great vitality for our churches, this is good news indeed. Søren Kierkegaard compared the moribund church of his own time to a family that had inherited a grand mansion, but chose to live in a mere tent in the front yard. To me, the movement toward retraditioning feels an awful lot like moving back into the mansion.

The Rev. Martin B. Copenhaver '80 M.Div. served churches in Phoenix, AZ, Burlington, VT, and Westport, CT, before becoming senior pastor of Wellesley (MA) Congregational Church in 1994. His five books include To Begin at the Beginning: An Introduction to the Christian Faith *(Pilgrim Press, 1994, 2002) and* Words for the Journey: Letters to Our Teenagers About Life and Faith, *with Anthony B. Robinson (Pilgrim Press, 2003). His latest is* This Odd and Wondrous Calling: The Public and Private Lives of Two Ministers, *co-written with Lillian Daniel (Eerdmans, 2009).*

Notes

1 *How to Be a Perfect Stranger*, edited by Arthur J. Magida & Stuart M. Matlins (Skylight Paths Publishing, 1999).
2 Ibid, p. 411.
3 Diana Butler Bass, *The Practicing Congregation: Imagining a New Old Church* (Alban Institute, 2004), p. 50.
4 Bass, p. 50.

A New Apostolic Moment

By Anthony B. Robinson

Journeyman Kansas City Royals relief pitcher Dan Quisenberry once announced, "I have seen the future, and it's much like the past, only longer."

Though making forecasts about the future of anything, particularly congregational life, is a fool's game, I am confident about saying this much: Dan Quisenberry's pronouncement is probably off target when it comes to mainline congregations in North America.

Indeed, it appears to be a time of deep and genuine "shaking of the foundations," to use Paul Tillich's famous phrase. A more recent observer, Phyllis Tickle, argues in her 2008 book, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why*, that we are in one of those once-every-500-years watersheds in the life of the faith (the others include the Reformation, the Great Schism, Gregory the Great and the Monastic Movement) when the church holds a huge rummage sale. Most everything is put out on the tables to be sorted through, turned over, and examined. Some forms and practices of church will be discarded and sent to the rubbish heap. Others will be reconditioned, recycled and appropriated in new ways. Serviceable practices are retained without overhaul. But the point of Tickle's homely image is that everything is up for grabs.

The End of Christendom?

Tickle does not view this as a bad thing, but on balance a good one. She notes that the effect of these every-five-centuries paroxysms has been two-fold – to spread the faith to new demographic swaths or segments and to expand the faith geographically. Tickle's hopefulness may be justified, but for congregational leaders on the ground, the realities can be unsettling indeed. Many feel they are peddling as fast as they can simply to stay even. Others notice that once-reliable methods and strategies aren't as fruitful any longer. True, one finds vital, healthy, growing congregations here and there all across the land. But it's difficult to tell whether they are harbingers of a new future or merely exceptions to a broader rule of disarray and decline.

Based on my travels and observations as a teacher, preacher, and consultant, let me suggest three directions or forms that congregations of the Protestant mainline are taking these days. Of course, limiting my conjectures to the Protestant mainline may, right off the bat, be judged a fatal flaw. A good deal of what is emerging is emerging elsewhere, whether in different lands and continents, different ecclesial traditions or denominations, or among generational cohorts or ethnic and cultural groups not much represented in the historic mainline. I will return to say a further word about all this in conclusion.

We've been living too long with an oversimplified script that says only conservatives thrive.

As for the three forms or directions my experience identifies, I will dub them "Civic Religion," "Culturally Accessible Church," and "Communities of Formation/Discipleship." For this formulation I owe something to Dan Benedict and his work in *Come to the Waters: Baptism & Our Ministry of Welcoming Seekers & Making Disciples.*

When I was growing up in the 1950s and 60s, we were encouraged to "attend the church of your choice." That friendly slogan, brought to us as "a public service message" on TV or radio, betokened an era of great continuity between church and culture. Religion in North America was, Dan Benedict

observes, "institutional, optimistic, and voluntary. People joined churches as part of their civic and community life."

I suspect this form of congregation remains significant in parts of North America. Certainly it offers at least for many the comforts of familiarity. In her work, Diana Butler Bass describes this as "Established Churchgoing." The church functions as a kind of chapel, and ministers as chaplains, to the culture.

Though "Civic Religion" may persist and even be relatively strong in some parts of North America, it looks increasingly hard to pull off. In much of North America, "Christian memory" seems reduced if not vanished altogether. People no longer feel socially obligated to church involvement, and the competition from work, leisure, and sports is intense. That doesn't mean that we will stop trying to reassert the centrality of "established churchgoing." It does mean that it will be an uphill struggle and marked by some sense of both disconnect and nostalgia.

Thou Shalt Not Bore

A second form of congregation is the "Culturally Accessible Church." This is most famously embodied by the megachurches that began to emerge in the late 1970s and flourish in the 80s. Their motto might be, "Out with the old, in with the new." Music, building design, orders of service, and clergy roles were all changed in the name of innovation and broader appeal. They deployed an aggressive use of media in order to reach people who are "uncomfortable with church." Contemporary Christian and praise music led the way, and churches throbbed with the sounds and style of mall and cineplex.

In some respects, of course, this is nothing new in American religion. Innovators and entrepreneurs have always been at work in this vineyard. One recalls the "New Measures" of Charles G. Finney, his revivalistic methods of the Second Great Awakening early in the nineteenth century. These were met with enthusiasm – and skepticism. Still, the Culturally Accessible Churches, and there are now a fair number in the old mainline, have discovered ways of reaching people that churches had not been reaching. Participants in such congregations tend to say their church is "different" or "not boring." One can rejoice when church isn't boring, but this claim and achievement come at a cost. Borrowing so much from contemporary culture, the Culturally Accessible Church has never quite shaken the criticism that it is turning religion into another consumer product or experience.

A third form of congregation now taking shape might be termed the "Community of Formation/Discipleship." These may be smaller congregations, though not always; I recently took part in the life of an Anabaptist megachurch in Toronto, suggesting that seriousness about discipleship doesn't have to mean small. These congregations tend to be postmodern in style and sensibility. One indication of this is that they are self-consciously in tension with the surrounding society. They regard the church as a sort of apostolic outpost in the mission field of a diverse, up-for-grabs North American culture.

These congregations tend to be postmodern in style and sensibility. One indication of this is that they are self-consciously in tension with the surrounding society. They regard the church as a sort of apostolic outpost in the mission field of a diverse, up-for-grabs North American culture.

Such congregations exist at a variety of points on the theological spectrum. Some are more evangelical, others more "progressive," some think of themselves as "emerging church," while others work hard to be multiracial or multicultural. They tend to take both conversion and discipleship seriously. They do not offer the comfortable familiarity of the Civic Religion model, or the instant appeal of the Culturally Accessible version. My hunch is that some congregations that have long been in the Civic Religion tradition, or some churches that tried the Culturally Accessible strategy without great success, will find greater affinity and connection with the Community of Formation/Discipleship form of church. Sometimes this move toward the discipleship model is an intentional choice, other times something that evolves as congregations place greater emphasis on formative spiritual practices.

The Vanishing Mainstream

Part of the great shift and change of our time is, however, the loss of mainline and even Protestant predominance in North America. According to a recent Pew Research Study, the Protestant "share" has slipped to 51 percent (and that includes all varieties of Protestant, not only mainline). Nor does this mean that Roman Catholics are the wave of the future, since Catholic numbers have been maintained by immigration more than any other factor.

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What does seem to be the case, as in so much of postmodern culture, is that there is no established norm, no "mainstream," but rather many and shifting streams.

So Protestant (and other) congregations will for the foreseeable future find themselves in a competitive environment. Here at the "end of Christendom," we compete for people's hearts and minds, time and loyalty. In this teeming post-institutional pluralism, I encounter young pastors who are excited about the array of possibilities for ministry and mission, the challenging need for deeper teaching, deeper community and relationships.

The scene is likely to be ideologically diverse: we've been living too long with an oversimplified script that says only conservatives thrive. Arguably, this moment is not unlike another watershed period in the long series of great historic turns of church history – the first-century period of the church's emergence. Congregations alert to the pulse of the culture might well want to claim our time as a rich apostolic moment – a time for rediscovering the words of Jesus, a time for gathering and making and sending disciples – a moment where much is at stake.

Anthony B. Robinson, an ordained United Church of Christ minister, is a speaker, teacher, preacher, consultant and coach serving congregations and their leaders. He is also the author of nine books; the latest is Changing the Conversation: A Third Way for Congregations *(Eerdmans, 2008).*

THE BEAUTY OF THE SOUND OF THE BELLS
by Thomas H. Troeger

The beauty of the sound of the bells
rings from a tower
that rises from a building
that houses a school
that teaches a tradition
that grows from a history
that flows with the blood
of slaves who were chained
and women who were silenced
as the church gave witness
to Christ who inspired
the people who built
the tower that rings
with the beauty of the sound of the bells.

Finding Our Voices Again

by Lillian Daniel

"And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing." –2 Cor 4:3

It has long struck me as strange that the same mainline church members who pass resolutions on gay marriage and propose solutions to conflict in the Middle East and take on health care reform suddenly shrink in silence on the subject of sharing their faith – and here's the irony – lest they offend someone.

– What do you believe about God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?
– I don't know ... what do you believe?
– Tell me about your faith. How have you experienced the living God in your life?
– Well, I wouldn't want to offend you.
– No, I really want to know.
– Well, I can tell you what I don't believe. I'm not like those Christians who try to force their religion down your throat, so ...
– So what do you believe?
– Well, I believe everyone should be free to believe what they want to believe ...
– And for you that is ...
– Well, I just said it.
– Said what?!

For too long, the mainline's noble and honorable impulses toward tolerance and inclusivity have turned our church members into spiritual illiterates who, being out of practice, have forgotten how to speak the simple words of testimony.

That was not a practice that came naturally to us, particularly as New Englanders, but it turned out to be a risk work taking, as talking about Jesus always is.

We who love to talk – we who have found our feminist voices, our justice voices, our intellectual voices, our public voices for Christian traditions that value teaching, prophetic speech, and intellect – we have a fear of public speaking on the one topic we should be most excited about, which is our experience of the living God.

In 2007 my denomination celebrated its fiftieth anniversary. At our General Synod two years before that, they tried to pass a resolution that would make voting on resolutions at the next General Synod a no-no. It was a resolution to prohibit resolutions. Its purpose was to allow our anniversary celebration to focus on worship, our church, our ecclesiology, our salvation history, our faith, and our future. But there would be no voting on resolutions.

Needless to say, it was voted down. Which is why we in the United Church of Christ have the nickname, "resolutionaries."

But we are not alone. We all have our resolutionary tendencies, do we not? – a willingness to speak out boldly on how our faith ought to be lived out, but reticence about our faith itself. Put simply, we are more willing to tell our neighbor how to vote than we are to invite our neighbor to church.

"No Godless Testimonies!"

I say this as one who loves my church's prophetic witness so much that I actually want our churches to grow.

A few years ago, I wrote a book called *Tell It Like It Is: Reclaiming the Practice of Testimony.* It told the story about how our congregation, the Church of the Redeemer, UCC, just north of YDS on Whitney Avenue in New Haven, came to adopt the practice of testimony, of telling our faith stories to one another, in worship. That was not a practice that came

naturally to us, particularly as New Englanders, but it turned out to be a risk worth taking, as talking about Jesus always is. We defined testimony as standing up in church and talking about personal experience of God, but other than that there were no parameters. As long as it was ultimately about God, it could cover any other topic as well. We instructed people who were eager to speak about matters they cared about that they could do all that, but that their testimony could not be Godless. "No Godless testimonies!" became our shorthand mantra.

So some people talked about meeting Jesus through community organizing, and others spoke about grandparents who had nurtured them in the faith. One woman even talked about Barbie dolls. I forget how Malibu Barbie and her camper connected to Jesus, but I know they did because we insisted on it. In order to help people who were comfortable speaking about everything except God, we asked them, "What could you say here in church that we would not hear on NPR?" That made sense in an intimate liberal college town where NPR was more normative than the gospels.

I finished writing that book at the church I currently serve in Glen Ellyn, IL,, in a very different part of the country. I am minister of a large suburban church in a Republican county, where many people are likely to get their news from Fox News, and where 1,200 members and two services do not make for much intimacy. I wondered how testimony would work in such a setting, but I was determined to try it, and the congregation was open to it, much more so than my New England friends had been.

Our church is full of sales people and business people who are very comfortable speaking in public. Surrounded by heartland Christianity, they realize faith-sharing is virtually the norm in Glen Ellyn and the next-door college town of Wheaton, considered by many to be the heart of evangelical thought. Our folks were ready to give it a try. In fact, they were ready to do it off-the-cuff and without notes.

Tears and Fears

One man stood up one Sunday and practically swaggered up to the lectern and just started talking. "I'm really pleased Lillian suggested I do this. I'm very comfortable speaking in public and I love to communicate, and what better subject than the church I love ..." But as he went on to speak about the ways in which being a lay leader had not only brought him closer to God but had brought him closer to his aging father, he began to cry. His voice stopped working for a moment and you could tell he was surprised at his own physical reaction. He turned around to speak directly to me and said, "Wow, this is really different from other kinds of speaking, isn't it?" The confident and successful man was humbled at the power of the practice, and when he continued, the tears accompanied him as he told a beautiful story that trumped any sermon I could give.

Since the book came out, I have spent the last few years offering occasional testimony workshops for church folk who want to start talking about their faith. I hear from Episcopalians, Methodists, Catholics, Presbyterians, and Quakers. Many of them are already doing some form of testimony, they just wouldn't ever call it that, since it sounds like something "those other Christians do." "Testimony" is a word that conservative churches use, and I myself began the practice using the milquetoast phrase "Lenten reflections," because at the beginning I was too much of a chicken to take back the church's word. But I now love the word "testimony," as well as the bridge it builds between churches that might otherwise be separated by the culture wars.

For too long we in the mainline have spoken out on matters of justice, but turned faith speech into something secondary that we reach for in order to back up our positions.

In one workshop I was surprised to find an Assemblies of God pastor, and I asked him why he was there, adding, "I thought you guys could teach us about this stuff."

"We're losing the tradition," he said. "Our people don't feel comfortable sharing their faith either. We're all in this together."

Since then, I have heard Pentecostal ministers say the same thing. Slick megachurches use edited videotaped "testimony" so polished it may not even deserve to be called testimony anymore. It's not just the mainliners who struggle with a fear of public speaking, but, for us, the cure may need to be tailored to our own unique culture. (Perhaps we should offer our testifiers a tote bag, just like NPR.)

In the workshops I lead, I notice many diverse examples of mainline church vitality, but the one common thread I see most clearly is: in vital congregations, the church members and their pastors have learned to tell the story of how they have experienced God's grace. Even if their belief is in a universal salvation for all people of all religions, they have learned to testify to their faith in their

Christian community and to share that story with enthusiasm. They have broken through the mainline fear of offending people and decided to talk about their church life and God.

Notice that I include the pastors in this. Occasionally I teach preaching, and I am struck by how many of our future pastors are afraid to speak of their own personal relationship with God, even when they are preaching.

I developed an advanced preaching seminar and taught it for the first time this spring at the University of Chicago Divinity School. It was called "The Use of Testimony and Personal Narrative in Preaching." The divinity students signed up with trepidation, I believe, since they had wise and appropriate reservations about how much of the pastor's story should be a part of the sermon. But they also acknowledged that, in their university environment, people are more at ease discussing God intellectually than personally. I recognized this phenomenon from my own days as a student at YDS. When you train for the ministry in the midst of a secular university, your own fear of public speaking about faith is easily hidden as long as you are good at expressing yourself in intellectual matters. But that won't fly in the local church. If testimony is going to catch on as a practice again, the sermon can be the place where people learn that it's safe to go in these waters. And sometimes, it is the lay people's testimony that gives the pastor the courage to do the same. Pastor and laity can reinforce one another.

In one workshop I was surprised to find an Assemblies of God pastor, and I asked him why he was there, adding, "I thought you guys could teach us about this stuff."

To use Paul's image, it's time for the veil to be pulled off the gospel, because, and here's the rebuke we receive from Scripture, the gospel is veiled to those who are perishing.

Defying the Mega-Voices

And who are those unchurched people? In the mainline, we don't dismiss them as infidels. They are people who are distant from God, hurting and in pain, people who, God forbid, were injured somewhere by a church. And not realizing that there are other options, they languish, perish even, lonely for God and separated from the Christian family.

So if the gospel seems to be veiled, covered up, hidden to people, whose fault is it? It's ours. For too long, we have let other wings of the Christian family dominate the discussion. We have allowed mega-churches to have an uncontested mega-voice, and allowed the judgmentalism of one form of Christianity to imprint upon the inexperienced a distorted picture of our gospel.

Paul's letter names this habit, as if he were writing today: "In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel." (2 Cor 4:4) And God help us, sometimes the church is implicated, either by speaking wrongly or by keeping silence when we could have spoken rightly.

We need to sit up and take responsibility. Because if we can proclaim that God is still speaking, as we do in my own denomination, we better remember that we need to be speaking as well.

It's time for the great unveiling of a gospel that is justice-seeking and welcoming of all people. And it's time to acknowledge that those characteristics are not the gospel itself, but merely fruits of it, natural extensions of it. For too long we in the mainline have spoken out on matters of justice, but turned faith speech into something secondary that we reach for in order to back up our positions. We began with an impulse to change the world, and ended up letting the tail wag the dog.

For those of us within the Christian tradition who are so gifted in speaking the language of justice, or of intellect, we must learn again to speak the language of faith and recapture the vocabulary of people who have experienced the divine. Because we have and we do. We just need to remember how to talk about it. And like many of our best movements, this one may be lead by lay people, if the pastors can make room in Sunday morning worship for recovering an ancient practice we heedlessly let lapse: the practice of testimony.

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Faith Futures: An interview with Mark Chaves

Worship services are getting more informal. Churches are hurrying to take the gospel online. White congregations are quietly becoming more ethnically diverse. Church leaders, meanwhile, are still overwhelmingly male, and most congregations lean conservative.

These are some of the details emerging from a fresh portrait of American church life as seen in the National Congregations Study (NCS), a far-ranging survey directed by sociologist Mark Chaves, a prominent interpreter of contemporary religious life.

The NCS differs from other surveys on American religion by focusing not on individual beliefs but on what people do together in congregations. The NCS has been tracking church trends for a decade now, collecting data in two waves, first in 1998, then again in 2006-07. Some 2,740 congregations have participated in the survey, reporting details about their worship style, social outreach, politics, and other aspects of practice and identity.

"These data will keep sociologists and professional religious observers busy for years, and they will inform all manner of religious leaders, from small-town clergy and megachurch pastors to seminary presidents and denomination heads," Chaves writes.

See the full NCS report at www.soc.duke.edu/natcong.

Chaves, a professor of sociology at Duke University, has an M.Div. degree from Harvard Divinity School and a Ph.D. in sociology from Harvard University. His most recent book is Congregations in America *(Harvard University Press, 2004).*

This transcript, prepared by Reflections *editor Ray Waddle, is adapted from interviews with Chaves in July 2009 and from information supplied by the NCS report.*

REFLECTIONS: The National Congregations Study says only 17 percent of Protestant congregations describe themselves as mainline, while 43 percent call themselves evangelical. Is it time to discard the "mainline" label? Is the term no longer helpful description for that group of Protestant churches (United Methodist, Episcopal, Presbyterian-USA, United Church of Christ, American Baptist, Disciples of Christ, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and others) that once held cultural sway?

CHAVES: If we use numbers rather than perceived social influence to define mainline, then American mainline religion is Catholic, Baptist, and non-denominational. Catholicism is mainline in some parts of the country, while evangelical denominations are mainline in other regions – for example, the Southern Baptist Convention in the South and the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod in the Upper Midwest.

Also, the presumed equivalence between "mainline" and "liberal" might need to be re-evaluated: only 9 percent of congregations describe themselves as theologically liberal.

On the other hand, there are important theological ideas and cultural priorities shared by traditionally defined mainline denominations. These churches are most committed to ecumenicalism, have pushed hardest for inclusivity in their leadership (first for African Americans and women, and now, with serious ongoing debates, for gays and lesbians), and identify with the National Council of Churches. Moreover, when they mobilize politically, these churches still tend to position themselves on the liberal side of policy debates.

Whatever terms are used, it is worth noting that, numerically, the traditional Protestant mainline is

not the default religion in America. It is not even the default Protestant religion in America, and has not been for about two decades.

REFLECTIONS: What are the prospects for mainline churches? Are they shaped now by a "narrative of decline"?

CHAVES: It's important to distinguish between denominational infrastructure and local congregational life. Much mainline discouragement is tied to the deterioration of regional or national infrastructures.

The overall percentage of congregations led by women likely will remain well below 30 percent for the foreseeable future.

The resources for maintaining those extensive offices, oversight boards, consultancies, and support systems are in decline. In many cases, these infrastructures got built up in the heyday of the 1950s and 60s, the baby boomer period, and now demographic declines in fertility rates are working against some of those denominations.

I'm not sure we'd have quite the same narrative of decline if it weren't for all the built-up infrastructure. It has been valuable in lots of ways, of course. But a question to ask now is: Will we miss it? Will we have to reinvent it?

Meanwhile, the decline narrative is defied by thousands of mainline congregations that are hugely healthy and vibrant. They aren't going away. The United Methodist Church alone has 30,000 churches. Some mainline congregations are in decline, but that's true of Southern Baptist congregations too.

REFLECTIONS: Your research says female clergy continue to lead only a few congregations (37 percent lead liberal churches, but only 8 percent of congregations overall have female clergy leadership), despite the strong numbers of women in seminaries. Why the lack of progress for women?

CHAVES: First, though the percentage of women enrolling in Master of Divinity programs grew dramatically in recent decades, that percentage peaked in 2002 at 31.5 percent and fell slightly to 30.6 per cent by 2006, according to the Association of Theological Schools. Second, women with an M.Div. are less likely to pursue pastoral ministry than men, and when they do work as pastors they are less likely to report satisfaction with their jobs than their male colleagues. Third, and perhaps most important, several major religious groups still do not permit women to lead congregations. Even within denominations that ordained women for decades, many congregations are still reluctant to hire women as their main clergy person.

REFLECTIONS: Do you think this picture will change?

CHAVES: The percentage of congregations led by women should increase in the coming years as clergy from younger, more female cohorts replace clergy from older, almost completely male ones. But the presence of women in congregational leadership will be widely variable across denominations and religious groups. The overall percentage of congregations led by women likely will remain well below 30 percent for the foreseeable future.

REFLECTIONS: Despite lots of talk about diversity and immigration, there are still very few truly multicultural churches. Does the NCS point to other trends?

CHAVES: Yes, what's happening is there are fewer all-white congregations in the U.S. today. I think that's a trend that's been under the radar: more and more predominantly white congregations have at least some Latino, Asian, or African American presence. For instance, the percent of attendees in predominantly white congregations with at least some Hispanic participants increased from 57 to 64 percent.

This raises an interesting question: will a congregation be affected by the presence of even just a few African Americans, Hispanics, or recent immigrants? John Green, a University of Akron professor and a leading expert on religion and politics, has said that congregations are easier to politicize when they are more homogeneous. Is a clergyperson with even one black family in the pews likely to talk in quite the same way about race and social welfare issues as he would if that family was not there? Is a congregation with even one Latino family likely to approach immigration reform in quite the same way? How this increasing pluralism might change congregations deserves additional research and reflection.

REFLECTIONS: Your data say the average congregation has just 75 regular participants. But the average *person* worships with about 400 other people. Are these numbers compatible?

CHAVES: The statistics represent two different perspectives on the same congregational data. Even though the average congregation has only 75 regular participants and an annual budget of $90,000, the average person is in a congregation with 400 people and a budget of $280,000. The size of the average congregation – 75 – has not changed since 1998 despite the proliferation of those very large Protestant churches we call megachurches. Nevertheless, one fact is fundamental: Most congregations in the United States are small, but most people are in large congregations.

REFLECTIONS: Was it always the case that most people are concentrated in just a few large churches?

CHAVES: Statistically that's generally what happens, because churches are never all the same size. But what we have seen since the 1970s is an intensification of that trend: more and more people are concentrated in the very largest congregations. Megachurches are only the tip of the iceberg. The movement of people from smaller to larger churches is much broader and deeper than the proliferation of stereotypical megachurches. These days, the largest 10 percent of congregations contain about half of all churchgoers.

We need to think about what this means, because it has enormous consequences in American church life. It means that most seminarians come from large churches (since that's where most people are), but most clergy jobs are in small churches. It means that pastors of the largest churches wield political power inside denominations that may be proportional to the size of their congregations but disproportional from a one-congregation, one-vote point of view. It means that denominational officials can serve the most people by concentrating their attention on just the largest churches. But that strategy can leave most congregations out of the picture. When confronted with a policy decision, should you ask what the impact might be on most churches, or what the impact might be on most churchgoers? That is a tough question.

REFLECTIONS: Is there a limit or pattern to how big these churches get?

CHAVES: The big churches are getting bigger, though they are not necessarily the same churches year after year. What the research shows is: if you become one of the Top 20 largest churches in your denomination, the half-life is about 30 years. That is, only half of those churches will be in that Top 20 list in 30 years. The reason is they get overtaken by the next wave of big churches. The next wave usually gets there very fast, making their gains with new kinds of organization, new energy. That seems to be a principle of cultural change.

That said, there has to be a limit to this increasing concentration, since we're not all going to wind up in one big church. I studied this trend up to about 2000, and at that point it looked like concentration was still increasing. There was no sign of a plateau. Perhaps we have reached a plateau since then. We need to update that research in order to know.

REFLECTIONS: What about the future of small congregations? Is it a good time to be a small church, or an unusually tough time?

CHAVES: The challenges facing smaller churches are perennial. But some recent trends have exacerbated that. Because of urbanization and suburbanization – world trends – many rural areas where smaller churches reside are depopulating. Also, the modern pattern of the two-career family makes it harder to move to a small community where there might be fewer employment opportunities for the non-clergy spouse. And the trend of people entering ministry at an older age means they likely will have higher

Sacred Spontaneity

A Surge in Informality in Churches

- **Fewer congregations incorporate choir singing into worship, falling from 54 percent in 1998 to 44 percent in 2006-07.**
- **The number of congregations that use a printed bulletin dropped from 72 percent to 68 percent.**
- **Far more use visual projection equipment in worship, increasing from 12 percent to 27 percent.**
- **The number of congregations in which someone other than the leader speaks at worship about a personal religious experience increased from 78 percent to 85 percent.**
- **More congregations report people spontaneously saying "amen," jumping from 61 percent to 71 percent.**
- **More report people jumping, shouting, or dancing spontaneously, up from 19 percent to 26 percent.**
- **The number of congregations in which people raise their hands in praise grew from 45 percent to 57 percent.**
- **The number of congregations that use drums increased from 20 percent to 33 percent.**

Source: National Congregations Study

salary demands, something that smaller churches have trouble meeting. Finally, the economics of running a church have changed, making it harder for a smaller church to maintain quality. You have to be a bigger church than you used, with a bigger budget, in order to offer a youth ministry or even to support a full-time senior minister.

REFLECTIONS: You note the trend toward informality as a strong mark of change in congregations. One explanation is a trend away from an emphasis on belief and doctrine and towards an emphasis on experience and emotion. You also suggest informality reflects changes in society itself. Is informality an inevitable effect of the spirit of democracy and equality?

CHAVES: It might have to do with rising education levels – more and more people getting a college education. A consequence of that is the breakdown of big status differences between people. When more people have access to education, it's easier to imag-

Meanwhile, the decline narrative is defied by thousands of mainline congregations that are hugely healthy and vibrant. They aren't going away. The United Methodist Church alone has 30,000 churches.

ine a sense of equality. An exception to this is the doctor's office. We still call the physician "Dr." It's a way of recognizing a big gap in knowledge between patient and expert in this case. Nevertheless, I don't think we still recognize that sort of knowledge gap when it comes to clergy and religious leaders, and perhaps that helps push worship in an informal direction. But I'm speculating here.

REFLECTIONS: Can the informality trend go on indefinitely? In the NCS report, you raised the possibility of a backlash of formality. I know of a Presbyterian congregation that built a cathedral-like sanctuary to protest the informality trend of Sunday morning t-shirt and flipflops, and reintroduce a sense of God's majesty, reverence, and decorum.

CHAVES: There might be a limit to informality. One researcher I know uses a fashion example to illustrate cyclical cultural change. Women's skirts get shorter and shorter, but there's a limit. So fashion turns, and they go the other way. There have been times in American history when the trend went toward formality – times of upward social mobility, when it was the thing to do to control your emotions, look professional, act formal.

But there are ways to get back to formality without reproducing the signals of formality of the past. Cultural change usually happens gradually. Innovators take pieces of existing practices and put them together in new ways – but not too new, or you look weird.

On the other hand, some have questioned whether informality is the best way to frame the change we see underway in congregations. Maybe it's a matter of participation versus audience – greater worship participation versus feeling like a spectator.

REFLECTIONS: You are tracking a surging, enthusiastic use of technology in congregations – an increase in web sites, Facebook, video projection during services. What ramifications do you see for congregational life?

CHAVES: The embrace of technology raises questions that congregations need to think about. How do congregations manage and pay for new technologies? How do congregations decide what to empha-

Sex and the City of God

Social Attitudes at Church

- **51 percent of congregations do not allow women to be full-fledged senior clergy.**
- **33 percent do not allow women to preach at a main worship service.**
- **13 percent do not allow women to teach a class containing adult men.**
- **54 percent of congregations allow cohabiting heterosexual couples to be full-fledged members.**
- **28 percent allow cohabiting heterosexual couples to hold volunteer leadership positions.**
- **38 percent of congregations allow gay and lesbian couples in committed relationships to be full-fledged members.**
- **19 percent allow gay and lesbian couples in committed relationships to hold volunteer leadership positions.**
- **60 percent of congregations allow pro-choice individuals to be full-fledged members.**
- **86 percent of congregations allow pro-life individuals to be full-fledged members.**
- **72 percent of congregations allow moderate drinkers to be full-fledged members.**

Source: National Congregations Study

size about themselves on their web sites? Since web sites make congregations more visible to each other, will clergy and other congregational leaders monitor and influence each other more than before? Will there be even faster and more widespread mimicking of successful congregations? Will congregations conduct Bible studies online? Provide pastoral care? Maintain friendships? Already some people claim to be members of virtual congregations. They claim to use new technology the way early Protestants used the printing press – the message remains the same, only the medium has changed. But new technologies always produce unintended social effects. Will congregations' use of email create or exacerbate digital divides, since some members still do not have access to email? How will these members stay in the loop when congregations turn to electronic forms of communication? Will technology make congregations more efficient and innovative, or will it impose new costs without providing clear benefits?

Another issue is one I heard raised by a colleague. If churches start taping the entire service and posting it on the web site, what about that moment in the service when people get up and speak their personal concerns or testimonies? Should their personal details go public for all the world to see and hear? What are the ethics of that? Will it have a chilling effect on what church members say at the service if they know they are being taped? Also, will it affect the content of the sermon? Or will it make the sermon better, if a minister knows so many more people might hear it?

REFLECTIONS: As NCS director, you have now overseen two waves of national congregational data since 1998. Will there be a third wave?

CHAVES: I hope so. It is a matter of getting funding to do it. The first two waves produced very rich data; we are continuing to write about it. Now that we've done it twice, we are identifying some trends. If we could do it a third time – or more than three times, and more frequently than every eight years or so – then we could see more precisely how these trends are moving and how fast or slowly change is really happening.

Theme and Variation

Subjects of Rising Importance at Church

- **More congregations consider the Bible to be literal and inerrant, increasing to 83 percent in 2006-07, from 76 percent in 1998.**
- **Congregations conducting voter registration increased to 18 percent in 2006-07, up from 8 percent in 1998.**
- **The number of churches that described themselves as right in the middle politically increased to 35 percent from 31 percent.**
- **The number of churches that organized a group to discuss or learn about another religion rose to 25 percent.**
- **Congregations hosting classes on English as a second language rose to nearly 6 percent.**
- **The number of congregations hosting meetings about lobbying nearly doubled to 8 percent.**
- **More congregations met to hear assessments of community needs – 48 percent in 2006-07, compared to 37 percent in 1998.**
- **The percentage of churches that said they would apply for government money to support human services programs increased to 47 percent.**
- **The number of congregations that hosted a book discussion group rose to 45 percent, from 29 percent.**
- **The median length of a congregation's most recent sermon increased to 30 minutes from 25.**

Source: National Congregations Study

The Hospitality Imperative

By Peter W. Marty

There is a crisis of confusion in American churches these years, including many outwardly healthy congregations.

It is not a doctrinal dispute, though there are plenty of those to go around. Nor is it a fresh statistical report to contradict the spiraling trend of membership decline in some denominations. Rather, it is the mistake that thousands of congregations innocently commit every weekend – confusing *friendliness* with *hospitality* in their life together.

Friendly congregations are wonderful entities, buoyant signs of life in a world full of drab religious expression. But friendly behavior among churchgoers is no guarantee that a faith community will bear any remarkable signs of Biblical hospitality.

Friendliness has become the happy default for congregational behavior in churches across the land. Nice words of welcome on an outdoor sign, tasty cookies and punch on an indoor table, and plastic-sleeved nametags to help members connect faces and names are all ecclesiastical niceties. But in and of themselves, these gestures do not make for hospitality. If anything, they offer a pleasant friendliness that easily distracts from what a hospitable community ought to look like.

The sign read: *Welcome Neighbor!* Once inside, I quickly realized what the real translation of that sign was: "Come and be like we are."

While vacationing last summer, I did what many clergy long to do when away on break – I worshipped at a congregation other than the one I lead. My wife and I stepped into a nice-looking church that Sunday, one with a large sign in the front yard with those moveable black letters that fit neatly into horizontal slots. Beneath the worship times it read: *Welcome Neighbor!* Once inside, I quickly realized what the real translation of that sign was: "Come and be like we are."

Every member had a pre-printed nametag. The people seemed polite and of good cheer. But since when is Christianity mostly about politeness? More to the point, not a soul came up to express any interest in who we were, or what our lives comprised. We stood out like uncomfortably sore thumbs in a sea of people who looked cozily at home in their Sunday environs. The ushers functioned like bulletin-dispensing machines that just coincidentally happened to be warm-blooded. No one stepped toward us. In the greeting line, the pastor indicated that she was happy we came to visit.

Bible-Based Hospitality

Several realities make Biblically inspired hospitality in a congregation different from well-intentioned friendliness. First, there is a language detail we ought to get straight. It has to do with the term *visitor*. Who in their right mind ever wants to bear the ontological weight of being a "visitor"? At best, this label is the dubious distinction placed upon any of us who land in certain socially awkward situations. Stand as a stranger in a crowd of people who feel at home in *their* church and you are apt to feel a visceral distress, a perspiring sensation. Your normally comfortable self will begin to feel acutely ill at ease. Everybody else will appear to be an insider to a fellowship that does not include you. Why are you not feeling at home? Well, you are "a visitor," and lest you doubt as much, someone may remind you by handing over an embossed coffee mug with a welcome brochure rolled inside.

By contrast, congregations in pursuit of a vibrant life are busy adopting the language of "guest" and "host." These two nouns are the linguistic cornerstones of hospitality. They happen to be in keeping with the ministry of Jesus, who himself was a perennial guest in the homes of others. Though most churches may not have St. Benedict's little rule posted beside their front door – *Let all who enter here be received as Christ* – every guest who steps inside will be able to detect if others, through generous hosting, actually noticed something of Christ in their presence.

We Are All Guests

The church's imagination regarding hospitality expands whenever the concept of "guest" embraces every soul who walks through the door. Long-time members are guests in character and identity as much as first-time strangers. There is no permissible distinction when a Biblical sense of hospitality is at stake. Presumptuous behavior about how long-term membership might privilege one over someone of briefer ties has no place in the church. We are all guests in the house of the Lord. Every week, we stand as guests before the mystery of God and within the ever-evolving dynamics of our particular faith community.

There is a second feature of hospitality that differentiates it from friendliness. When, to the eyes of an observer, the gap between guest and host becomes indistinguishable, true hospitality has arrived. A commitment to eliminating irrelevant barriers between two people takes effort. Mostly, it is an effort of each party delighting in the significance

Congregation members who love their church often think of it as family. But what social system is tougher to break into from the outside than a family?

and profound humanity of the other. In the world of true hospitality, the needs and hopes of a guest receive an embrace that supersedes the preferences and preoccupations of the host.

In the Pentecost story of Acts 2, when the wind of God blows the doors off the house of those gathered, the Spirit could have required everyone to conform to the language, culture, and tradition of the disciples. The Jews who gathered in Jerusalem from near and far could have been forced to become just like the apostles: wearing their garb, reading poetry with an Aramaic accent, and adopting various Galilean customs of the day. But this isn't how it went. The Spirit determined that the Gospel was not the exclusive domain of the apostles. Each of the hearers would be able to hear the Lord in his or her own native tongue and tribal way. The Gospel would not become the privileged property of a few, with everyone else looking in from the outside as strangers.

Unfortunately, friendliness in congregational practice often appears to incoming guests as *clubbiness*. Congregation members who love their church often think of it as family. But what social system is tougher to break into from the outside than a family? When established members become at home with certain congregational customs and traditions, they often function as if they "possess the goods." They are more than happy to make these goods available to the stranger – "Let us introduce you to who we are." But it connotes unilateral behavior. The member ends up acting as the teacher – albeit a friendly one who is excited to share about his or her church – while the guest serves as the student, with little to offer in return except the look of unfamiliarity.

What to do about this? Congregations might consider appointing a team of specially selected people who are naturally gifted to serve as Sunday hosts. Unlike ushers and greeters who seem to always want to know their position – "Where should I stand?" – hosts make a point of fluidly moving toward any person in sight (members and newcomers alike) and initiating delightful conversation involving friendship, Sunday joy, and basic human interest.

The psychiatrist Alfred Margulies once proposed that "wonder" is what it really takes to understand another human being. Wonder, he writes, "promotes a searching attitude of simultaneously knowing and not knowing."[1] It blends astonishment with curiosity, thus fostering a deep appreciation of the other. This is hospitality. The other person becomes more important than we are, no matter how unfamiliar he or she may be to us. A sense of wonder keeps us from behaving as if we have other people figured out.

A Mamre Welcome

Attention to the needs, interests, and unique being of "the other" highlights a third feature of Biblical hospitality: guests never come empty-handed. They always come bearing certain gifts. Rich with experiences, questions, and deep meanings of their own, guests have something extraordinary to offer. Though other church members may be eager to compartmentalize them as visitors, and though guests may look as if they have little to offer aside from their overwhelmed faces, a gracious host will gently awaken the gifts of a guest, and in due course be changed personally by them.

In one of the great scriptural accounts of hospitality, Abraham and Sarah welcome, refresh, and feed three unknown guests under the Oaks of Mamre (Genesis 18). Their hosting efforts are noteworthy. Disregarding the heat of the day, Abraham and Sarah move *toward* their guests. This is the direction of all gracious hosting. They do not wait for the three to come to them; they initiate the encounter, eventually feeding these strangers with bread, a precious calf, and milk and curds. But the surprise of the story is found in the fact that these strangers come to give their host a gift. They do not come merely to receive. They come bearing the promise of a child – a gift that later will be wrapped in ribbons and bows with the name Isaac written all over it.

This is hospitality. The other person becomes more important than we are, no matter how unfamiliar he or she may be to us.

Congregational hospitality that is alive and well will always be more eager to receive from a guest than to dispense or deliver something to that same guest.

Hyper-Friendly Ambush

A final element of vibrant hospitality in a congregation will be evident whenever individuals create what Henri Nouwen calls "free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend."[2] This entails making room for another person to be who they truly are. A gracious host will offer sacred space for another human being to flourish.

Congregations that pride themselves on friendliness can be on the lookout for inadvertent behaviors that squeeze guests with oppressive gestures and do not allow sufficient space for "the other" to breathe. Hyper-friendly churches are often most guilty of ambushing the unsuspecting newcomer or the low-key member in ways neither ever asked to be treated. Who wants to be ambushed?

In the Torah, God reminds the Israelites not to squeeze or crush a stranger: "You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the feelings of a stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt" (Exod 23:9). There is a stifling quality to inhospitable activity. To be squeezed or stifled by another is to feel shut down or shut out.

Jesus offers an instructive word to his disciples when encouraging their ministry, even through inhospitable territory. Knowing that they would face others unwilling to receive them, Jesus informs them, "If any place will not welcome you, and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them" (Mark 6:11). Though a first read of this sandal-shaking act sounds like nothing but an inhospitable tantrum, Jesus is also reminding his followers not to become the wrong people.

It is as if he were saying: "When you find no hospitality extended your way, but only the littleness, the prejudice, the meanness, or the stuffiness of another person's heart or mind, remember that the soil on which they walk is tainted by their whole outlook on life and their incapacity to receive others. If you carry that dust of their ground with you on the bottom of your shoes, the footprints you leave in the world will also be tainted. Your imprint on the world will be 'soiled.' So, shake off that dust, lest you lose a sense of who you are supposed to be in the eyes of God."

We might think of hospitality first and last as a disposition – the predominant spirit of all who are bent on being the creatures God desires them to be *for others*. It could be that our footprints, constantly turned in the direction of the guest, will be that trace of God that gives our deepest identity away.

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Notes

1 Quoted in *Faith's Wisdom for Daily Living,* Herb Anderson and Bonnie Miller-McLemore (Augsburg Fortress, 2008), p. 71.

2 Henri J.M. Nouwen, *Reaching Out* (Doubleday, 1975), p. 51.

Reclaiming Godly Wonder

By Thomas H. Troeger

(Adapted from *Wonder Reborn: The Place of Beauty in Preaching and Worship*, which will be published in 2010 by Oxford University Press. Used by permission of the publisher.)

Amidst the talk of the organizational health of mainline churches, I want to introduce a concern that may initially seem unrelated but that I believe is at the nerve of the long-term future of all churches: how godly wonder can be reborn through renewed attention to the place of beauty in preaching and worship. If the spiritual life of a church is moribund, sooner or later its demise as an institution will follow.

As a small boy I found the world to be overflowing with wonder. But as I became an adult the wonder of childhood dissipated, and I started seeing all things with a more calculating eye. Yet the residue of wonder never completely vanished. Beauty kept retrieving wonder again and again in my life. I felt wonder return in a more sophisticated mode when I took a course in physics because there is something beautiful about using equations to plot the path and force of material phenomena. I felt wonder when I studied philosophers who tried to disentangle the conundrums of existence because there is something beautiful about the mind wrestling with the profoundest matters of life. I felt wonder when I had a deep conversation with my wife because there is something beautiful about catching a glimpse of how the world appears to another human being.

The Life of Astonishment

All of these were, however, scattered experiences of wonder, fragmentary intimations that fit no comprehensive constellation of meaning. What finally drew them together was when I worshipped, and the prayers, the reading of Scripture, the sermon, the music, and the visual environment were so interwoven that the very Spirit of the Creator breathed through the service, expanding my imagination.

What I experienced was not the untutored wonder of childhood, but the informed wonder of mature faith. I call it "godly wonder," a way of perceiving, knowing, and being in which all the polarities of life complement and enrich one another. In a state of godly wonder, religion and science, feeling and thought, imagination and reason, faith and knowledge dance together, and we gratefully discover that what one lacks the other offers. Godly wonder means for me a state of prayerful astonishment awakened by the Spirit of God through the experience of beauty.

Preachers can help to mend our bitterly fragmented world by reclaiming the place of beauty in preaching and worship in order to renew our sense of godly wonder. This will not be easy to do: there is a long-standing wariness in the church about being attentive to beauty. Yet I think of all the times – whether in church or in other settings – where I have seen people surprised anew by the wonder of God through an experience of beauty.

I recall, for example, a particular concert at which the standing ovation went on and on and on. The audience members were stomping their feet, clapping as loudly as they could, shouting "Bravo! Bravo!" We had just listened to an electrifying performance of Anton Bruckner's Symphony No. 5. As the ovation

continued, my wife turned to me and asked, "Can we sing the doxology now?" She was serious. Even though it was a secular concert in a secular setting, her response made perfect sense to me. For a moment life was transfigured by beauty.

At the mention of the word, I can already hear the skeptical voices: What is beauty? "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder." "It's all a matter of taste,

In a world filled with terrors, the heart longs for a vision of divine beauty, and when the church fails to attend to beauty, the life of faith often becomes grim and onerous.

and everyone's taste varies." Before we let these tired clichés suppress the urge to sing the doxology – the impulse to give ourselves completely to the praise of God because of what beauty awakens in us – let us acknowledge that in fact beauty is often the medium of grace that breaks through to the most disbelieving and hardened heart.

Rather than attempt a precise definition of the word, I will identify some of the overtones that sound in my heart and mind when I encounter beauty. They are like the overtones on a musical instrument: when someone plays a fundamental note, a sequence of pitches simultaneously sounds, giving the instrument its unique timbre and voice. We recognize a flute as a flute or a clarinet as a clarinet because of its pattern of overtones. Most of us do not have perfect pitch, and so we cannot name the fundamental note that is played, but we know what instrument is playing from the character of its sound. Likewise, we do not have "perfect pitch" for beauty – we cannot give a fundamental definition that everyone agrees with. But we recognize the overtones, the characteristics that lead us to describe something as "beautiful."

Here then are some of the major "overtones" that sound when we encounter beauty:

- Beauty is more than mere prettiness.
- Beauty has a gift-like, gracious quality.
- Beauty can be a vessel of God's creativity.
- Beauty is culturally durable.
- Beauty has room for what is disturbing and difficult.
- Beauty helps us to see honestly what is there.
- Beauty is best understood by a dialogue between our concepts and our experience.

Beauty is not the same as "mere prettiness" because, "to be beautiful as opposed to merely pretty, it needs to be associated with other values like truth or integrity."[1] Since beauty is more than prettiness, there is an enduring quality to beauty that is not always instantly detectable. It takes reflection and discernment. This is indeed a task of the church: "the church must always be in the midst of sorting out the immediately attractive from the culturally durable."[2]

When we encounter beauty it has the quality of being a gift, something unearned that delights and enhances life at the deepest level of our being. Such beauty has ample room to embrace not only what is attractive, but also things that are disturbing and difficult for us to confront. Beauty has this capacity because it is "inseparable from truth and goodness. Indeed, beauty is the persuasive power of God's truth and goodness. So beauty is in the end about honesty, about seeing what is actually there and being true to one's own response to it."[3] The beauty of what God has done through Christ includes not only the joy of incarnation and resurrection but also the cruelty of betrayal and torture.

Aesthetic Ambivalence

Preaching on works of art that embody an understanding of Christian beauty – preaching about a poem or musical work that reaches from joy to "holy saving sorrow" has the potential to awaken a range of aesthetic judgments in a congregation.[4] Preachers, sensitive to this possibility, may decide it is the better part of pastoral wisdom not to risk the congregational unease or consternation that might stir. Yet those conflicts, set in the context of a faithful community, can be a source of rich conversation and growth. Although we might disagree about what is beautiful, "the very fact that when such disagreements occur we can talk, put forward reasons for our judgments, be understood and perhaps modify our views somewhat, indicates some shared criteria of judgment. As in the case of disagreement over moral issues, the very fact that we can discourse with those whose views are different from our own indicates the existence of some common ground."[5]

There is sadness to a religious faith that fails to embrace the role of beauty in giving witness to God through music and poetry. It is the sadness of a church that fears beauty will be a wayward impulse, leading us astray from God. Such fear has shaped the belief and practice of many Christians through the centuries. As theologian Don Saliers observes: "Christian theology has shown a long and studied ambivalence toward human aesthetic capacities, especially toward relationships between art and religious faith."[6]

Religious people sometimes reject aesthetics, assuming that the term implies "art for art's sake." It has meant this for some artists and critics, but "art for art's sake" is not an automatic corollary of the term. For me "aesthetic" refers to a theologically informed way of studying how we respond to and assess our experience of artistic work, including attention to what moves the human heart. My aesthetic is shaped by the gospel of Christ.

The Deep, Dear Core of Things

Theological convictions about the character of God shape the aesthetic that I use in creating sermons based on works of art.

When I was a young pastor, I was initially reluctant to share with the congregation my passion for great English poetry because I feared it might be considered elitist or snobbish. Then one year, I decided I would base a Lenten study series on a number of poems by John Donne (1572-1631), a complex but profound poet. I was astonished not only at the number of people who attended but who became absorbed in the man's poems. I had discovered the truth of Marilynne Robinson's observation, "There is no snobbery in saying things differ by the measure of their courage and their honesty and their largeness of spirit, and that the difference is profoundly one of value."[7]

I believe preachers can use a theologically informed aesthetic to preach on works of artistic beauty that renew a congregation's sense of godly wonder. When it is experienced in corporate worship, it is more than a generalized feeling of awe and astonishment. It is an encounter with the numinous, the holy, the deep, dear core of things, the One who has created and redeemed us and in whose presence we are "lost in wonder, love, and praise."[8]

There are also pastoral and ethical reasons for using artistic beauty to draw us to the beauty of God. We live in an age where beauty has been commercialized and degraded. I think here of "the beautiful people" or "the beautiful life." Beauty is reduced to being young, fit, rich, and glamorous. It then becomes a lifestyle of extravagant consumption that is environmentally disastrous and often personally destructive. In light of this culturally diminished vision of beauty, the eternal beauty of self-giving love that pours from the heart of God needs compelling expression to awaken the holiest and healthiest capacities of the human creature. Using the beauty of art to draw us to the beauty of God thus supplies a countercultural vision of what it means to be beautiful people and to lead a beautiful life.

This kind of dynamic relationship between aesthetics and prophetic witness can be traced back to the Psalms.

Rejoice in the Lord, O you righteous.
Praise befits the upright.
Praise the Lord with the lyre;
make melody to him with the harp of ten strings.
Sing to him a new song;
play skillfully on the strings, with loud shouts.

For the word of the Lord is upright,
and all his work is done in faithfulness.
He loves righteousness and justice;
the earth is full of the steadfast love of the Lord.

By the word of the Lord the heavens were made,
and all their host by the breath of his mouth.
He gathered the waters of the sea as in a bottle;
he put the deeps in storehouses. (Psalm 33: 1-7)

Instead of separating ethics and aesthetics, the psalmist presents doing justice and performing "skillfully on the strings" as actions that flow together in a single stream of faithful living, which in turn points to the creative artistry of God. By placing the values of righteousness and justice between the descriptions of human and divine artistry, the psalmist suggests that morality and aesthetics are seamlessly connected in the divine ordering of things. The movement from musical artistry to ethical principles to the creative work of God reveals that "the morality of beauty is something much deeper than that of 'must' and 'ought.' Its experience is inescapably personal, a loving and grateful approach to life itself. The fullness of being is experienced as a beautifying gift, an attractive appeal that solicits a loving response. Anyone who allows the beautiful, in all its dimensions, to bring its message home, knows that life is meaningful, a wonderful gift and opportunity."[9]

We need to make room in our preaching and worship for beauty so that wonder may be reborn as God is known and experienced anew.

In a world filled with terrors, the heart longs for a vision of divine beauty, and when the church fails to attend to beauty, the life of faith often becomes grim and onerous. Contrary to the opinion that an appeal to the arts is elitist or high brow or of little interest to most worshippers,

> "the data reveal that the vast majority of church members in all three traditions [evangelicals, mainline Protestants, Catholics] consider the arts (here, referring to painting, sculpture, music of all kinds, dance, theater, and creative literature) to be important in their personal lives. Among evangelicals, three-quarters do, and among mainline Protestants and Catholics, more than four in five do. This means that the typical pastor, looking out at his or her flock on a given Sunday morning, can be pretty sure that most of the congregation has some appreciation of the arts." [10]

The necessity of beauty becomes apparent when we consider the whole human community struggling to come to terms with a global economy, pluralism of cultures, and an ecological crisis. We are engaged in "a battle between vast destructive systems which feed on sameness, uniformity and power, and the fragile diversity of the human species as we struggle to evolve, not according to some evolutionary myth of progress, but according to that innate desire within our species to make meaning, to imagine worlds, to create beauty, even in the midst of violence and destruction."[11] We need to make room in our preaching and worship for beauty so that wonder may be reborn as God is known and experienced anew. Without this, no amount of institutional tinkering will vitalize the church's life and witness.

Thomas H. Troeger, the J. Edward and Ruth Cox Lantz Professor of Christian Communication at Yale Divinity School, has written more than a dozen books in the fields of preaching and worship. His most recent books include God, You Made All Things for Singing: Hymn Texts, Anthems, and Poems for a New Millennium *(Oxford University Press, 2009),* Preaching and Worship *(Chalice Press, 2003),* Above the Moon Earth Rises: Hymn Texts, Anthems and Poems for a New Creation *(Oxford University Press, 2002), and* Preaching While the Church is Under Reconstruction *(Abingdon, 1999). He is also a flutist and a poet whose work appears in the hymnals of most denominations. He is dually ordained as an Episcopal priest and a Presbyterian minister.*

Notes

1 Richard Harries, *Art and The Beauty of God* (Mowbray, 1996), pp. 47-48.
2 Don E. Saliers, "Liturgical Aesthetics: The Travail of Christian Worship" in *Arts, Theology and the Church: New Intersections*, edited by Kimberly Vrudny and Wilson Yates (Pilgrim Press, 2005), p. 197.
3 Harries, p. 11.
4 P. T. Forsyth, *Christ on Parnassus* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1911), p. 42.
5 Harries, p. 23.
6 Saliers, p. 181.
7 Marilynne Robinson, *The Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought* (Picador, 2005), p. 85.
8 Charles Wesley, "Jesus, Show Us Thy Salvation" ("Love divine, all loves excelling") in Erik Routley, *A Panorama of Christian Hymnody*, edited and expanded by Paul A. Richardson (GIA Publications, 2005), p. 67.
9 Bernard Häring, *Free and Faithful in Christ: Moral Theology for Priests and Laity, Vol. 2: The Truth Will Set You Free* (Seabury Press, 1979), p. 108.
10 Robert Wuthnow, *All in Sync: How Music and Art Are Revitalizing American Religion* (University of California Press, 2006), p. 137.
11 Tina Beattie, *The New Atheists: The Twilight of Reason and the War on Religion* (Orbis, 2007), p. 75.

THE ALTAR

A broken ALTAR, Lord, thy servant rears,
Made of a heart, and cemented with tears:
Whose parts are as thy hand did frame;
No workman's tool hath touch'd the same.
A HEART alone
Is such a stone,
As nothing but
Thy pow'r doth cut.
Wherefore each part
Of my hard heart
Meets in this frame,
To praise thy name.
That if I chance to hold my peace,
These stones to praise thee may not cease.
O let thy blessed SACRIFICE be mine,
And sanctify this ALTAR to be thine.

●

THE CHURCH-FLOOR

Mark you the floor? that square and speckled stone,
Which looks so firm and strong,
Is *Patience*:

And th' other black and grave, wherewith each one
Is checker'd all along,
Humility:

The gentle rising, which on either hand
Leads to the Choir above,
Is *Confidence*:

But the sweet cement, which in one sure band
Ties the whole frame, is Love
And *Charity*.

Hither sometimes Sin steals, and stains
The marble's neat and curious veins:
But all is cleansed when the marble weeps.
Sometimes Death, puffing at the door,
Blows all the dust about the floor:
But while he thinks to spoil the room, he sweeps.
Blest be the Architect, whose art
Could build so strong in a weak heart.

Small Churches in the Big Picture

By William Imes

My wife and I recently took a retirement camping trip from Massachusetts to Washington State and back. Besides being an enriching vacation, our coast-to-coast adventure was also a cautionary tale about the current anxieties of American Christianity, particularly the perilous status of small-town church life, and possible solutions.

Professionally and vocationally, my focus has long been on the small towns that have served for generations as home to the majority of mainline Protestant churches.

But as our travels suggested, many of those towns are simply drying up and blowing away. From Upper Michigan to Eastern Washington we encountered small town after small town where the business district has virtually disappeared, schools have consolidated over larger and larger areas, and churches have dwindled.

At one point, we stopped to visit friends in Pomeroy and Fonda, Iowa, where I served as pastor at two United Church of Christ churches from 1969 to 1978. Forty years ago, the Fonda-Pomeroy UCC parish was a new "yoke." In previous decades, each church had been strong enough to support a full-time, seminary-educated pastor on its own. The yoke meant that neither church was able to do so any longer.

A Church Razed

Today, a great deal has changed. The First United Church of Christ of Pomeroy closed in June 2007. When we visited this summer, we saw that the lovely brick building had been razed, and a vacant grass lot was all that was left. The last members have dispersed to congregations elsewhere. Gathering at a local restaurant to visit with these old friends was a bittersweet moment. They were a faithful group of Christians. Their life together had been marked by loyalty to the traditions of the Evangelical Synod of North America (one of the precursor bodies of the UCC), great generosity (at one time their giving to benevolences actually reached 40 percent of the local church budget), and a strong understanding of the catholicity of the Christian church.

It is sad that their 128-year history has come to an end, yet their story illustrates three factors that have contributed to the rise and decline of U.S. mainline Protestantism over the last century.

First, theirs was an ethnic history. German by heritage, many of these persons had come from Ostfriesland in northern Germany, and some actually spoke Frisian rather than a German dialect. The members of First UCC-Pomeroy were the Germans who supported their German-speaking pastor's desire to continue to worship in German during World War I, an act that resulted in his imprisonment. They helped him escape a mob eager to tar and feather him. After local self-styled "true Americans" shot at him in the pulpit during an Old Year's Eve Service and then burned the church to the ground, many families joined an English-speaking Lutheran congregation while a remnant rebuilt the church and carried on as the First Evangelical Church.

By now, though, such dramatic ethnic history and identity are a dim memory, with little power to move new generations.

Second, there is the question of internal dynamics of local churches and how they limit growth. In 1969 this Pomeroy congregation of 119 adult members came basically from six families – more than 50

of them from just two families that were closely intermarried. And so, you joined First Church by marrying into it. When we returned for a visit in 1999, we were given a pictorial directory where the fate of the congregation was graphically portrayed. There was not one person pictured who had not been a part of the congregation when we left in 1978. Such congregations, where a church is literally a family affair, have been common in small-town America for decades.

Third, the single greatest factor facing American churches is that we have become an urban/suburban nation. Within that movement from farm to town to city, another complex set of shifts has played out: American cities started as Protestant enclaves, became Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox and Jewish centers, and are now yielding to non-denominational megachurches, alternative spiritualities, and secularism.

In Pomeroy in 1970 there were 1,800 people served by seven churches. One could argue that a community that size did not need seven churches. Indeed, Glenn Miller, in his 2007 book *Piety and Profession*, the magisterial second volume of his history of theological education in the United States, argues that a constant feature of U.S. Protestant life has been its over-churched nature. When those 1,800 people start to move away, the prospect of supporting seven churches becomes even less plausible.

In a country that is constantly growing, we lose sight of the fact that much of the country is failing to grow – in some cases, failing dramatically and traumatically. If you ever live in Maine, you learn to speak of "the County." Aroostook County is the northernmost county in Maine; it accounts for 20 percent of the state's area and is larger than the State of Connecticut. It currently has about 70,000 residents. Forty years ago it had more than 100,000. The loss of a major Air Force base was a factor in this decline, but the County is also the heart of Maine's agriculture. Everywhere there, farms are getting larger, but the number of farmers is in steep decline. Foresting and mining communities have faced the same experience.

The pastor of the Rainy River Parish in Koochiching County drives 84 miles round trip each Sunday to lead services at three small congregations in three separate communities. This is a common story; the travel distances only increase the further west one goes.

The story is similar elsewhere. Many of our relatives live in Koochiching County, MN., located on the Canadian border. Its population of 13,000 has dropped almost 25 percent from 1980. The globalization of the forest-products market and the mechanization of lumbering have combined to empty an already sparsely settled part of the world. In 1900, 28 percent of Minnesotans lived in the Twin Cities area. Today the figure is closer to 70 percent. For churches in the emptying parts of the state, the challenges are very large. The pastor of the Rainy River Parish in Koochiching County drives 84 miles round trip each Sunday to lead services at three small congregations in three separate communities. This is a common story; the travel distances only increase the further west one goes.

But our visit to friends in the Fonda United Church of Christ in Fonda, Iowa, lifted up another part of the story of churches in the towns of America – a more optimistic story. The difficult demographics are identical to those of Pomeroy. One former parishioner who had worked for the local newspaper, now long closed, said that 25 years ago the town had over 50 businesses. Today there are less than ten. But the religious landscape there is different from that in Pomeroy. Fonda has been predominately Irish Catholic for more than a century. The Presbyterian church closed a few years ago. Another Protestant congregation is expected to close at anytime. That will leave the Fonda UCC, with its 50 members, as the only Protestant church in a community of about 600 people.

New Job Description: Tentmaker

They are determined to stay hopeful – and viable. Their solution has been to turn to a longtime member, an engineer who commutes some 60 miles to work each day. Greg Baskerville has taken the lay minister training of the UCC's Iowa Conference. He is fully licensed to serve that congregation. His presence gives the church hope for its continued future.

Such programs for lay ministers have multiplied rapidly in many denominations across the country. They are a part of a trend of creating multiple paths to ordination, alternatives to a conventional seminary education. Every denomination faces the problem of churches that cannot afford full-time, seminary-trained leadership. The Presbyterian Church (USA) lists 45 percent of its congregations as being without an installed pastor. About half of those congregations have no ordained leader-

ship. The other half rely on retired pastors or bi-vocational "tentmakers."

Last October I had the opportunity to meet with the Association of Presbyterian Tentmakers. What began almost 20 years ago as an informal collection of people – licensed lay leaders and clergy who felt they might not fit traditional structures – now looks like one of the most useful paths for denominations to pursue in search of fully trained leadership for small churches (see www. pcusatentmakers.org).

But the Spirit will continue to move. And churches and theological schools will respond – perhaps slowly and painfully – to that leading in the midst of pain and decline.

Tentmaking is not easy. Both congregation and pastor have to learn how to do it. At Bangor Theological Seminary we have trained many persons who ended up as tentmakers. Some would say that it bifurcates one's life in complicated and unhelpful ways. But others believe it is the perfect answer for them to God's call to ministry. A recent United Methodist Church graduate has combined a career as a very successful local TV weather forecaster with a ministry to two congregations that has strengthened both of them. He has just been appointed to serve a larger congregation on similar working terms.

It is important to remember that American Protestantism has been in this sort of predicament before. Through the 1920s and 30s, congregations in many areas declined and closed. Federated churches, larger parishes, and the training of lay pastors were all part of the solution to the problem of finding leadership for struggling congregations. In many ways the post-war 1950s and '60s repeated the problems of the Constantinian Settlement: A well-attended and well-financed church pays a price in terms of losing its creativity, flexibility, and ability to heed and respond to the movement of the Holy Spirit. But the Spirit will continue to move. And churches and theological schools will respond – perhaps slowly and painfully – to that leading in the midst of pain and decline. For there are small churches of great vitality that use the gifts they have been granted in faithful service to God and neighbor.

The Rev. William Imes retired earlier this year as president of Bangor Theological Seminary in Bangor, Maine, where he served for seven years.

Inside the Megachurches

Since emerging in the 1970s, megachurches have changed the religious scene in America, and altered the Protestant conversation.

A study released this summer, "Not Who You Think They Are: A Profile of the People Who Attend America's Megachurches," provides an updated snapshot of who attends megachurches. The study concentrated on twelve churches that each had an average weekly attendance of 3,900. Produced by Scott Thumma of the Hartford Institute for Religion Research at Hartford Seminary and Warren Bird of Leadership Network, the study estimates there are 1,300 U.S. megachurches, congregations with weekly worship attendance of 2,000 or more.

A few of the findings:

- **The average megachurch attender is somewhat more educated than overall church attenders and significantly more so than the general U.S. public.**
- **They are also younger. The average age of megachurch attenders is 40. The average age of an attender in a typical congregation is nearly 53. Eighteen percent of megachurchgoers are 18-24, compared to 5 percent in all churches.**
- **Nearly a third of megachurch attenders are single and unmarried. In a typical church generally, singles account for 10 percent.**
- **Worship style is the strongest factor in the initial attraction to a megachurch.**
- **New people almost always come to the megachurch because family, friends, or co-workers invited them.**
- **One of the mainstays of megachurch programming – small group participation – engages only 60 percent of attenders.**
- **Megachurch financial giving figures fall below those for all churches generally: 32 percent of megachurchgoers give nothing financially, or contribute only a small amount when they can. This compares to 15 percent at churches generally.**
- **11 percent of megachurch attenders said they didn't consider the megachurch their home church; another 12 percent claimed it as "home" but said they also attend other churches too.**
- **45 percent of megachurch attenders never volunteer at the church.**

Source: Field Study of U.S. Megachurches, produced by Leadership Network and Hartford Seminary. See the report at hirr.hartsem.edu/megachurch/megachurch_attender_report.htm

Congregational Power and Grace in a Hostile Culture

By Dwight Andrews

The church, thank God, has never been a static institution. Change and upheaval are certainly afoot in American religious life today, both in our cultures of worship and the culture of church itself. Our task is to face it, try to understand it, and despite uncertainties reclaim the church's great strength and gift: community.

Many Christian communities continue to struggle for common ground around matters of human sexuality, race, class, mission, politics, foreign policy, and materialism. Other churches, unfettered by denominational authority and long-standing liturgical traditions, have been very successful offering a church experience that mirrors the world of popular culture and entertainment. Carefully avoiding social and theological controversies, some non-denominational churches have created a worship experience that is at once familiar and immediately gratifying.

Of course, "change" has always been an important dynamic – indeed a constant – within American religious culture. Recall the eighteenth and nineteenth century religious debates over slavery, or the early twentieth century struggles over women's suffrage and segregation. The church continues to be moved by the Holy Spirit as well as by the same fads and fashions that shape the rest of our world. Indeed, the perpetual tension between the church and the world – the ever-present critique of the world embodied by the gospel and the necessity of bearing witness to the gospel – gives the church its reason for being and shapes the details of a congregational life. Through it all, churches are perhaps the last institutions standing that have the inner reserves and counter values to defy the corrosions of twenty-first century culture. Worship, despite the turmoil and debate around it, is a regular, historic opportunity for creating that sense of community, something society is fast losing.

Vital congregational life asserts a counter-discourse against aggressive secularism and moral complacency – including the complacency that says we now live in a "post-racial" moment.

But the quality of congregational life, as we presently know it, is under unusual assault from within and without. I believe this is a reflection of the shifting values of what people are seeking in a church experience and what it means to "be church" today.

At an earlier point in the twentieth century, churches were based in neighborhoods, so there was a sense of shared geography, cultural, and educational experience. However, certainly since 1945 in America, with the creation of the suburbs, and the partially desegregated urban communities of the 1950s, then the re-segregated communities by class in the 1960s and '70s, our sense of community has changed remarkably. Under desegregation, affluent blacks now live where their affluence can afford them. (Even so, one reality hasn't changed: 11 a.m. on Sunday morning remains the most segregated hour in American life. That we continue to worship in separate ways and segregated spaces is its own commentary on the distance we have yet to travel.)

The Overbooked Life

These shifting patterns – of consumerism, housing, transportation, time management – have changed congregational expectations, pulling at the fabric of a cohesive faith community. Many members in our downtown congregation come from as far as

50 miles away to worship on Sunday. Though we are grateful for the faithfulness of our long-distance members, the distance means that their ability to participate in the life of the church on other days is often quite limited. Similarly, their children are challenged both because of their proximity to the church and also the multitude of other activities they and their parents are involved in closer to home. Between soccer, football, tennis classes, marching band, and SAT test prep, many parents ask that their children's church lives be condensed into a single Sunday experience.

The difficulties here are obvious. Many of our families who have been blessed by their affluence are also driven by overbooked lives and unfocused, almost incoherent family schedules. The "smorgasbord" approach can expose children to too many activities. Mastery and proficiency are sometimes sacrificed. This lack of focus, discipline, and commitment often leads to unsatisfactory results, or, at best, a mediocre outcome. Inadvertently perhaps, we teach our children that a sustained and committed encounter with a subject or activity is not valuable. We opt out of making a commitment to a few choices and instead choose to dabble in everything. More ends up being less. Equally troubling, we dabble in multiple experiences simultaneously and call it "multi-tasking." Recent research seems to suggest that multi-tasking is an illusion – productivity is not necessarily increased, and the quality of our efforts is diminished.

Our attention spans are shorter, our sense of expectation requires quicker gratification. Our young people – and many of our not-so-young people – find it difficult to listen to anthems, hymns, or other multi-part pieces of music.

Attention, Please

There are connections and consequences to all of these disturbing behaviors. We accept the short syntax of an e-text, because we have been conditioned to condense more and more "stuff" into a shorter and smaller time frame. We accept the sound bite as a shortcut to the essence of the story. Yet the essence of anything can rarely be found in a sound bite. The lyrics in our popular songs have fewer words and fewer whole sentences. The hook of a good pop song used to be the culmination of an idea. Now, the hook *is* the idea.

When the same frenetic approach is transferred to our church experience, the quality of our congregational life is impoverished. It weakens our ability to be engaged for longer segments of time. Our attention spans are shorter, and our sense of expectation requires quicker gratification. Thus, for many of our young people, the preacher is boring because it takes him or her 20 minutes just to say Jesus loves me. Our young people – and many of our not-so-young people – find it difficult to listen to anthems, hymns, or other multi-part pieces of music. These realities put a tremendous burden on our worship leaders to create an engaging and fulfilling worship experience.

Some churches try to resolve these issues and satisfy the members by offering different worship experiences, including a "contemporary" service or a "traditional" service. The danger of these divided services is often a divided congregation. First Congregational Church in Atlanta has elected a "blended" approach in which traditional anthems and hymns are placed alongside jazz and gospel music. Our attempt at blending different musical traditions and preaching styles into a single service affirms that we see value in all of these different expressions. By not capitulating to "niche" worship services, we come together as a family of God's people: old and young, black and white, rich and poor, educated and not-so-educated. Divisions may still persist, but at least we are worshipping at the same time.

Important aesthetic and theological decisions must be made when choosing this course. It means the music is not simply the responsibility of the minister or the minister of music; rather the membership is charged with helping to discern not only what song to sing, but also the *why* of the song. Through Bible study, informal but intentional discussions, and forums about worship traditions, church members actually learn about the roots of our worship experience, which strengthens bonds between present and past.

Our decision to include different music traditions in worship is also a fundamental acknowledgement that the African American experience is itself a "blended" experience. It sets the stage for the church's necessary, ongoing critical self-examination. Since the beginning of independent black congregations, tension has existed about "what song shall we sing in a strange land." The tension here is not about style but the substance of the music and liturgy as an embodiment of the congregation's very identity.

Jam

For many decades, educated African Americans in urban settings openly rejected traditions that seemed to contradict their new-found status and prosperity. For instance, the "old way" of lining-out the hymns, the call-and-response practice whereby the worship leader calls out the text and the congregation repeats the line, reinforced a sense of community in congregations that could not read. This tradition placed great emphasis on the immediate and powerful experience of *sharing* the word, person-to-person, unmediated by a text or hymn printed on paper. When contemporary worshipers understand the compelling origins of the practice, they are able to embrace and appreciate a past that many prefer to forget.

Churches are perhaps the last institutions standing that have the inner reserves and counter values to defy the corrosions of twenty-first century culture.

An exception is the African American spiritual, which represents an important strand within the black religious experience that continues to bring cohesion and a sense of community. This musical tradition, borne out of the slave Christian experience, distills the theology and Christology of black slaves who could not spell either term. God's redemptive power was set into songs like *Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel* and *Go Down Moses*. These songs became the mechanism to teach the gospel and introduce the Biblical narrative. We sing these songs because they both remind us of a past that God has brought us through and they affirm God's capacity to speak even now. The relevance of the spiritual song tradition is that it testifies to God's power to free us. The spirituals link resistance and redemption and make justice a divine matter, not simply a moral imperative. Put another way, liberation theology has no meaning without an appreciation for captivity. The fact that the human spirit continues to be imprisoned in dark and nefarious ways today means that the spirituals still have value.

Questioning the Post-Racial Moment

Worship is a powerful reminder of God's grace in the midst of the drama of human history. It provides a living sense of spiritual continuity from week to week and generation to generation. A vital congregational life asserts a counter-discourse against aggressive secularism and moral complacency – including the complacency that says we now live in a "post-racial" moment. The post-racial proposition suggests the battle is over and the victory has been won. The election of Barack Obama and the Supreme Court appointment of Sonia Sotomayor certainly represent signs of significant, exciting change. But assertions that these signposts indicate a new "post-racial" era in American life are premature. The battle against racial disparity and prejudice – in education, in the court system, in the disproportionately high incarceration rates of young African American men – is not over. Congregations embody and articulate a sense of history and the search for God's justice. Congregational life provides the antidote of cohesion against the contemporary sense of dislocation and discouragement. In our society, it is the church that says the battle is *not* over and the victory has *not* yet been won.

Communities of faith are at their best when they have stood up against segregation, against war and violence, materialism and consumerism. The church is invigorated and energized when it protests against the misogynistic, racist, and demeaning values that seem to consume us and bears witness to the truths of justice and mercy. Living up to this calling to affirm what is good and true is key to finding the common ground that defines community and well-being in our congregational life.

In spite of the many things that can separate us – geography, race, sexual orientation, ethnicity, class, gender, and generation – the love of God, discovered in faithful community, brings cohesion and wholeness to a world that values neither.

The Rev. Dwight Andrews '77 M.Div. is senior minister at First Congregational Church in Atlanta. He is also an associate professor of music theory at Emory University. He holds degrees from the University of Michigan and a Ph.D. in Music Theory from Yale University. Recognized for his collaborations with playwright August Wilson, he has composed music for several Broadway productions, film, and television. He has taught at Harvard, Yale, and Rice.

"Old Forms are Passing Away": YDS Graduates Ponder the Future of Congregational Life

Yale Divinity School graduates were front-and-center at the Spring 2009 YDS conference on the "Future of Congregational Life." Two slates of graduates, most working in local parish ministry, served as panelists to discuss challenges facing churches, their mission in the world, and their relation to twenty-first century culture. Reflections *seized the moment this spring to submit questions and record their responses on themes ranging from the "Post-Protestant" landscape to the realities of managing a local congregation. Here is a sampling of their remarks:*

On church as society's "third space"

the Rev. David Wood '89 S.T.M,
senior minister, Glencoe (IL) Union Church

We are becoming a culture in which loneliness and isolation thrive. Places where people are brought together across generations in communal activities and practices that matter are rare – rare indeed. The hunger for a third space beyond the often-stifling dynamics of family relations and the limited relationships of work opens up real possibility for congregations to thrive.

However – and this is a big "however" – the church has to open up to new forms and new understandings of what it means to be a place that qualifies as that kind of "third space." Old forms are passing away ... but the new forms are still emerging.

There is a lot of casting about without a strong sense of what the center is. I continue to be amazed at what folks put up with for "church." My only explanation is, they are so desperate for something, they will take what they can get, and they have become convinced that this (whatever it is) is as good as it gets. There is WAY too much mediocrity and incompetence out there masquerading as what church life is supposed to be.

On why people seek church

Nancy McLaren '06 M.Div.,
director of Christian education,
First Presbyterian Church, New Haven, CT

People want to be involved, want to exercise their God-given talents and skills that they may not have the chance to exercise in their daily work lives. People want to "feel" something about God when they come to church: they want their senses awakened, they want to sing, they want to pray out loud.

I also believe that people are more willing to be known to one another, willing to become more vulnerable to one another. Church can provide a safe environment for these people, who would like to connect with other somewhat like-minded folks. I do get the sense that more and more people are going to church because they are seeking something rather than because they feel they must for some social reason.

On Jesus Christ and Fenway Park

the Rev. Nancy Taylor '81 M.Div., minister, Old South Church, Boston, MA

Jesus crossed borders. He healed people. He challenged things. He taught in ways that were so exciting. I propose that church needs to be a place that is truly exciting, where people are connecting with things that matter deeply. I would propose, coming from Boston, that church can and ought to be as riveting, as enthralling, as compelling – in its own way! – as is Fenway Park when the Sox are in town. We experience a palpable sense of community. We lean into it when the preacher comes up to preach. We expect that person to break that thing open, that Word – to open it right up – in a way that helps us to see and feel God's presence. I think some excitement, as well as elegance, beauty, and contemplation, is what's wanted.

On opening 10,000 doors

the Rev. Jessica Anschutz '07 M.Div., associate pastor, Park Avenue United Methodist Church, New York, NY

A single voice in the sanctuary shouted, "10,000 ..." and the crowd responded " ... doors!" Then the voice called out, "Rethink ..." and the crowd replied with a hearty "... church!"

Gathering inside a Manhattan church, about 100 United Methodist volunteers then boarded buses and headed out into the various corners of New York City to do random acts of kindness while promoting the United Methodist Church's new media campaign, "Rethink Church." (www.10thousanddoors.org.) The campaign emphasizes the thousands of ways, or doors, people can enter into our churches and ministries.

At our church, the evening service is carefully and prayerfully planned with the understanding that people come to worship in order to serve and praise God, grow in faith, be healed and forgiven, and be in community with one another. Though the service is contemporary in some ways (praise band, PowerPoint), it has a fairly traditional order of worship, and Holy Communion is served every week. Those who gather for worship with us come from diverse backgrounds, faith and life experiences. Many live and share their faith through the congregation's social justice and outreach ministries: mission trips, disaster relief trips, lunch programs, Habitat for Humanity, and beyond.

Yes, mainline church identity and practice need renewal if they are to survive! Nevertheless, we do not need to scrap everything our long history has given us and completely start over. Rather, we need to revive, enliven, celebrate and awaken both ancient and new practices within the church. The United Methodist Church is already encouraging its people to think outside the box.

On remedial religion

Kerry Robinson '94 M.A.R., executive director, National Leadership Roundtable on Church Management

(Catholic) students arrive at Yale very advanced intellectually, and we know that their acumen in philosophy and languages and physics will grow exponentially.

But they typically also arrive stalled at an eighth grade level of catechesis. If they don't develop an adult vocabulary of faith, then they will not engage in discourse in religious matters. If they think they appear ignorant about their faith tradition or matters of faith generally, they won't engage in discourse about matters of faith. This needs to change. Campus ministries, local parishes, parents – anyone who is invested in a vibrant welcoming church community has a role to play.

On spiritual identity and zombie attacks

the Rev. Kaji Spellman '06 M.Div., associate pastor, St. Peter's Lutheran Church, New York, NY

There's been a curious trend on Facebook over the past few months – the enormous explosion of identity quizzes. My friends and I have been taking all sorts of tests claiming to help us understand ourselves better. For example, I now understand the country I should live in (France), the color of my personality (orange), the decade I belong in (the "revolutionary 40s") and how effective I would be in case of a zombie attack (very).

I'm very curious about this trend because I think it shows we don't want to be "people," we want to be ourselves, our very own personal selves – authentically so. We don't want to be molded into a structure that doesn't reflect or involve us. We want things to be different because we're there. The quizzes show me that some of us need some help figuring out just who we are, and, because life is the way it is, the "who we are" right now is not necessarily the same as who we'll become in a few years. The church is eminently relevant to this search.

I believe the church can have an integral role in the development of the self, but also of the self in

covenantal relation to others. I believe the church should always adapt and change and grow with each person; in other words, to a certain degree, when a person becomes part of a church community, that church should never quite be the same as it was. And as change happens to the church, I should change, too. I want church to help me to be me, to help me to figure out what that means as a child of God, and to help me to figure out what that means as a citizen of God's green earth with neighbors all about. I want church to help me to understand what it is to be loved, to feel loved, and to love. I want church to help me to recognize God around me and others, to see God at work in and through me, to assure me of my place in God's grace.

And, were zombies to attack, I would want church to know what to do with those of us who would be effective in such a time.

On congregations and the kids

the Rev. Carol Pinkham Oak '85 M.Div., rector, St. John's Episcopal Church. Ellicott City, MD

Long before I arrived at St. John's, the parish decided to implement programs to keep our youth involved. We plan annual retreats for the kids, regular outreach ministries and weekly Sunday school classes. More than 50 volunteers are dedicated to helping young people learn the life of faith, the language of faith. The adults are comfortable talking about what they believe about Jesus. That integrity is obvious to the youth. When it isn't, the kids pick up on that right away.

On Christian light and lite

the Rev. Sarah S. Scherschligt '04 M.Div., associate pastor, Prince of Peace Lutheran Church, Gaithersburg, MD

We in the mainline have suspicions about megachurches, of course. Most of these churches set out to be intentionally non-denominational; they wanted to be different from us.

But I've been fascinated with them for a long time. They do something right. They are earnest about meeting people's hunger for God. They're not afraid to try corporate business models to figure out how to lead churches. Those models work in some contexts. They're what people understand.

We find these churches kind of threatening because that stuff can look slick – and because they so often seem aligned with a particular political stance that doesn't favor peacemaking or justice. We suspect they are successful because they don't challenge values of the culture at large. We see them as Christianity lite.

But I wish we'd feel a little less threatened. I love my tradition, but it comes with a lot of baggage. Not all that baggage is essential for proclaiming the gospel with sound theology. Some non-denominational megachurches understand that.

We can align our justice work with prayer and Scripture and also meet people so that the gospel truth really grabs them as individuals. We're jealous of large churches, but a church doesn't need to be big to be holy. Pastors (and denominations) too often measure success in numbers.

On the competition of 500 channels

the Rev. Carol Pinkham Oak

Several years ago a minister said to me, "There's a lot of good TV out there now" – that is, there are a lot of other non-church options people have. I'm very aware that people spend more time in the gym each week than in the pews. But in my experience, when people find something that lights their passion, they connect with church. By itself, worship attendance doesn't necessarily keep people connected to the life of the parish anymore. Instead, it might be going on a medical mission trip to Jamaica or helping an inner-city school in Baltimore. Those are two ministries we sponsor. When people see they have made a difference in the lives of others, then they want to share that experience and help others make a difference too.

On spiritual maturity

the Rev. Jeffrey Haggray '88 M.Div., executive director/minister, District of Columbia Baptist Convention, Washington, DC

Take spiritual formation seriously.

Develop spiritual discipline and health – mental, physical, moral.

Without introspection and reflection you can do real damage.

Don't be shy about being creative and innovative.

Don't be afraid.

Too many talented people end up applying to a church where the description is narrower than their passion and they become misfitted and frustrated.

There might not be a template for what you feel called to do. You may have to actually create it and market it to an employer – church, corporate America, or a community organization.

On quantity vs. quality

the Rev. Rob Leacock '05 M.Div., associate for liturgy and worship, St. Michael and All Angels Episcopal Church, Dallas, TX

My own parish – like many parishes – is situated in an instant-gratification, consumer-driven culture, and the church is often viewed as a purveyor of goods and services. People can and do have a very proprietary attitude toward their church. The great benefit of working in a larger, programmatically driven corporate parish is that there is always great enthusiasm built around many things. The down side is that we can become overly concerned with quantitative measures – number of people in the pews, numbers of dollars raised – rather than qualitative measures. But are any of these measures a good indication of how the needs of our congregation are being met?

What has not changed is the deep or even desperate desire to have a real sense of belonging through relationships, with God and with other people.

On Catholic identities

Angela Batie '07 M.Div., campus minister, St. Louis University, St. Louis, MO

What I've seen in the college student population are three general groups. The first is a small group of people who seek greater engagement with Catholic social teaching out of a concern for justice, inclusion, and care of the poor. These students seem to find the church hierarchy out of touch and prefer a more community-based view of church.

They worship alongside a second group, which relishes church tradition, loves the identity that traditional piety seems to provide, and prizes orthodoxy. This neo-conservative movement is growing in appeal to young adults, many of whom in post-9/11 America desire structure, certainty, and something they can look to for clear answers. (See the book *Googling God: The Religious Landscape of People in their 20s and 30s* by Mike Hayes.)

The third group, in my estimation the largest on our campus among the churchgoing Catholics, frankly doesn't want much from the church – or rather, doesn't expect much. They attend Mass with fair regularity on Sundays and would certainly identify themselves as Catholic, but there is a question about how much the spirituality of our faith permeates the rest of their lives. They feel "good" when they attend Mass (usually because of the presence of their peers), but church teachings appear either inconvenient or out-of-touch, so there is a limit to how much the students embrace the faith tradition. They still experience a level of spiritual thirst, but they question how well the Catholic Church can meet that desire. Yet they have limited ambition to try to find it.

On the "Post-Protestant," post-whatever era

the Rev. Kaji Spellman

Personally, I don't look back to the age of Christendom with longing. In the age of Christendom, I couldn't have served the churches I have served thus far, because de jure or de facto segregation would've kept me, a black woman, out of these historically white churches with historically male pulpits. So the only personal meaning these labels evoke is that they are of an era I'm grateful to experience in history books rather than in my own life.

As Protestants, I wonder what we now are and should be protesting. I think the church (Protestant or not) does well not to take itself for granted. I like moving away from assuming that people will just show up because that was what people did once upon a time (as I'm told). At the same time, I see the church's role as rightly ordering the place of the self. And this refashioning of the self is, of course, countercultural. So, what a blessing that this is a post-whatever era!

On Twitter theology

the Rev. Sarah S. Scherschligt

We're just starting to develop a technology plan at our church. How should we use technology? How much of it? How to do the newsletter? Should we blog? If a church wants to be a sanctuary from a world of too much technology, then don't put a flat-screen TV in the narthex. There's no one right plan. But don't just pooh-pooh technology because you don't know how to use it.

These are things to think about; we might well be in a "Gutenberg moment." Denominations need to be quicker about understanding the technical options – YouTube, Twitter, DVDs. But we must not lose our identity or just strive to be the next big thing and lose the Bible. You can't put the Bible into 140 Twitter characters. To me, our identity still means being a community marked by forgiveness and self-sacrifice in working for justice. It means not just ensuring our survival for the sake of the gospel but risking survival for the sake of the gospel.

EXIT

On institutional relevance

the Rev. Rob Leacock

Is the institutional church relevant anymore? I would argue that it is, on the basis that the institution of the church has never been as institutional as we have made it out to be. When has the church ever been of one mind about ecclesiology, church governance, the role or authority of Scripture, the nature of the sacraments?

Even belonging to an institutional church, I do not believe that I am called to uphold its institutionalism above all else. When we pray for the church throughout the world, "that we all may be one," it is not an institutional intercession. The reason institutions, be they churches or divinity schools, are imperfect is not necessarily because they are institutions per se. Rather, they are imperfect because they are full of wretched sinners, of which I am one!

On post-denominationalism

the Rev. Jason Turner '06, M.Div., pastor, Community Baptist Church, New Haven, CT

Too often we are obsessed with altering our ministry to fit the culture. Although the church must seek ways to remain relevant we should not stray from what Christ has intended the church to be. I think these "post-denominational" labels are misleading; we are just living in a time where Christianity is in decline but it is nowhere becoming extinct. We just happen to live in a day where people are not overly concerned about which denomination they are worshipping with – as long as there is a connection between the message (both verbal and non-verbal) and the hearer.

On the audacity of change

the Rev. Jeff Braun '04, M.Div. senior minister, First Congregational Church (UCC), Cheshire, CT

By clinging to ill-defined notions of tradition (notions of "Well, this is how we've always done it, so we're not changing!"), and by resisting the refreshment and re-interpretation of our Christian faith, the churches are hurting *themselves*. We're driving our own decline. We're giving past or potential churchgoers every reason to seek their connection to God outside our denominational folds because we are not meeting them where they are. We're not finding ways to meet people's spiritual needs with both integrity *and* innovation. However unintentionally (and it is clearly unintentional, for no church seeks its own irrelevance or demise), we are forsaking Christ's own commandment to spread the Good News to the nations.

As Christians, we have a sacred story to tell. But we do not – and we *cannot* – tell that story when we eschew any and all change, when we value our own comfort over attending to the discomfort of others, and when we seek a fixedness of tradition and of spiritual experience that dampens our ability to channel God's love and to meet people where they are.

On rejecting business-as-usual

the Rev. Jeffrey Haggray

I initially approached pastoring as though I were an executive director and lecturer-in-chief of a business operation called "church." I believed religiously that if only I preached theologically correct sermons and organized the people around a compelling business model with enough chores we could fix both the church and surrounding neighborhood in a three-to-five year jaunt.

I discovered that local churches don't easily lend themselves to the principles of business management, despite sincere intentions and high-sounding mission and vision statements. People don't always report to church with the sense of duty and consistency that they might carry to a secular job.

In addition to leading a healthy physical, spiritual, emotional, and moral life, I now seek to:

Form long-term relationships with individuals as a spiritual companion or mentor.

Journey with others as they discern the meaning and demands of call in their lives.

Lead congregations to become communities wherein individuals and small groups respond creatively to God's call.

Impress upon my own children and others the meaning of Christian discipleship, call, and service to others.

On mainline rejuvenation ... and jello

the Rev. Sarah S. Scherschligt

My denomination, the ELCA, developed a handbook to help people understand the practices of faith. In it, they included a section on church potlucks that included something about jello salad. That's funny and relevant to Lutherans in the Upper Midwest. To those who didn't grow up on green jello and cool whip, that means nothing. Much of what we think of as Lutheran is actually German or Norwegian. Culturally bound (and increasingly archaic) signi-

fiers of denominations need to change. For us it also means challenging things like our music: can you be Lutheran and never have heard Bach? Of course you can – check out the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Namibia.

Renewal means understanding new challenges to a traditional arc of faith. Yes, for some, truth is obviously faith in Jesus, but for many others, "My best friend is Jewish; my grandma doesn't believe in God; my parents don't like our church; I'm living with my girlfriend; I'm gay, etc ..." These are too huge to ignore. Renewal means engaging the priority of authenticity and experience that young people use to test their faith. It means understanding that mobility and transience affect communities deeply and change what people are looking for in a church. Context, context, context.

On the religion of daily reality

Angela Batie

At YDS, my greatest concerns were intellectual and theoretical. My imagination was ignited by theological questions and my energy absorbed by topics like church structure, justice, liberation, and all manner of enlivening subjects. I have since found, though, that most students are only mildly concerned with such questions when they come to me. Their questions are rarely, "How does the language we use in liturgy shape our understanding of community?" but far more often, "How long until my broken heart stops hurting so much?" or "How will I know what I'm supposed to be when I graduate?" Though exploration into the deeper theological questions informs my ministry and is vital for my own spiritual growth, it is much less explicit in my day-to-day work than I expected.

Advice to future church leaders

the Rev. Scott Black Johnston '89 M.Div., senior minister, Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, New York, NY

Get enough sleep and be sharp about your prayers. Leadership in the church is difficult. You need to develop a healthy set of calluses in order to be effective. I used to think that sincerity would get the job done, but sincerity and four bucks will get you a latte at Starbucks. Personal care and spiritual discipline are essential to your survival as a pastor. Finally, trust takes time. It takes a while for a congregation and a pastor to bond. It is a powerful thing, though, when a congregation and a pastor begin to trust each other enough to tell each other the truth.

On getting things done right

Kerry Robinson

There's a cultural shift going on: more and more in parish life, I find appreciation for the idea that excellence across the board is a key to parish vitality. It is no longer acceptable to excel only at pastoral leadership. There is an expectation to excel in the church's temporal affairs too – a zeal for excellence in communications, managerial, financial and personnel endeavors that go hand-in-hand with leading a local parish. Seminaries don't teach best practices in management and financial accountability. I wish they did. But no church leader can ignore this cultural shift any longer. In the meantime, we need to look to laity who have these competencies, and prevail upon their baptismal call to enlist those talents in service to the faith community to which they belong.

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On vocation and gratitude

the Rev. Jeff Braun

Discern and celebrate your gifts. Then apply them, humbly. Discern and celebrate the gifts of the congregation, then cultivate them with sincerity. Assess the growth edges and opportunities alike, then bring the full suite of resources, both within and outside the congregation, to bear. Seek every chance to partner and to ally, within and outside the parish walls and hallways. Don't forget to pray. Don't forget that if you ignore yourself and/or your family (who are your FIRST congregation), then everything you do at church can so quickly be hollowed.

And never forget, not ever, to give thanks for the blessed, mysterious chance to be called to lead – and to be led by – a portion of Christ's body of believers. There is no more rewarding, no more essential, and no more critical a vocation or calling than this.

On seizing the moment

the Rev. Nancy Taylor

This is too good a crisis to waste. People are open. Too many are living lives that are shallow and flat. If we are doing our job well – if we are, indeed, helping to bring people into the very presence of God – we are bringing them deep things, placing their lives in the context of eternity. We are at an evolutionary moment in the life of the Christian church in America. I believe we have a message the culture isn't hearing. We have something amazing that too many people are missing out on. If only they knew!

Sacred Space in Cyberspace

by Kimberly Knight

"We have all known the long loneliness, and we have found that the answer is community." – Dorothy Day

I have the best job in the world because I get to meet that long loneliness with a new kind of community.

I am the Circuit Rider for The Beatitudes Society, but my tools are quite different than the well-worn saddle and leather-bound Bibles of my forebears.[1] My tools are the currency of the online world – Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn and Second Life. I enlist online resources that help clergy learn and act on pressing social issues and give them online places to meet and talk with other progressive faith leaders.

How does a seminary graduate end up as an online Circuit Rider? Answer: I genuinely believe in online community. Community is the common thread to all my work. I see it in practice at The Beatitudes Society. I also see it in practice as the pastor of an online church, Koinonia Congregational Church of Second Life.

What may appear to be play-acting is for many in fact a very serious and faithful act of worship and community.

Let me tell you about my church. Imagine a new town emerging on the outskirts of your city, a planned village filled with all manner of retail, rolling golf courses, night clubs, and civic arrangements necessary to organizing a small city. You'd also expect to find houses of worship where the new town's citizens can connect with God and with each other. So it is with the new metropolis of the internet: churches are springing up every day online, and I am one of the ministers.

At our church this past Easter morning, for instance, folks wandered in, picked up their bulletins and settled into their seats. They chatted quietly about their lovely dresses and crisp Sunday suits while the music welcoming the Risen Lord floated lightly overhead. This group has been worshipping together for two years, and the joy was palpable. When it came time for the passing of the peace, people greeted one another from Germany, England, California, Mississippi, Georgia, and Toronto. They hadn't traveled from those places; they were still at home in all those places, but making church online – worshipping, studying, praying, crying and laughing together from all corners of the globe.

Avatars and Atonement

Koinonia Congregation is an actual congregation meeting in online space – a virtual reality world derived from the revolutionary software program called Second Life, which allows users to socialize and use voice and text chat. Koinonia uses Second Life to create a safe environment where people can learn about the Christian faith and experience a loving Christian community.

Each week we meet for worship in the 3D-rendered sanctuary where as avatars we gather for fellowship, prayer, music, and the preached Word.[2] Opening its doors and heart to people of various theologies, sexual orientations, and faith experiences, Koinonia practices God's extravagant welcome to all. Koinonia Christians celebrate the abundance of life and diversity of God's people. The worldwide reach of Second Life gives Koinonia unlimited potential to connect with people who would never walk through the doors of a brick-and-mortar church. It provides a safe place for those who have been hurt or rejected by previous, earthbound communities of faith. (To see a YouTube video of Koinonia Church, visit our web site, www.koinonia-church.org. For further information about Second Life, see www.secondlife.com)

As minister, I spend time at the church daily, meeting with folks who need prayer or an encouraging word. Visitors curious about Koinonia pop by daily and explore the grounds, where they can slip a prayer request in a dedicated mail box, light a prayer candle or sit in meditation in the gardens that surround the Frank Lloyd Wright-inspired building. If you are ever "in-world" (the phrase Second Life citizens use to designate being logged into Second Life), stop by and I can give you a tour of the parsonage. Our church is not the only congregation in Second Life. You can wander into the neighboring cathedral of the Anglican church of New Zealand. You can visit a Presbyterian fellowship and find evangelical churches all around the cyber-landscape. The Unitarian Universalist worship space (www.fuucsl.org/cms) is one of the loveliest sacred sites in Second Life. You can also find mosques, synagogues, and Zen meditation gardens, support groups like Alcoholics Anonymous, and hundreds of such fellowships offering real community online.

Soul and Circuitry

How did all this come to be, these myriad manifestations of faith communities online? What might seem like a dizzying techno-revolution, a break with the past, can actually be placed in the long history of evangelism. I see it in the tradition of the nineteenth century revivals and in the lineage of twentieth century preachers who, taking the Great Commission seriously, enlivened the radio and TV airwaves. But where we at Koinonia break with traditional evangelical practice and theology is with their drive to "produce" confessing converts who have made their "decision for Christ." Instead of endeavoring to increase the rolls and move on to the next task or program, our focus is to gather as the visible Body of Christ and extend God's radical hospitality to all who seek connection. What makes the internet fundamentally different from previous electronic evangelism is its potential for direct, one-on-one interaction between individuals, its potential for community – for koinonia.

In his book *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes, "It is the curse and promise (of Christendom) that God's people must dwell in far countries among unbelievers, but it will be the seed of the kingdom of God in all the world." Bonhoeffer also says: "It is by the grace of God that a congregation is permitted to gather visible in this world to share God's word and sacrament. Not all Christians receive this blessing. The imprisoned, the sick, the scattered and lonely, the proclaimers of the Gospel in heathen lands, stand alone."[3] Bonhoeffer is right: isolated people long for community, whether they are locked away behind concrete and steel, or closeted and imprisoned by hostile social prejudice, shut away from loved ones. Preachers who find themselves self-censoring for fear of creating congregational conflict can be the most isolated of all. Today we have new tools to break through the isolation: the blessing of community is available online.

Twitter, Facebook, Second Life – I know, it seems overwhelming, and maybe even distasteful. Just when you might have recovered from your technology allergy and started using email with enthusiasm, now we get all these new "social networking" tools and you hardly know where to begin. But these are the tools in my "saddle-bag" along with my brand new iPhone. We call this "Web 2.0," where relationship trumps one-way, passive transmission of online information. Web 2.0 refers to the evolution of web-based communities, including social-networking sites, wikis, video-sharing sites, and blogs. People are seeking "connectedness," and these Web 2.0 tools make that possible.

Although we are still learning what exactly it means to be church online we are blessed with the capability now to create a participatory space for Christians and seekers, for the un-churched and de-churched to worship and to extend God's gracious welcome to all who come near. And what may appear to be play-acting is for many in fact a very serious and faithful act of worship and community.

People tell me that it's not real church if it's not real brick and mortar. But my hunch is most Christians would agree that a building is not the church either. The community of believers is the real church.

Referring to Christian scholar Phyllis Tickle's remarks about the internet, host Krista Tippet said recently on her PBS show *Speaking of Faith*: "She said every time one of these kids logs on, they step through the back of the closet into Narnia. And they live with ideas of different levels of reality. There's virtual reality and this reality, and that they all have some substance, and that they don't have cognitive dissonance about taking all of that seriously."

I have found this to be absolutely true, but with one caveat: The folks participating in online church are by no means exclusively kids, youth, or twenty-somethings. The people who call Koinonia Congre-

gational Church their spiritual home are young, old, black and white, American and European, gay and straight, and representing a spectrum of differently-abled bodies. One parishioner who has worshipped at Koinonia for nearly two years is a grandmother who lives alone and has experienced more than forty surgical procedures. Though home-bound, she finds solace in a living Christian community that daily prays with her, visits with her, and worries about her when she is not around. One young woman, a lesbian living in a small southern community, came to Koinonia with deep wounds inflicted by her home congregation. Finding a church in her hometown was hard. In our church, she has found love and acceptance. Here she has found a deep connection with God and peace with herself.

Each week we meet for worship in the 3D-rendered sanctuary where as avatars we gather for fellowship, prayer, music, and the preached Word. Opening its doors and heart to people of various theologies, sexual orientations, and faith experiences, Koinonia practices God's extravagant welcome to all.

Real Tears of Joy

In the earliest days of this church's formation, a nineteen-year-old woman found the community she needed when she was dislocated from her family of origin. She had relocated across the country with her fiancé who was now stationed in Iraq, and at Koinonia she made a new family. The space was virtual, but the community was real. As a community, we prayed and waited for the safe return of her beloved. When news of his return reached Koinonia, we cried. I cried real tears of joy for her joy.

I know Koinonia online sounds weird – I hear it all the time. People tell me that it's not real church if it's not real brick and mortar. But my hunch is most Christians would agree that a building is not the church either. The community of believers is the real temple, the real church (2 Corinthians 3:16, Ephesians 2:21). Biblically speaking, the Christian holy place is as omnipresent as the ascended Lord. Church happens in spirit and reality inside God's people, for that is where God lives.

Sure, big questions about online spirituality persist: Does this sort of community privilege mind over body? What about the digital divide – are we creating a new system of exclusion? Another big one – what about the sacraments? Without bread and wine and water, are we church? Or is online church a new "outward and visible sign" for an inward and invisible truth?

There are no ready answers – yet. But over time and through the constant cycle of action and reflection, the church has a new and extraordinary opportunity to grapple with what it means to live a sacramental life in cyberspace. Funny thing is, this grappling is nothing new to people of faith: many of these same questions about the nature of sacramental life perennially confront us in our local "traditional" communities.

In his study of base communities of Latin America, *Ecclesiogenesis: The Base Communities Reinvent the Church* (Orbis, 1986), Leonardo Boff wrote, "Grace and salvation are always expressed in sacramental form. They do not come like a bolt from the blue. They find their path to the hearts of human beings through all manner of mediations. The mediations can change, but grace and faith cannot."[4]

Whether it's a face-to-face encounter with a witnessing Christian, a life in a well-established and traditional church, or via the airwaves of radio and TV, or in a Sabbath gathering of 3D avatars in Second Life, the belief that the Holy Spirit can work in and through any vehicle is what compels me to create, participate in, and sustain online Christian community.

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Notes

1 The Beatitudes Society develops and sustains a national network of progressive Christian leaders who advocate for justice, compassion, and peace; reclaim a Christianity that welcomes all people, especially those at the margins; articulate a Christianity that dares to speak and act for our fragile planet and our most vulnerable citizens.

2 In Second Life, an avatar is the computer user's representation of herself in the form of a three-dimensional model or figure.

3 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (Harper and Row, 1954), p.18

4 Leonardo Boff, *Ecclesiogenesis: The Base Communities Reinvent the Church* (Orbis Books, 1986), p. 17.

Seven Things Congregations Have Taught Me About Preaching

By Leonora Tubbs Tisdale

Congregations have long intrigued me. Whether serving as a pastor (as I have done in congregations that range in size from 38 members to 3,800), or as a scholar/teacher (in diverse seminary settings), I have spent a lot of my life thinking and talking about the nature and mystery of congregations.

In my book *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art*, I argued that we should prepare pastors not only to exegete Biblical texts, but also to "exegete" congregations, so that ministers can preach in ways that are both fitting and transformative for local faith communities. I regularly teach courses in which students are required to undertake an interpretive study of the signs and symbols of a congregation's corporate life (much as an anthropologist would interpret a new culture), and to share their results with the class.

However, congregations have not only been subjects of study for me. They have also been my teachers. Indeed, much of what I know about preaching has come from the guidance, correction, and insight that people of faith have shared with me as I have sought to live out my calling as a minister of the Gospel.

As we ponder the future of congregational life, it is important that we also look back and honor what congregations have taught us. There are lessons there to assist us as well.

1) It's about God.

One Sunday morning, while waiting for worship to begin in a large congregation in New York City where I was serving on the pastoral staff, I became overwhelmed by the strong sense that the people had come to church that day because they wanted to be ushered into the presence of God. I was only beginning to know these people – but what I knew floored me. They had hundreds of other interesting places they could be on Sunday morning, but they chose to be in church. They had myriad other things they could be doing with their time, but they chose to spend some of it at church. And the main reason they were there was that they were hoping somehow, some way, through this service of worship, they might be brought into the presence of God.

Congregations remind us – if we will but listen to them – that worship is about God. Sometimes we preachers forget that, and think it's about us. We make jokes at the holiest moments in the service, because we ourselves are uneasy with mystery. We work hard to find a novel idea in a Biblical text, without asking ourselves: "But is there any good news here?" We pride ourselves in a well-crafted turn of phrase or a story well told, without asking the deeper question: "But did this sermon bring people into the presence of God?"

Yet congregations consistently remind us – by their presence, their faithfulness, and their hopeful faces – that ultimately preaching is all about God. That's not going to change, no matter what shape or form preaching may take in the future.

2) Just a little cud is sufficient.

One Sunday, after preaching a sermon in the smallest of four churches in the parish my husband and I served right out of seminary, one of the dairy farmers in my congregation came out after worship and commented, "Well, preacher, you sure gave us the whole bale of hay this morning!" I thanked him for his comment. And it was not until I was halfway home that I realized that what he was saying to me was not a compliment! He was telling me that I had given him the whole bale of hay, when all he wanted for the week was a small bit of cud to chew on.

One of the mistakes pastors, especially beginning pastors, make is trying to give the congregation the whole bale of hay – the extensive results of our exegetical research, the multiple meanings a certain word might have, all three sermon possibilities arising from the text. Congregations are patient. They will sit through such feedings until the hay starts taking up residence between their ears. But what the farmer was telling me was that too much food isn't good for you. It puts you to sleep and addles your brain. The preacher's task is to pick and choose which nutritious morsels will get her listeners through the coming week.

The good news is: congregations encourage such choosing simply by showing up, week after week. Over time you realize you don't have to say it all this week. You've got next week. And the week after. And, hopefully, the week after that. Over time, a well-balanced diet of choice morsels can satisfy the hungry soul.

3) We need to preach more about jobs and vocations.

Early in my ministry I read a book in which the author claimed that what many parishioners long for are more sermons related to their lives in the work world. Preachers, he claimed, don't talk nearly enough about everyday work in their sermons, and consequently parishioners feel a genuine disconnect between the sermons they hear on Sundays and the ways they spend their time the rest of the week.

Though his words rang true to me, I frankly didn't feel qualified to talk to my parishioners in the early years of my ministry about their jobs. What did I know about dairy farming and shop tending and surveying and being a public school superintendent? I was having a hard enough time figuring out how to be a pastor.

Later in life I got bolder. Much to my amazement, *the* sermon that fostered the most post-sermon conversation in my last parish was one titled "The Difference Between a Job and a Vocation." Congregants, I was reminded, consistently struggle with what Christian vocation is and what work is and how the two are related. They long for someone to help them make sense of their work, or lack thereof, in these days of corporate downsizing, unemployment, and recession. Some need to be challenged to consider that their calling to love and serve God and neighbor might find better outlets than in their current work place.

My own observation is that pastors do talk a lot with people about their jobs – mostly in the study behind closed doors. It's time to expand the conversation and bring it into the pulpit as well. If we do, we will likely find that the requests for conversations in the study will also multiply.

4) Preaching depends on pastoral care for survival.

Early in my ministry I first became aware of how closely related preaching and pastoral care are. If I was not out visiting my people on a regular basis – whether in their homes, places of work, hospitals or nursing homes – I felt disconnected from their lives and the questions and concerns they brought with them to Sunday worship. Pastoral care fed me as a preacher, and also pressed me to wrestle more deeply with the complex challenges my parishioners were facing.

I also observed that if I was a faithful pastor to my people, their trust in me as a preacher would grow so that they would sometimes give my sermon the benefit of the doubt – even if I was preaching something they radically disagreed with. Philip Wogaman puts it well: "Let me state the principle in an academic way. A C-plus sermon will be perceived as B-plus or A-minus if the preacher is viewed as a friend; an A-plus sermon will be demoted to a B or lower if the preacher comes across as uncaring."[1]

Preaching depends on pastoral care for its very survival. And though the modes of such care may increase in the future – via email, text messages, and blog sites – I also suspect that the longing for face-to-face and voice-to-voice human contact and interaction will only increase in a world where so many isolated individuals are spending much of their days before computer screens.

5) The sermon is the beginning of the conversation, not the end of it.

Coming from Presbyterian and Reformed theological roots, I have always had a high opinion of preaching as "Word of God." Preaching is not just mere mortals talking about what we think about God. Preaching, through the Spirit's stirrings, can become God's own words to God's people.

On the plus side, such a high view of preaching reminds us preachers never to treat our task lightly or carelessly. We are about God's work here, and we need to give it the very best we have to offer of our intellect, our creativity, and our craft. We are on holy ground when we preach, and the mystery and wonder about this task should cause even the most seasoned pastor to quake a bit as she makes her way to the pulpit.

But there is a negative side to this theological viewpoint, too: if we are not careful, we preachers

will come to think that our words and God's words are identical, and that therefore our word in the pulpit is the last word.

Congregations remind us that sermons should initiate conversations, not close them off. Whether it is through the anger a parishioner expresses when we have preached on a social issue and proclaimed our point of view as if it is the only legitimate one, or through the honest questioning at coffee hour or during a "sermon talk back" session after worship, congregations often signal that they, too, want to be a part of the conversation.

What I hear in the new ways of envisioning congregations in the future – whether through "emergent" churches, house churches, or the recovery of testimony in worship – is a plea for a more dialogical approach to preaching. After all, the task of proclaiming the Gospel and interpreting the Scriptures has been entrusted to the whole community of faith, not just to the pastor.

6) One of the best gifts a congregation can give its pastor is to pray him or her into the pulpit. Throughout my ministerial career, I have been asked to be the guest preacher in a diversity of congregations. One thing I have noticed over the years is the difference it makes when I preach at a church where members of the congregation take the time to pray the preacher into the pulpit.

In the early years of my ministry, it was primarily African American congregations that did so best. A lay leader would greet me before the service began and would pray for me as I prepared to preach. During the worship service another lay leader would pray for my anointing by the Holy Spirit before the sermon began. And during the preaching moment itself, I had a strong sense that the entire congregation was praying for me, even as they also let me know how I was doing through their "call and response" feedback.

I have to confess to a different experience in some other congregations, where I occasionally felt that parishioners were crossing their arms as I approached the pulpit, with looks on their faces that said, "So – you teach preaching, do you? Let's see if you can do it!"

The last congregation I served (Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City) was great at praying its ministers into the pulpit. Before worship each Sunday morning, the lay leaders would gather with the pastors in a room adjacent to the sanctuary and would join hands as people went around the circle praying. The prayers incorporated concerns for people in the congregation who were sick or who had recently suffered loss, for the homeless who slept on our steps and in our shelter each night, for critical events happening in the life of our city, nation, or world, and always, always for the service of worship and the preacher of the day.

Whatever the future holds for congregational trends, I hope churches will surround their worship leaders with prayer. Paradoxically, nothing better grounds a preacher in the preaching moment than to be borne into the pulpit on the wings of prayer.

7) Preaching changes lives – and is here to stay. Thirty-five years ago, I took a church youth group to a conference where the preacher for the weekend presented a series of sermons on "living the Christian life with freedom." At the time I was facing a major life decision that (I am convinced to this day) would have meant the difference between living my life in freedom or living in a far less fulfilling way. Because of that preacher's challenge, I chose the freedom road, and (as Robert Frost would say) "that has made all the difference."

A few years ago, I told that story at a dinner party where, unbeknown to me, the person who had actually preached those sermons was present! Once we made the connection, I thanked him profusely for his sermons, and we both marveled at the mysterious workings of God through them.

Through the years that I have served in congregations, people have told me similar stories about sermons that changed their lives. It still happens today. Despite the warnings of the 1960s – when authority on all levels was being questioned and when preaching was predicted soon to go the way of dinosaurs – preaching has survived. Why? Because when you come right down to it, there is no substitute for one person talking to another about the goodness of God.

Whatever the shape of congregations in the future, and whatever the shape preaching takes, God is in the midst of us. And with God, amazing things are possible.

Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, Clement-Muehl Professor of Homiletics at Yale Divinity School, is the author or editor of eight books. They include Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art *(Augsburg Fortress, 1997),* Making Room at the Table: An Invitation to Multicultural Worship *(Westminster John Knox, 2001), and* Teaching Preaching as a Christian Practice *(Westminster John Knox, 2008). Her latest book,* Preaching Prophetically in a Pastoral Way*, is forthcoming from Westminster John Knox.*

Notes

1 J. Philip Wogaman, *Speaking Truth in Love: Prophetic Preaching to a Broken World* (Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), p.20.

The Hundred-Year Transition: From Protestant Privilege to Cultural Pluralism

by John B. Lindner

For the last quarter of the twentieth century, I was privileged to serve churches in both denominational and ecumenical forms of ministry at the Interchurch Center in New York, known to many simply by its Riverside Drive address: "475."

There I participated in the enormous change that unfolded within both the mainline Protestant denominations and the larger ecumenical agencies in which they played a primary role. I also witnessed the slow but widely reported decline of mainline influence – the result, ironically, of a mainline strength, its loyalty to Christ's call to unity and prophetic witness. I want to explore that paradoxical strength in greater detail.

When I arrived at 475 in 1975, many of the structures and leaders from an earlier era were still in place. As a young seminary graduate at the time, I was awestruck to find myself in meetings with leaders of churches, social movements, and nations from around the world. At the time, 475 was headquarters for several key Protestant denominations as well as the National Council of Churches. The founders' vision for 475 was to locate denominations in the same building and enable day-to-day engagement in dialogue and cooperation. Fulfilling Christ's prayer for Christian unity was a fervent goal of these post-World War II church leaders, and 475 embodied that hope.

It was the success of mainline Protestant churches in promoting a message of unity that helped bring about a new era of pluralism and inclusion, even to the extent of triggering declines in denominational loyalties.

But meshed with that hope was a deep irony. Plans for the Interchurch Center were conceived in the 1950s, the pinnacle of mainline Protestant power and privilege in American life. Yet even as the doors of 475 opened in Spring 1960, a new era was being born – an era in which mainline Protestant churches would no longer dominate American culture. In the waning years of the old century, many denominations would depart 475, and the landscape of ecumenism changed considerably from its post-World War II arrangements. Indeed 475 had become a metaphor for the change and diffusion that has taken place in Protestant churches over the last six decades.

A Fixation on Decline

As the mainline Protestant churches began to descend from their high perch in American culture and political life in the 1960s, religious commentators initiated what is now nearly a half-century of research and examination of the Protestant giants' erosion of status and power. Narratives in the press have been content to focus on numerical and political "decline," asserting how the conservative, evangelical churches were winning over the religious hearts of American from these old liberal mainline bodies.

Yet a fixation on decline misses what is at the heart of the change that has been taking place in American religious culture. If anything, it was the success of mainline Protestant churches in promoting a message of unity that helped to bring about a new era of pluralism and inclusion, even to the extent of triggering declines in denominational loyalties. The search for understanding mainline Protestant churches – and their future role and identity – is not helped or clarified by a focus on decline. It's far more constructive to identify strengths from

the past that inform present and future identity in a radically changed religious demography where no single faith group dominates the culture.

Though research has certainly identified worrisome trends regarding the well-being of liberal and moderate Protestant churches, many studies report a surprising degree of vitality in congregational life. Compared to historic European counterparts, America's moderate and liberal Protestant mainline churches (American Baptist, Disciples of Christ, Episcopal Church, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Presbyterian Church USA, Reformed Church in America, United Church of Christ, and United Methodist Church) continue to experience a much higher degree of institutional affiliation and regular participation. This is not to ignore that in the last half of the twentieth century there has been definite numerical erosion. But countering the narrative of liberal-decline-and-conservative-growth is evidence that many congregations with strong social-justice commitments experience growth.

What does it mean to be a progressive Christian? Have we spent too much energy in these last decades setting agendas in reaction to the religious right? What is a compelling Protestant vision?

Demographic Dramas

Such positive statements are encouraging, but it is also true that more than half of all mainline Protestant congregations have fewer than 100 members and are therefore financially marginal. (Approximately 10 percent of mainline Protestant congregations have 1,000 members or more.) And mainline Protestant congregations tend to be aging congregations.

Beyond such statistics, there is a larger reason for the decrease of mainline Protestant proportions within the U.S. population: demographics. A 2008 study by the Pew Center estimates mainline Protestants now account for 18 percent of the population. These churches are predominately Anglo-American churches, and Anglo-Americans with each decade represent a smaller percentage in the U.S. population that is experiencing significant shifts in ethnicity.

These trends chronicle turmoil and transformation. Yet change and uncertainty are nothing new for American Protestants. A little history can give us insight into possible future mainline trajectories.

Religious communities arrived in America in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries with a variety of notions of church, community, and government. Some came with experience as "established churches." But with the Act of Toleration enacted by the Maryland legislature in 1649, minority religious groups began to tip the scales toward non-establishment, and the colonies began to grapple with the challenge of Christian pluralism. Fierce struggles took place as diverse believers clashed over their differences.

By the late eighteenth century, a voluntary religious culture, undergirded by the right of free exercise of religion, allowed churches to organize themselves in new ways. Non-establishment and religious freedom, embedded in the First Amendment, would soon prevail as critical democratic principles. The principle of free exercise fit well with the individualistic character of Protestant theologies and ecclesiology. But a fragmented religious marketplace did not mean churches relinquished their ambitions of cultural influence. As American church historian Robert Handy argued in his classic work *A Christian America*, "The passing of patterns of colonial establishment did not at all mean the Christian hope for triumph of Christian civilization was being given up, but that voluntary ways of working toward it were being extended."

By the 1800s, the Christianization of society was well underway: Christian faith and economic striving were blended together to encapsulate a vision of Christian destiny and civilization. This marriage of piety and progress in the context of special calling (or manifest destiny) and voluntarism in part propelled the century's great missionary movements and the lead-up to Nobel laureate John R. Mott's call for the evangelization of the world in the early twentieth century.

These evolving voluntaristic movements soon embraced a broad spectrum of Christian activism – missionary endeavors, "benevolence" initiatives, revivalism. American-grown religious expressions such as the Mormons were arguably as much a part of the voluntary movements as were the Christian social movements that stirred abolition, the social gospel, temperance, woman's suffrage, and advocacy to end child labor.

Twentieth-Century Limited

In the twentieth century, boldly declared the "Christian Century," the vision of Christian America matured: social Christian ideas were everywhere, the foundational values of modern mainline churches. The growth and maturing of dynamic voluntary movements included the student Christian movement in the YMCA and YWCA, the Interchurch movement, and the Sunday School movement.

The period immediately following World War II was the climax of the era of this Protestant establishment. In the 1950s local churches continued to grow, and denominational headquarters grew with them. But growth meant leaving behind traditions: in the mainline world, the early 1950s saw the replacement of voluntary movements by professional denominational staffs serving large representative agencies, boards, and commissions. Ecumenical structures also lost their voluntaristic character, most often serving as centers for coordinating collaboration among denominational staffs.

Optimism for these new institutional expressions of Christian unity was both widespread and short-lived. In his later years Eugene Carson Blake, the renowned Presbyterian ecumenical leader, confided to a friend his surprise and disappointment that COCU (the Consultation on Church Union) was still languishing as an unfulfilled hope as late as the 1980s. He had expected an immediate positive response to his famous call for unity in 1962 from the pulpit of Grace Cathedral in San Francisco.

The triumphal hopes for a unity envisioned in this postwar period by the denominational establishment cannot be overstated. Protestant church leaders spoke with great moral authority, and they believed they were poised to achieve the unity for which Jesus had prayed. But just as the Protestant establishment approached the height of its influence, the 1960s unleashed a new force – contemporary pluralism. Globally, the decade marked the end of colonialism, the beginning of an aggressive, instantaneous media age, and the burgeoning confidence of nationalities that had previously gone unheard. In 1965 the United States passed two landmark acts of reform legislation: both the immigration act and civil rights act opened the door to new peoples – races, cultures, religions – changing the character of participation in society and gradually the ethnic racial make up of the American population. The old Protestant epoch was over.

We have been advocates for a multiracial/multicultural society. But our practice as churches looks quite different. Surveys indicate that less than 10 percent of mainline Protestant congregations are even modestly multicultural.

By the early 1970s the face of leadership was changing. Women and people of color expected to be included in leadership and to share power in the church. The last vestiges of the old voluntaristic movement, nurtured over the course of two centuries, had come to an end. A notable casualty was the student Christian movement, which was perceived as having failed to adjust sufficiently to the new pluralism.

An All-American Ethos

Yet even as the Protestant establishment was losing its central place, it lent its values of Biblical unity and justice to the national movement for civil rights and in support of the immigrant. Even though local churches were divided over civil rights, mainline church leaders were at the forefront of the action: many pastors, especially in the South, were fired for their support of racial integration. But the core of the story is that the leadership of mainline Protestant churches, hand-in-hand with leaders of historic black churches, Roman Catholic leaders, and Jewish leaders, together began to forge a new inclusive vision of America that stood for equality before the law and a spirit of tolerance – and which today is largely the cultural norm.

Only when we grasp this history can we begin to address Protestant identity for the future. I believe the spirit of freedom and voluntarism, a passion for unity, and commitment to justice are themes that remain embedded in Protestant American experience and memory. They have come to be American values.

What of Protestant values now? Protestant identity is complex. From the time of the earliest reformers, the Protestant churches encouraged both individual practices of faith as well as a social witness. In one sense, the current search for renewed identity for mainline churches is a paradox in that Protestant churches are victims of their own teachings. By valuing an ethos of the individual quest for faith, Protestant practice has resulted in a drift toward the self-authentication of truth, suspicion of ecclesiastical authority, an outbreak of freelance spirituality, launching generations of seekers. As surveys routinely report, denominational influence wanes: people are increasingly selective in the way they recognize authority of Scripture, creed, ethical and moral teaching, or ecclesial disciplines.

Youth Groundswell, Grounded

Today people move between Protestant churches with less regard for denominational labels than before. Previously, to be a member of a denomination was to be raised in an extended, even global, family with all of the disciplines, expectations, and support systems of a family. A century ago, these "vertical,"

denomination-oriented relations and loyalties were reinforced by the experiences that congregants enjoyed in the voluntary grassroots movements. Such voluntary Christian associations, including the student YMCAs and YWCAs, were the feeder systems for a vital church life, nurturing generations of committed church youth. These movements served to mentor young people, provide them with an identity in the faith, find them a role in the denomination, and give them exposure to international students and the larger church. That culture of church-oriented youth movements has largely been lost.

Surveying this history, I conclude that we find ourselves in an ongoing, hundred-year transition from Protestant Era to Pluralism. I would argue that two basic markers define a century of transition. The first is the 1960 election of John F. Kennedy as first Catholic president of the U.S., an event that marks the beginning of pluralism. The second is the projected date in the mid-twenty-first century when people of color will be the majority population nationwide.

Depositioning, Repositioning

Now almost 50 years into this hundred-year transition, Protestant churches are still reacting and perhaps subconsciously still trying to reassert a lost prestige and cultural dominance. The most common form of reaction is the restructuring of agencies and church organization, as though the problem is simply a matter of attaining organizational efficiency. Others turn to leadership strategies based on corporate models, again assuming it to be a matter of efficiency rather than a more profound struggle for a new identity.

As the former religious elites in American society, mainline Protestants find it difficult to imagine what it might mean to exist as a mere religious minority. For decades, as Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann has pointed out, Protestants could take for granted their identity when Christianity was at the center of the culture.

"In Christendom Christians needed no such effort, for identity simply came with the territory, as it always does for a dominant faith," Brueggemann wrote in the Spring 1998 issue of *Word & World*.

But that was before the "depositioning of Christian faith" now taking place, Brueggemann says. Forging a Protestant core identity now requires alert self-examination.

"The beginning point is the recognition that clear Christian identity is not a cultural given, as it might have been in former times of domination. (Christian identity) is now an oddness that requires courageous intentionality," he wrote.

Incongruities abound in transitional times. Currently, for instance, our Protestant self-perception assumes an assembly of churches that embraces the world's diversity. We have been advocates for a multiracial/multicultural society. But our practice as churches looks quite different. Surveys indicate that less than 10 percent of mainline Protestant congregations are even modestly multicultural. In an article in the *Christian Century* (Feb. 28, 2001) on the subject of racially mixed churches, sociologist Nancy Ammerman was quoted: "Mainline (Protestant) folks, for all their talk about diversity, lag significantly behind." She says there are a host of reasons for this. "One surely is the disproportionately upper-middle class, highly-educated character of traditional Anglo mainline congregations and their clergy."

For decades, as Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann has pointed out, Protestants could take for granted their identity when Christianity was at the center of the culture.

In the second half of the century-long transition to a plural society, it will be critical for mainline Protestant denominations to forge an identity with new humility as a minority among minorities. Such transformation of identity raises many issues. I will mention a few:

- What does it mean to be a progressive Christian? Have we spent too much energy in these last decades setting agendas in reaction to the religious right? What is a compelling Protestant vision?
- Finding a balance between individualism and community, or between private and public faith, deserves attention. How do we fully engage both a public community spirit and congregational cohesion?
- Is multicultural Protestantism possible? Or are the old mainline Protestant churches destined to become an enclave of ethnically Anglo churches? How much will our churches continue to be defined by ethnicity and class? What needs to change to free our congregational identities from race and class?
- What might "connectional" church life and authority look like in the future? Are mainline denominations any longer sufficient carriers of tradition and connection?
- What global, linguistic, and interfaith competencies will be required of a Protestant church in an age of globalization and pluralism?
- Can we find vigorous consensus around the meaning of the creeds and other teachings of the church?

We need to find plausible ways to express the meaning of spirituality, authority, the role of Scripture, and theology in community life as Protestant churches.

These are just a few of the questions to probe as we shape a lively and compelling life of worship and witness for the years ahead. We are navigating uncharted territory both for churches and for our society. There are no simple fixes. Though I focus here on the experience of mainline Protestants, I can imagine that my friends in historic black churches and in Roman Catholic parishes face similar challenges of future identity.

Those of us raised in the last days of the Protestant epoch have a special vocation after living through much struggle and change. We baby boomers might better be known as the Transitional Generation. Of course, every generation has a special calling for its time, and it is for us now in our later years to serve the role of community memory, to raise wise questions that point the way; like Moses we will not see the end of this journey. The young are the inheritors of this wonderful faith tradition. They will be looked to for leadership into the future.

The central story of the mainline Protestant churches should not be one of decline but one of further commitment to unity and justice, forged with creative intentionality.

In its best moments this faith tradition has been willing to be vulnerable and abandon patterns of privilege and power in order to share in community much more widely than anyone could have dreamed. The central story of the mainline Protestant churches should not be one of decline but one of further commitment to unity and justice, forged with creative intentionality.

That creativity must shape a community by ethics and liturgy, with a message that brings to our community and our children a clear and distinct story of what it means to live Protestant Christian lives in religiously plural and secular societies. The challenge is to move beyond an excessively individualistic piety as well as the old monochromatic notions of unity that were a form of cultural domination, and instead live into new notions of unity and freedom that come from sharing community with others. For that day I live in hope.

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Vitality and its Discontents

Congregational vitality faces embattled times, according to a new FACT2008 national survey of church life.

Between 2005 and 2008, fewer congregations claimed to have spiritual vitality, strong finances, and a clear sense of mission. Fewer claimed worship attendance growth of 2 percent or more.

Only 19 percent said their current financial health is excellent, compared to 31 percent in 2000 (the FACT2008 survey pre-dates the market collapse of late 2008).

The study said mainline Protestant congregations face a special challenge, because their memberships are significantly older than other faith families. In nearly six of every ten mainline congregations a quarter or more of participants are 65 or older. This is nearly three times as great as for evangelical Protestant congregations.

But this periodic survey records bright spots too. Pockets of church vitality disclose a pattern of key ingredients for strong church life, including openness to change, clarity of purpose, attentiveness to new members, and appreciation of volunteers.

It found vitality especially among congregations that emphasize hospitality to newcomers and support of lay volunteers. Such congregations are more likely to extend invitations to new people to become involved in introductory classes, take roles in worship (reading, singing, taking up offering), and get involved in a social ministry. These congregations also are more likely to provide training for volunteers and recognize their service, the report says.

Source: Fact2008, a product of the Cooperative Congregational Studies Partnership, a multifaith coalition of American faith communities affiliated with Hartford Seminary's Hartford Institute for Religion Research. See http://fact.hartsem.edu/products/index.html.

Breaking through the Screen of Cliché

By Nora Gallagher

I sat in an Episcopal church in New York at the 1 p.m. service on Good Friday. The church, a solid neighborhood parish, had survived for nearly two hundred years; outside through the dense bottle-glass windows, pear trees were coming into bloom. I was a stranger there; I live most of the year in California and am rarely away from my home parish on Good Friday. I felt both alert and shy.

I knew intimately what the priests had to do to prepare for Holy Week, and what they probably prayed as they wrote the sermons, rehearsed the liturgies, and rose day after day to face another service: "Lord, just get me through until noon on Easter."

I know something about this is because I am a hybrid: not quite "layperson," not quite "minister." I walked most of the way down the road to ordination in the Episcopal Diocese of Los Angeles, endured the dreaded "process," won the baton at the end – and stopped, just shy of the gates of a seminary.

During the process, I worked in a parish in a city near my hometown, did a lot of preaching (and still do), served communion, and designed liturgies. I've risen at 5 on Sunday clutching a sermon that still felt unfinished, and been convinced I was having a heart attack while waiting to preach it. I've checked the pulpit three times between services to make sure someone hadn't removed my sermon text from its place under the Bible. I've evoked the Solemn Collects. I've preached on Good Friday. I've watched a young acolyte keel over from low blood sugar across from me at the 8 am and for a split second wondered whether I should interrupt the service, cross the vast space between us, in front of the altar and all those people, or, well, just let him lie there.

Sitting there, I finally identified what it was that I was feeling: friends, I was bored.

After all of that, I returned to almost full-time laypersonhood, to the pew. This has equipped me with an odd double vision: I see the altar and the service from both sides now.

I stopped because I realized I was a writer, and writing is its own vocation. Very few people can handle two vocations in a lifetime and I am not one of them. But I saw, later, that writer and minister are very much intertwined. No wonder I mistook one for the other.

Only Connect

In an important sense, the writer's shaping of words is at the heart of ministry. The right word at the right time is the difference between real solace and the papering over of grief. The sermon that sings releases more than admiration in the congregation; it calls out of others the better angels of their natures. "Only connect," said writer E.M. Forster, and connection is what words at their very best do.

Deeper still is our human gift to name. We were invited in Genesis to name the world, and in each church I think we are asked to name and be named, to listen and to speak, to name the world anew.

There is so much I love about parish churches and the experience of a faith community. My nephew, who has schizophrenia and wears dreadlocks and a string bracelet hung with plastic elephants, is always welcome in the churches in his town. My priest and community gave my father's death meaning. I never know who will stand next to me at communion, whose hand might brush mine.

And that is why it took me a while to understand what was happening in that Good Friday service in New York – what the feeling was that sat on my heart and clouded my mind.

Anxious Perfectionism

The priests walked in at a stately pace. They were beautifully vested. The choir, for which this church is famous, assembled above us in a loft. The presider sang *Blessed Be Our God*. Everything that could be sung was sung: Psalm 22, John's Passion (with, remarkably, the tragic and horrific language regarding "the Jews" left unchanged). The preacher preached.

But something was wrong.

The overall feeling was an anxious perfectionism, as if a hostess were constantly adjusting her tablecloth at a dinner party, a desire *to get things exactly right*.

I was getting twitchy, irritated. I wanted to run out of the place but I could not, so I felt oppressed, the heavy hand of obligation firmly on my back. Sitting there, I finally identified what it was that I was feeling: friends, I was bored. I was bored the way I am when I listen to someone telling me nothing new or when someone gives me prepackaged, generic phrases in place of authentic feeling and experience. I was bored the way I was in fifth grade when the teacher went through a lesson I had already studied and understood. And I realize, as I write this, that it is almost taboo to admit to boredom in church.

Jesus refused to keep safe. He neither ducked his circumstances nor ignored them. In his presence, no one got away with very much.

That was brought home to me at the Yale conference to which this *Reflections* is dedicated. At a break, I said something to a youngish minister about being so bored in that service I could have cried. She replied, with some irritation, that perhaps boredom "was part of going to church," as if it were a rung on a spiritual ladder. Boredom, a new form of spiritual discipline. OMG.

A few months later, in the summer, I taught a week-long class at YDS on writing. My students were graduates of Yale; most of them were clergy.

"The Whole Thing is a Lie"

In the syllabus, I wrote that many of us were taught writing by people who meant well but did not really know how to write. "Add church lingo and religious clichés and you've got writing that often ends up solipsistic or, worse, dishonest," I said. "Participants may find that faith can be clarified or revived by the practice of good writing."

As the class began, my Good Friday experience was still on my mind. On the second day, we "workshopped" a manuscript by a woman who serves a parish on the Eastern Seaboard, a newsletter article about "celebrations." I had been worried about this manuscript from the moment I read it. The word "blessing" was used a number of times without a full sense of what was meant by it. The Bible and the *Book of Common Prayer* were quoted and so was the Oxford English Dictionary. I felt as if the writer were circling a subject that lay off to the side. It did not add up. I was bored by it.

In the class, I asked the author if there was anything she wished to say to us before we dove in. "Yes," she replied. "The whole thing is a lie."

A collective gasp went up.

"It's a lie," she said. "I don't really like celebrations. Or at least not all of them. I am not sure they are 'blessings.' I don't even know what 'blessing' means. I was asked to write this the day before it was due for the church newsletter and I wrote it as if I were asleep, read it over, hated it, and sent it in."

We burst into applause.

The week went on that way; student after student found the places in their manuscripts where either a lie was told or the truth was obscured. On the very last day, I asked a minister from Virginia exactly what she meant by the phrase in her sermon about "being cleansed by the blood of Jesus," and after some thought, she replied, "I don't know."

I realized that week that my twenty-one students, as bright and lively and passionate about their work as you could find in ministry, were victimized by the same thing that so oppressed me in that church on Good Friday: the deadening force of words that are no longer enfleshed or carry meaning. And, although I can't be sure this was the case in that church on that Friday, I will bet that there, too, was the fear of telling the truth about one's experience. Add to that, inside-the-beltway lingo, cheery optimism, unearned hope (those hasty flourishes of hope tacked onto the end of a sermon or article without letting the material itself lead us there). *Getting things right.* These are pitfalls of religious writing and they are pitfalls of church practice.

One of the talismanic pieces of writing I keep near me as I write is an essay about Vincent van Gogh by the art critic and novelist John Berger. In "The Production of the World" Berger describes going to a gathering of socialists in Amsterdam, an annual meeting he had attended for many years. But something was wrong. He felt separated from

himself, depressed. "The connection between words and what they signified had been broken. It seemed to me that I was lost; the first human power – the power to name – was failing."

Nothing seemed to work for Berger: joking, lying down, drinking coffee, not drinking coffee. Finally he decided to go to the van Gogh museum to see a friend who worked there, not to see the paintings. He needed van Gogh, he writes, "like a hole in the head." But as he walked past "The Potato Eaters" and then "The Cornfield with a Lark," he could not help but glance at them. Then he stopped and looked. Within two minutes, he was reassured, calmed, restored.

A faith community needs to be a place where we break through the screen that surrounds us and tempts us, and learn how to live.

Writing about it, Berger says some wise things about the nature of great paintings and the nature of making art. He says events in life are always at hand. But the *coherence* of events is not. He calls that coherence "reality." And reality, normally, "lies behind a screen of clichés. Every culture produces such a screen, partly to facilitate its own practices (to establish habits) and partly to consolidate its own power. Reality is inimical to those with power."

Reality, he concludes, "is not a given: it has to be continually sought out, held – I am tempted to say – salvaged."

I think we were trapped in that Good Friday service and in many of our church services and in our writing about faith, behind the screen of clichés. *The connection between words and what they signify has been broken. The first human power – the power to name – is failing.* For one reason or another, we choose not to break through. It is a screen of our own making, and one foisted on us, too, by a culture that desires clichés, to keep itself safe, to establish habits, and consolidate power. I struggle on this ground as much as anyone else: I have spent over a year trying to write a third memoir about faith without finding a way to speak truthfully about my experience. Part of my trouble is that I am simply afraid; another is that I want to be popular.

Jesus refused to keep safe. He neither ducked his circumstances nor ignored them. He described the present, as the biologist David Ehrenfeld has said about authentic prophecy, with exceptional truthfulness and accuracy. In his presence, no one got away with very much. I think he must have lived almost his entire life on the far side of that screen.

This is the antidote to boredom and business as usual. And it's where I hope we go when thinking about the future of congregations. A faith community needs to be a place where we break through the screen that surrounds and tempts us, and learn how to live.

Nora Gallagher is the author of *Things Seen and Unseen: A Year Lived in Faith* (Vintage, 1999); *Practicing Resurrection: A Memoir of Work, Doubt, Discernment, and Moments of Grace* (Vintage, 2004); *The Sacred Meal* (Thomas Nelson, 2009), and the novel, *Changing Light* (Vintage, 2008). She is preacher-in-residence at Trinity Episcopal Church, Santa Barbara, CA., and on the advisory board of Yale Divinity School.

WATER
by Philip Larkin

If I were called in
To construct a religion
I should make use of water.

Going to church
Would entail a fording
To dry, different clothes;

My liturgy would employ
Images of sousing,
A furious devout drench,

And I should raise in the east
A glass of water
Where any-angled light
Would congregate endlessly.

"What We Sing Goes Deep into Memory": An interview with Siobhán Garrigan and Patrick Evans

Marquand Chapel is the beating heart of Yale Divinity School. Diverse participatory services there daily embody the school's Christian worship values and expose students, faculty, and staff to the teeming larger world of the faith's music and prayers.

Committed to ecumenical worship, the chapel has an unusual dual role. It is a place for regular religious services, ranging widely from Lutheran vespers to Catholic footwashing to Pentecostal praise. It is also a space for teaching students the rhythms, theologies, and practicalities of liturgy and worship leadership. Whether a Marquand liturgy borrows from Celtic tradition, or New Zealand, Nigeria, Indonesia, or North America, the aim is the same. The chapel serves as a nexus of Christian spirit past, present, and future, giving students a glimpse of local liturgical possibility, a deeper sense of tradition, and an experience of world Christian solidarity.

Overseeing the work is Siobhán Garrigan, associate professor of liturgical studies and dean of the chapel, and Patrick Evans, associate professor in the practice of sacred music and director of music for the chapel.

They organize and confer with student interns, called chapel ministers, and the many others who shape the variety of worship experience there. Together they shepherd the Christian ecumenical ideals that the chapel and the school stand for.

Raised in Liverpool, England, Garrigan was a Government of Ireland Humanities Scholar. Before her teaching career, she worked extensively with homeless people. Her latest books, The Real Peace Process: Worship, Politics and the End of Sectarianism *(Equinox) and* Common Worship in Theological Education *(Wipf and Stock), will be out in the next few months.*

Evans, from Alabama, recently joined a team of church musician-teachers convened by the United Methodist Church General Board of Global Missions for two weeks in Uganda, teaching and learning from African church musicians and pastors. As a singer, he has appeared regularly in opera, oratorio, and recital performances, and came to YDS from the voice faculty at the University of Delaware.

Reflections *editor Ray Waddle sat down with both at Marquand Chapel in late August, a few days before the chapel's busy semester schedule commenced again. The following is an edited version of their conversation.*

REFLECTIONS: What ideas about liturgy are you eager to pass along to YDS students as they prepare for the wider world of church?

SIOBHÁN GARRIGAN: The program is based on five principles. My mnemonic is "DIHEP" – diversity, inclusivity, hospitality, ecumenism, and participation. It's no accident that diversity comes first. It's very important that, across the semester, each day's worship has a different feel, a different sonic landscape, a different ecclesiological foundation, because only then can people understand that difference and division don't need to be resolved by blending or unifying, that they can be entered into, loved, and engaged as they are.

PATRICK EVANS: There is multiple leadership most days, multiple voices, multiple folks involved in the planning. It means a lot of conversations, meetings, bringing people to voice, getting people's input, and inviting people to lead.

GARRIGAN: Take the fourth principle we are committed to, ecumenism, which I regard as a worldwide Christian attempt to be faithful in the midst of diversity.

Loosely speaking, there are three models of ecumenical worship. There's the "show-and-tell" method, where, if you're Episcopalian, you do Episcopalian, if you're Methodist, you do Methodist, etc. The disadvantage of this for our context is that

only Episcopalians come on one day, only Methodists come on another, etc., so we're not actually worshipping together.

The second model is the "lowest common denominator" model, where you make sure everybody can do everything, and without any discomfort for anyone. The advantage is it gives a feeling of togetherness, but it also means everything that is distinctive, native to traditions, is washed out. You never encounter difference.

In many places, worship is 95 percent comfort and 5 percent challenge – and that's on a prophetic day.

EVANS: With that model, everything you're inviting someone to do or sing, no one would object to.

GARRIGAN: The third model is the "pan-Protestant" model. But we have Catholics and Orthodox, and we want an ecumenism that includes them.

We're not running a chaplaincy here. We're trying to support a program in liturgical studies – we're trying to support the entire curriculum, in fact. And so these models work well elsewhere, but not in this specific context.

REFLECTIONS: Are you and YDS forging a fourth way?

GARRIGAN: We're working towards it. We ask people to lead entirely from their own tradition, but to open it up. What this means is people have to dig deeper into their own tradition but simultaneously think about who's going to be attending: how am I going to lead this, invite others into it, so that a Baptist and a Methodist and an evangelical can taste it? So people have to learn their ministerial chops – construct a service that has integrity within a tradition but that also invites others to participate in meaningful ways.

We support this model through roundtables and I write the *Marquand Reader*, the newsletter we put out every Sunday night. It tells you both the historical roots of what's on each week and also its place in the churches, so people are getting layers of learning – as well as the bodily, experiential learning in chapel each day.

EVANS: It's very different from leading in your church on Sunday where most everybody knows a particular way of doing things over many years of worshipping together. It means you prepare people for prayer in a different way, different homiletical and musical approaches, different ways of reading Scripture. But it also means people dig into their own traditions and discover that they contain a lot of things they didn't even know were in it.

I was recently the cantor at a big Presbyterian music and worship conference, and I was teaching some cantoring classes, and a few people in the class said, "I didn't know Presbyterians could have cantors now. Isn't that Catholic?" Well, no, there's nothing in the Presbyterian *Directory for Worship* that says you should not have cantors. But we often define worship practices locally as *not* what the folks across the street are doing, so the Presbyterian church is expected to do things only a certain way, and the Catholics are supposed to do things a certain way, and the Lutherans, and the AMEs – those differences often become generalized to worship practices that need not be that different.

GARRIGAN: Churches can end up with a very thin repertoire – unnecessarily. Part of what we teach is that each worship style or denomination has a massive storehouse of worship practice, and what you think of as normal in, say, a Methodist or Presbyterian church is probably less than five percent of what they could do – without inventing anything.

REFLECTIONS: Marquand Chapel liturgies and worship are a pivotal element in a YDS education; so many students are preparing for leadership positions in local churches. In a sense, you are teaching American churches, too, to do things a little differently.

GARRIGAN: I hope so.

EVANS: But what we're teaching comes *from* American churches and worldwide churches, too. Sometimes worship might look or feel different in this space, but none of this is invented whole-cloth just for the sake of being artistic or creative.

GARRIGAN: Regarding the sort of churches our students go into, the norm – not always, obviously, but the norm – is that you're second, third, even fourth fiddle, an assistant or associate, not senior minister. This made me realize I need to be educating these students for the church as it will be in 15 years' time, when they are in the position to effect change.

REFLECTIONS: How would you characterize the religious landscape these students face now?

EVANS: So much depends on each local situation.

If you talk about, for example, the PC (USA), you could choose two different congregations in the same town, both claiming Reformed tradition yet worshipping and living their daily community life in radically different ways, even though naming themselves in the same denomination.

GARRIGAN: The old Christian sectarianism was between Protestants and Catholics. I think the new sectarianism, which is equally pernicious, is between conservative evangelicals, so-called, and liberal progressives, so-called.

Your question might imply we are training them just for the American scene, or the American Protestant scene, but I see our role as training for an ecumenical, worldwide church. A good chunk of students do come from the American mainline churches, but there's so many who come from elsewhere, such as Catholic students, and international students – South Korea, especially – and our graduates go all over the world.

EVANS: This is one reason why we stress global song here, yes. How can the American church call itself "the church" in 2009 when the vast majority of Christians in the world live in the global south and are not European or North American?

How can we persist week after week, saying, "I believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church," the words of the creed, saying every week we believe in a global church – and not listen to other voices of the body of Christ? Instead, we want to sing this hymn the same way we've always sung it, or say the creed the same way we've always said it.

Part of what we teach is that each worship style or denomination has a massive storehouse of worship practice, and what you think of as normal in, say, a Methodist or Presbyterian church is probably less than five percent of what they could do – without inventing anything.

One of the great gifts to the North American church and the Western European church in the past 30 years has been aspects of worship from "non-Western cultures." Singing "O Worship the King" to an Indonesian tune brings out different themes in that familiar Western text. It describes a very different king. Global song gives us new theological insights, new bodily experiences. Such songs open up new windows of the spirit, and yet they're all very, very traditional; they just might not be the way we happen to have worshipped in the past.

GARRIGAN: When Patrick or others teach us a new song – say, a spiritual – by singing it, not by giving us a piece of paper to read but by standing up and singing it, and we sing back – something *different* is learned. Because of that, you know God a little differently.

REFLECTIONS: You've remarked on what we can learn from the surging global scene. But there's another reality too in the North American picture – those churches that resist this. They perhaps feel too much diversity and chaos and change going on in twenty-first century society, and what they want from their own particular Sunday congregational experience is ...

EVANS: Retreat, comfort ...

REFLECTIONS: Particularly in worship.

EVANS: In many places, worship is 95 percent comfort and 5 percent challenge – and that's on a prophetic day.

REFLECTIONS: Surely that's the world that some of these students are going to enter. Are you equipping them to take worshippers by the hand, gently, and pull them along to a different theological experience?

EVANS: In addition to training folks for 15 years from now, I do think the ways in which they've worshipped here not only gives them a glimpse of what is possible but also techniques for making things happen. I think of a local pastor here who has just started a service that is not being named as the "contemporary" service or the whatever service; it's just an additional worship service. This is an associate who is incorporating a lot of the music or the ways of praying that they've learned here. And those things work their way into the eleven o'clock service. Partly it depends on how early you have that authority.

GARRIGAN: I hope we're "bilingual." We're not just teaching people for 15 years hence, but for all sorts of situations right now. I would be really, really disappointed if students couldn't equally apply what we do to working in the large churches, the new churches, the evangelical churches, small or large. We've had several students go and work in megachurches. I hope that what we give them here is equally relevant.

REFLECTIONS: Is "contemporary versus traditional" still an epic tug-of-war? Is it evolving? Dissipating?

EVANS: There are musical movements within evan-

gelical praise-and-worship communities that are moving toward texts that are more social-justice-oriented, environmental, care for creation, and other such issues.

But polarities remain. For some, the solution 20 or 25 years ago was to do two different services. In some places that's worked, or at least worked for a bit, but play that out over 30 years, and what does that mean? In some places they've been able to sort of stay together as a church. But elsewhere it's really like two different churches meeting in the same place. The truth is, any worship we engage in is contemporary because we are engaging in it now.

GARRIGAN: For decades, where I'm from, some people have chosen to go to early Mass, others to the later Mass. Each had different hymns, a different atmosphere, a different crowd. So I don't think the recent wars were about choice, or even about worship style. I think they were about authority – theological, ecclesial, and monetary – and worship was polarized in the process.

EVANS: But this polarity can be idolatrous, because we're worshipping a style, naming the style as "the right way" or the way I like best, a personal preference. But we worship a creative and creating God, and we pray every week for the Holy Spirit to inspire us, and if we really mean those words, then how can we not sing and pray and worship in different ways? Not a different way every week, but learning a wider repertoire both of songs and ways of praying and preaching.

GARRIGAN: Don't you think it's hypocritical to pray for a new creation, which we do in some form or other every week, but then to insist that you sing all the same familiar hymns over and over?

REFLECTIONS: But isn't this traditional-contemporary dilemma a moot question for younger people? Isn't their style more eclectic – the way they absorb information and navigate through the fragmented media and assemble music through iTunes? Perhaps they can live with various worship styles side by side?

GARRIGAN: You know, I don't find them more eclectic. Too many of them are sort of repressed – don't know how to dance or hold a dinner party or tell a joke or join together for teamwork – their bodies work singly, not interactively. I don't blame them: they've been trained to interact with a computer screen their entire lives. To me, their world seems more *limited* in its practices, its options, not more eclectic.

REFLECTIONS: What are the ramifications for worship?

GARRIGAN: There's a lockdown on bodies in white American culture. This has translated into very little movement in worship, little emotion, little intimacy, and very little spontaneity.

EVANS: Churches understandably are concerned about how to attract young people. It's often the overt or covert motivator behind adding a contemporary worship service. But it's a problematic question. I do wonder how it's all going to look 30 years out from now, in terms of musical sensibility. One of the factors is the commodification of music. You used to have to buy the whole Bob Dylan album; if you heard a song on the radio you liked, you'd have to buy the whole 14 songs, and you'd listen to them and you might learn to love songs that at first you didn't immediately like. Now you download one 99-cent song, and you never hear the rest of the album. Engaging something that you don't immediately like doesn't happen as much in this day and age.

Don't you think it's hypocritical to pray for a new creation, which we do in some form or other every week, but then to insist that you sing all the same familiar hymns over and over?

GARRIGAN: Opening up realms of new experience to them is a delicate operation. You have to work gently with them, because you're working to overcome a suspicion that says, "I didn't choose this." It's no judgment on them. They have been taught to navigate the world a certain way, a way that gives them the illusion of total choice and control.

REFLECTIONS: Meanwhile, is singing in church hindered by these technological advances? Is congregational singing alive and well?

EVANS: Many people are disempowered from their own voices and their own singing – by the wider culture outside, but also within church culture. In many churches the choir is a great big mass of sound, but it's far away, not near the people in the pews. So, in many churches, if you've got a hundred people in a space for 600, people have become accustomed to listening instead of singing. We work with many methods – call-and-response, varying the instrumentation, using not just organ but piano, sometimes saxophone, sometimes flute, sometimes a cappella, having the choir process more or sit among the people – to help people reclaim their voices. These days, the music they listen to is per-

fect, because it's been all technologically and digitally corrected, and when they dare to sing, they're measuring seemingly feeble attempts against perfection. And where do people sing together in our culture? It doesn't happen so much outside worshipping communities.

GARRIGAN: That's the thing I noticed. When there's no singing in school, no pub singing, no school assembly singing, then there's no singing in churches. They compound one another.

EVANS: But the singing in many churches is for the choir, with the hope that a few people will jump in ...

GARRIGAN: ... And now there's a massive chunk of every incoming class who tried to sing once, were told not to bother by someone they respected, and literally have never sung since. I've met dozens of people, hundreds probably, who have that story here. They have to be reconnected, taught why it matters that they sing, and that it matters not what others think of their performance.

EVANS: If our repertoire is so limited that we're only singing four- and five-verse hymns, many people are going to continue *not* to sing. This argues for a wider range of worship music – not a replacement for this or that tradition, but a repertoire that might also include a three-part Indonesian chant in a different mode, a theologically and musically rich piece that might invite people to sing who haven't risked it before.

We often define worship practices locally as *not* what the folks across the street are doing, so the Presbyterian church is expected to do things only a certain way, and the Catholics are supposed to do things a certain way, and the Lutherans, and the AMEs.

When people don't sing, they don't memorize all of the beautiful, brilliant theology that worship music contains, because what we sing goes deep into memory, and is the lived theology we call on in time of trouble.

I AM A LITTLE CHURCH
by E.E. Cummings

i am a little church(no great cathedral)
far from the splendor and squalor of hurrying cities
– i do not worry if briefer days grow briefest,
i am not sorry when sun and rain make april

my life is the life of the reaper and the sower;
my prayers are prayers of earth's own clumsily striving
(finding and losing and laughing and crying)children
whose any sadness or joy is my grief or my gladness

around me surges a miracle of unceasing
birth and glory and death and resurrection:
over my sleeping self float flaming symbols
of hope, and i wake to a perfect patience of mountains

i am a little church(far from the frantic
world with its rapture and anguish)at peace with nature
– i do not worry if longer nights grow longest;
i am not sorry when silence becomes singing

winter by spring, i lift my diminutive spire to
merciful Him Whose only now is forever:
standing erect in the deathless truth of His presence
(welcoming humbly His light and proudly His darkness)

Whose Story? What Script? The Dramas of Small-Church Life

By Lew Parks

We had 39 people in worship last Sunday at Arnold's United Methodist Church of Dillsburg. None of our regulars were deterred by a late summer downpour, including Bruce (now in his late seventies) who brought his wife, Esther, in her wheelchair so they could hand-deliver a plate of applesauce raisin cookies that Esther baked for any first-time visitors. It was an unusual Sunday; they gave away two plates of cookies. Most weeks they take home what they bring.

I have been supplying the pulpit of this small church in south central Pennsylvania for a little over a year while they recover from a failed dream of significant growth, a dream stirred by a $300,000 gift. I have grown to admire the cast of characters like Bruce and Esther. I've made peace with our no-frills budget. But this I know: if I am to remain invested in this congregation, I must sense the drama of who we are and what we are about.

The Drama of Endurance

One thing is very clear to me and our church: it is not likely the membership will grow by leaps and bounds any time soon. Biological growth won't do it. We only have three or four childbearing women at Arnold's and none of them are inclined to take church growth that personally! Transfer growth won't do it. The church-shoppers try us on their way to the 24/7 full-service churches. I have become the infinitely courteous clerk smiling at the casual, one-time customer who has no intention of buying my product. And confession of faith won't do it. We get the seekers, but only one or two at a time, mostly through the slow deliberate networking of a member who is a realtor and another who works in personnel at the local pharmacy company.

Bigger is better to most of us, most of the time. I am a consumer trained for shopping in big-box stores. I drive eight-lane interstates. I appreciate the cornucopia of channels on the TV remote. Who can blame us for extending this logic to the churches we attend? I have served in mid-sized churches that get bigger and in large-sized churches that grow even larger. But Arnold's and roughly 75 percent of the churches in this country are the losers according to this logic. End of story. Or is it?

I have made up my own word for the small-church alternative to exponential growth. I use the term "dynamic equilibrium" to describe a congregation that is multigenerational, strives to live up to its core values, adapts to changes in its environment, and stays one step ahead of its losses. For a small church to sustain slow, steady growth in spite of the changes in the economy, public taste, and hurried denominational management is impressive enough. When this dynamic equilibrium, this creative dance, is measured in decades or even centuries, the achievement is truly remarkable.

The burden and grandeur of God's election are clearer in a small church. Through it all, Scripture provides counterscripts to discouragement and decline.

I do not know if we will be able to keep up with our oversized Neo-Hodgepodge building or if we

will have to abandon it. I do not know if we can outrun the loss of members to the megachurch that opened three miles down the road with its 80-acre sports complex and parade of famous gospel-singing guest artists. I do not know if we can keep up with our connectional church responsibilities: to fail there would be to wave a red flag in front of the judicatory, inviting closing from above. We are not the successful investor in an expanding economy but the everyday victim in a recession, juggling accounts and trying to make ends meet. Our median age is 68. We might finally achieve dynamic equilibrium one of these days, but it is far from certain. Now *that* is drama.

The Drama of Congregational Identity

I found a condition of narrative collapse at Arnold's when I arrived, the same condition facing hundreds of small churches. They were so saturated with the problems of their continued existence that they could not stand back from them to gain perspective. They had lost any hunger for reading Providence in the unfolding events of their life together. They were tempted to buy into others' demeaning stories and scripts about them.

Always available, for instance, is the narrative of nostalgia. Once upon a time, 100-plus people gathered for worship at Arnold's. There was a choir of twelve with powder blue robes, a full-time ordained minister vested according to the liturgical seasons. And money was no object. Glory days are a bittersweet memory, a spell that comes over them and threatens to paralyze them. I confess that some days the spell is contagious. I feel a tinge of survivor's guilt. The best and the brightest are gone, and we alone are left to tell the story.

I have found that scolding has limited impact on such nostalgia. The best antidote to nostalgia that I know is firm, measured doses of the congregation's own story. I make sure we look back to the founder, Micah Arnold, who gave the first building in 1856 (called the Dogwood Springs Meeting House). He was a middle-age convert to the faith under the influence of his adult children. At 58 he sold his milling business and followed a lay itinerant calling, then donated the first sanctuary.

We look for stories or scripts that counter the restricted images we have of small congregations today. We discover episodes of entrepreneurial spirit that defy resigned passivity. We recover hospitable and open family values to place beside the moments of failure and dysfunction. We remember the contributions to our corporate spirit of the occasional charismatic sojourner or high churchman who worshipped with us for a season. By recalling a rich past, we can meet the challenges of the present head-on and change an inherited plot of pessimism.

The Drama of Election

The burden and grandeur of God's election are clearer in a small church. Long ago in the little village of Dillsburg, PA, there were only assorted Christian believers meeting in one another's houses after work for prayer meetings where they sang pietist hymns, read Scripture, and "prayed through" at makeshift mourner's benches. Then Micah Arnold built a church and these individuals began to gather on a regular basis to "maintain worship," encourage one another's growth in faith, and plot their corporate witness, as Scripture would have it, "in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). The "not a people" became a "God's people." A small and inauspicious sociological unit became "the elect" (1 Peter 2:10).

The church members were called out to be a blessing to the nations (Gen 12:1-3). They projected themselves into scenarios of exodus, covenant, and exile. They rehearsed the plentitude of their spiritual gifts for ministry (1 Cor 1:7) and lived out all those New Testament "one another's" (love ... , do not judge ... , confess to ...) that make the most sense in a small-church setting. They concentrated on being built up (Eph 4:12). And they periodically paused to remember that their selection for this stellar part had nothing to do with their credits: "not because you were more numerous than any other people ... for you were the fewest of all people. ... It was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath that he swore to your ancestors. ..." (Deut 7:7-8). Through it all, Scripture provides counterscripts to discouragement and decline.

Glory days are a bittersweet memory, a spell that comes over them and threatens to paralyze them. I confess that some days the spell is contagious.

Also strengthening the Dillsburg congregation were counterscripts provided by the church universal's own metrics of authenticity, a rich language for measuring progress on the journey of a people of God. Could they live up to the true church's standard of unity in diversity ("you are all one in Christ")? They failed at least twice, with a church split in the '60s and another in the '80s. Would they practice the accountability and forgiveness of a community of moral formation ("holy")? There have

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been many tests. Would the faith of the apostles be passed along to the next generation in canon, creed, and hymns?

Here at Arnold's Church we are trying to become more discerning about the scripts we accept and enact. Place before us a script like *Semper Reformanda*, the vision of "always reforming," and we'll probably bite: we understand that small churches are not exempt from the call to excellence, and excellence requires us to question our behavior, practices, and structure in the light of the Word of God. But dangle before us scripts like Shame On You for Not Being Bigger or Look Who's to Blame for Mainline Decline, and we will pass, thank you very much. There are limits to what even a great actor can do with a bad script.

We had 39 people in worship last Sunday at Arnold's of Dillsburg. Drama was in the air with scripts provided by the Bible and the church universal. The God who elects a people as unpromising as we may appear to be was in attendance. It was a pretty good day.

Lew Parks is Professor of Theology, Ministry, and Congregational Development at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C., where he also directs the seminary's doctor of ministry program. An ordained United Methodist pastor in the Central Pennsylvania Conference, he is the author of Preaching in the Small Membership Church *(Abingdon, 2009) and co-author of* Ducking Spears, Dancing Madly: A Biblical Model of Church Leadership *(Abingdon, 2004).*

THE PASTOR'S WIFE CONSIDERS THEOLOGY
by Nola Garrett

What's that word for remembering?
***Anamnesis?* Yes, like when I hear him**
murmuring his way through them towards me,
The body of Christ given for you.
The body of Christ given for you.
He might as well be a bread machine:
The body of Christ given for you.
Black shoes arrive and above an alb;
he is before me
being and giving the host.
I look up and meet him square.
He is opaque,
no flicker of remembering
his body searching mine last night,
last month, last year. Only
The body of Christ given for you.
All is now:
my pastor in alb and chasuble
and my soul wearing me.
It is a strange relief.
He moves on,
the kind machine distributing
The body of Christ given for you.
The body of Christ given for you.
I look down at the body-bread he's given me,
find the good brown crust –
my favorite part,
torn off the loaf just for me – my future
rushes in: hope and coming and Him.

A "Mixed Economy" of Church in a Post-Christian Marketplace

By Becky Garrison

During my stint in the charismatic wing of the Episcopal Church USA in the mid-eighties, I kept hearing about some amazing alternative worship services happening in the United Kingdom, such as the Nine O'clock Service and the Late Late Service. In the United States, some of us were experimenting with our own new forms of worship, but without the benefit of much cross-pollination across the big pond. That was unfortunate; we might have learned something from each other.

As international missiologist Andrew Jones reflected on his blog *Tall Skinny Kiwi* in 2004:

> The disconnect in the USA between church culture and secular culture was much greater than UK. Radical change in worship forms was accepted into the church in the UK, but American churches closed the doors to new forms, or perhaps they thought their current forms were successful enough. The result is that believers involved in dance culture in the USA often bypassed the church and took their worship straight to the clubs, coffee shops, poetry slams, concerts, raves, galleries, and to whatever environment would accept it.

Eventually, a number of us left the U.S. charismatic crowd when it began lifting hands in support of the political right. Call it luck, fate, or the hand of God, but I reconnected with this global spirit in 2004 when I reported on the HipHopEMass services transpiring in the Bronx. Soon I was introduced to the work of Jonny Baker, one of the leaders of Grace, a Christian alternative worship community in London. Jonny and his friends showed me how they had moved from planning cutting-edge worship services to forming actual Christian communities that explore a rule of life and other spiritual practices.

Baker describes how Grace-London was begun by people who wanted to do something different because they were frustrated with church. As he explained to me, "They felt like there were two choices in terms of worship in the church at the time. There's kind of a liturgical tradition which feels like it has depth in terms of liturgy and so on, but people experience it as dry. On the other hand there's contemporary worship with charismatic songs and preaching that can kind of seem passionate and exciting for a season, but it doesn't really touch on the hard realities of life."

Now that the U.S. is starting to show serious declines in church growth and perhaps entering into its own post-Christian era, mainline church leaders might want to exchange stories with their UK counterparts, who have been pondering a post-Christian milieu for decades.

One of the first things I noticed when I visited Grace and many other UK emerging services in 2007 was the absence of a pulpit or altar as the centerpiece. These leaders tend to see themselves as facilitators or curators who work in the background,

similar to a DJ, rather than placing themselves front-and-center. The ethos of the service is influenced by all of the community members rather than shaped by a charismatic leader. Participants bring in the technologies and media of their everyday lives – TV, video, iPods, computers, face-to-face conversations. These tools are employed not to create cool worship but rather to connect participants with each other, using those particular pieces that speak to them. Grace's gatherings often have an ambient chill backbeat throughout the service and feature video loops and movies, types of entertainment that speak to this urban crowd.

Steve Collins, a member of Grace who has blogged about the development of alternative worship/emerging church culture, describes alternative worship as "what happens when people create worship for themselves in a way that fully reflects who they are as people and the culture that they live their everyday lives in." He explains: "Because most forms of church have become culturally disconnected from the wider world, alternative worship can seem like a radical break with conventional church practices."

Instead of eschewing culture, these communities seek to follow the example of Jesus, who both immersed himself in the culture of his day and challenged it.

Instead of eschewing culture, these communities seek to follow the example of Jesus, who both immersed himself in the culture of his day and challenged it. Each service is informed by the uniqueness of its specific setting; a service in London, Manchester, and Oxford will take on the vibe of the particular city's cultural milieu.

Present-Day Ancient-Future

Many of these communities embrace an "ancient-future faith." Collins elaborates: "Alternative worship searches the traditions of the church for resources that fit the needs of the present. Christianity has a rich storehouse of spiritual treasures. Many of these lie neglected or forgotten, but they have renewed relevance. Others have been exhausted by overuse and need to be rested, or have become irrelevant to current needs of the church and the world. Alternative worship tries to interpret tradition faithfully into these new contexts. But this may mean changing the form in order to preserve or revivify its meaning."

This growing church culture unfolds against a backdrop of UK churchgoing decline over many decades. Children's Sunday school attendance, for instance, has drastically plunged over the past century, dropping from 80 percent to 12. The Church of England has responded to the alternative spirit by launching "Fresh Expressions of Church" in 2004. This joint initiative with the Methodist Church seeks to recognize new Christian communities that attract those who are not members of a traditional church.

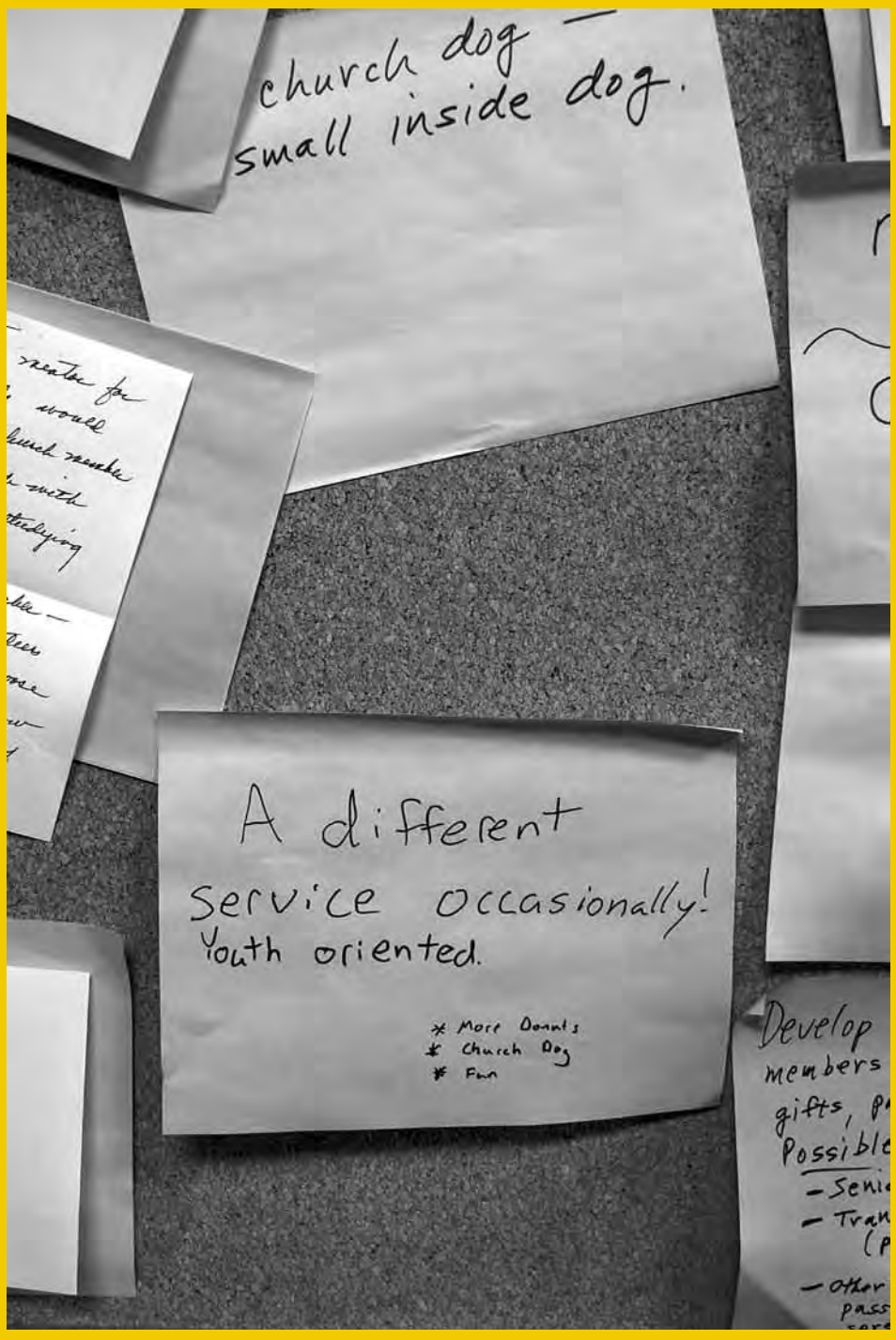
By 2005, the Church of England declared that 39 percent of parishes reported starting "fresh expressions," many aimed at occasional and non-churchgoers. More than two-thirds of the fresh expressions involved youths under 16. They range widely from unique church plants to worship services that have made only minor changes to their format. Many of these initiatives might not be included in parish statistics at all, the report said. But the sheer volume of these projects testifies to a general acceptance that churches needed to try new forms of faith and could not continue operating as they had in years past.

Endorsing the Fresh Expressions venture, Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, cited what he termed "a mixed economy of church." Mixed economy recognizes the continuing relevance of traditional forms of church, but it also acknowledges there are people who no longer connect with parish-based ministry. By 2008, the Church of England established a formal means of recognizing these new forms of church that don't fit within the existing parish system.

The Rev. Steve Hollinghurst, Researcher in Evangelism to Post-Christian Culture at The Church Army Sheffield Centre in England, says the UK scene now boasts a growing diversity of traditions available for creating experimental churches. He explains: "Fresh Expressions represented the Church of England coming to terms with evangelical church planting. ... These church plants were diversifying to reflect a growing awareness that Britain was in effect a cross-cultural mission field."

Interactive Prayer Stations

Now that the U.S. is starting to show serious declines in church growth and perhaps entering into its own post-Christian era, mainline church leaders might want to exchange stories about forming new forms of church with their UK counterparts, who have been pondering a post-Christian milieu for decades. Christian scholar Phyllis Tickle observes, "These cultural/religious shifts in the UK were clearly active, discernible, and describable at least 20 years before they were nearly so visible and coherent in this country, making observation of what is happening in Britain, Ireland, and Wales a very useful and sometimes predictive exercise for North American observers."


church dog —
small inside dog.
A different
service occasionally!
Youth oriented.
* More Donuts
* Church Dog
* Fun
Develop
members
gifts,
Possible

In her work with deepshift.org, Linnea Nilsen Capshaw says she is beginning to see signs of openness and support in the U.S. for young mainline church planters who are called to create new forms of faith communities in their local context, not just planting the "models" of past decades.

Throughout my travels, I've seen how U.S. worship pioneers such as the Rev. Karen Ward, Abbess of the Church of the Apostles (COTA), a joint Lutheran-Episcopal church plant based in Seattle, have created similar ancient-future communities. Like her UK counterparts, a leader like Karen helps spiritual seekers discern what kind of community they want to create rather than setting herself up as a self-proclaimed expert who has the magic elixir or quick fix for curing what ails the church. As part of COTA's service, a time of quiet called "Open Space" allows spiritual seekers to encounter several interactive prayer stations.

U.S. worship leaders seeking to learn how new communities express themselves in their own cultural context can check out the innovative work of Proost (proost.co.uk), an artists collective that provides liturgies, music, videos and other worship materials from alternative worship/emerging communities. Though most of the resources are from UK-based groups, U.S. church plants such as COTA in Seattle have contributed resources. Also, Greenbelt UK, a Christian music, arts and social justice festival founded in 1974, has come to represent a major annual international gathering hub for those interested in exploring new forms of church.

Here's a sampling of alternative web sites:

www.alternativeworship.org
anglimergent.ning.com
www.apostleschurch.org
www.churcharmy.org.uk/ms/sc/sfc_eote.asp
www.emergingchurch.info
www.freshexpressions.org.uk
www.greenbelt.org.uk
jonnybaker.blogs.com
www.missionshapedministry.org
www.proost.co.uk
www.sharetheguide.org.uk
www.smallfire.org
tallskinnykiwi.typepad.com/tallskinnykiwi

Becky Garrison '92 M.Div. is a senior contributing editor for Sojourners. *Her books include* The New Atheist Crusaders and Their Unholy Grail: The Misguided Quest to Destroy Your Faith *(Thomas Nelson, 2008),* Rising from the Ashes: Rethinking Church *(Seabury, 2007), and* Red and Blue God, Black and Blue Church: Eyewitness Accounts of How American Churches are Hijacking Jesus, Bagging the Beatitudes, and Worshipping the Almighty Dollar *(Jossey-Bass, 2006). Her latest book,* Jesus Died for This? *(Zondervan), will be released in July 2010.*

An Ancient-Future Congregation, in Its Own Words:

Church of the Apostles (Seattle, WA) is a *young, emerging, Episcopal and Lutheran mission congregation. We are a future church with an ancient faith* ... In the story of Jesus, we have glimpsed God's future and know that *"thiscouldchangeeverything."* So our purpose is to *helpgodchangeeverything,* by participating in God's future, within today's culture and our local zipcode, living and serving in intentional, sacramental community in the way of Jesus Christ.

Worship: Apostles' worship is neither "traditional" nor "contemporary" but *ancient-future*. Ancient-future liturgy speaks across generations and draws equally upon ancient (hymns, chant, candles, communion) and techno-modern (alt. rock, art, ambient, projection, video) sources, so there is no need to "check your culture at the door." So, come as you are, wear your jeans, show your body art, tote your java, and be @ home spiritually, with God, and among friends.

Ways to serve: Church of the Apostles is a spiritual *co-op* for the soul. As a *co-op,* we share our gifts and talents in love of God, in community with each other, and in service to our world.

Values: Mission and friendship, authenticity and economy, community and friendship, service and mercy, tradition and innovation, truth and becoming, beauty and wisdom, joy and serendipity. (For example):

• **Joy and serendipity**: Because Christ calls us to abundant life ... we seek to live joyously in the light of God's presence and celebrate the release and freedom that life in the spirit brings. Ever aware that the movements of the spirit are both uncontrollable and unpredictable, we seek only to surf the holy wind, breathe deep God's holy presence and enjoy the holy ride.

Source: www.apostleschurch.org. See the web site for a description of the church's worship, values, ways to serve, home-group activities, theology pub, and other events.

LILLIAN DANIEL *and*
MARTIN B. COPENHAVER
Foreword by PETER J. GOMES

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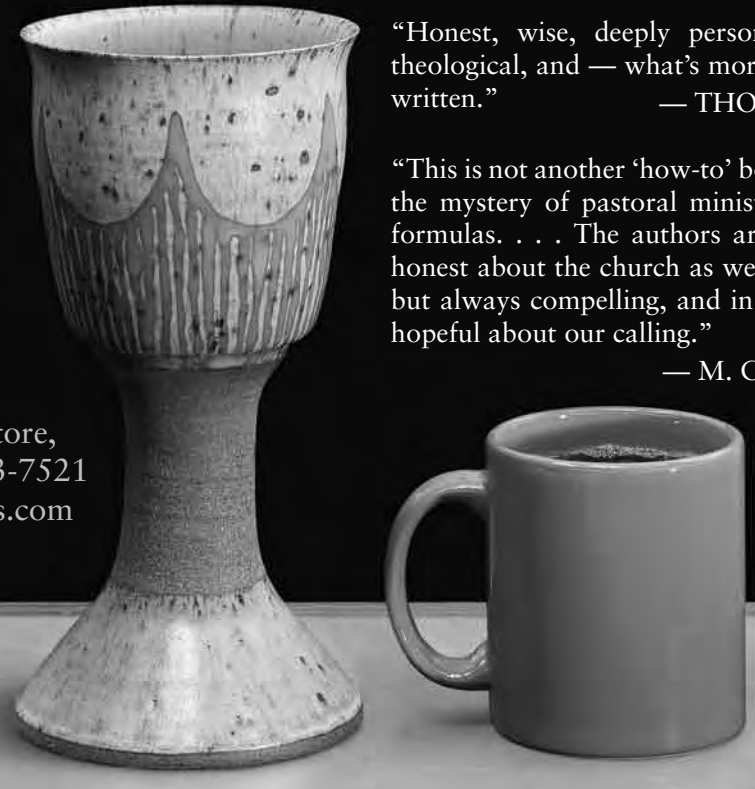

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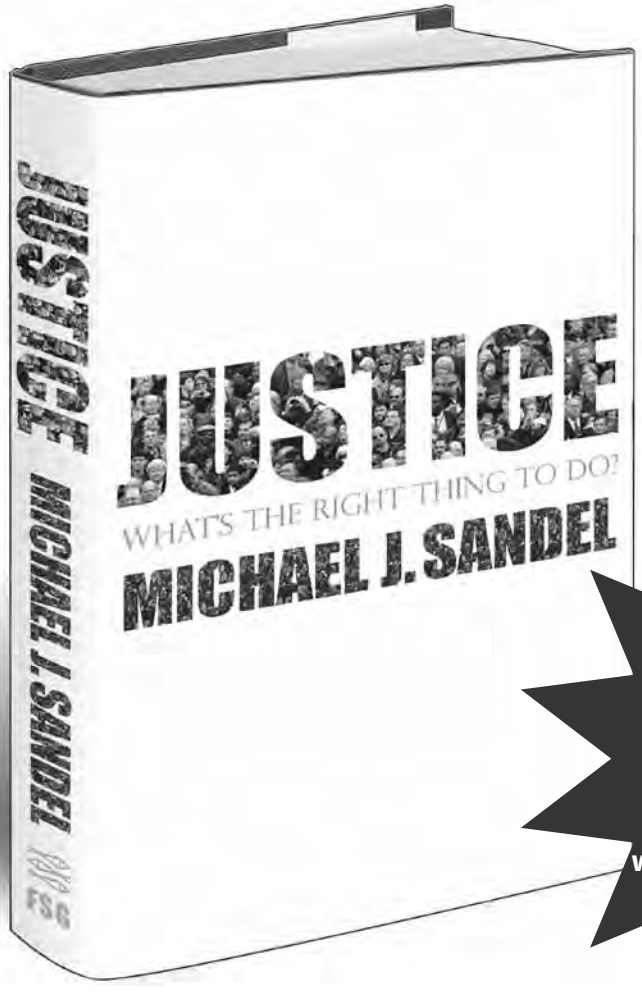

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