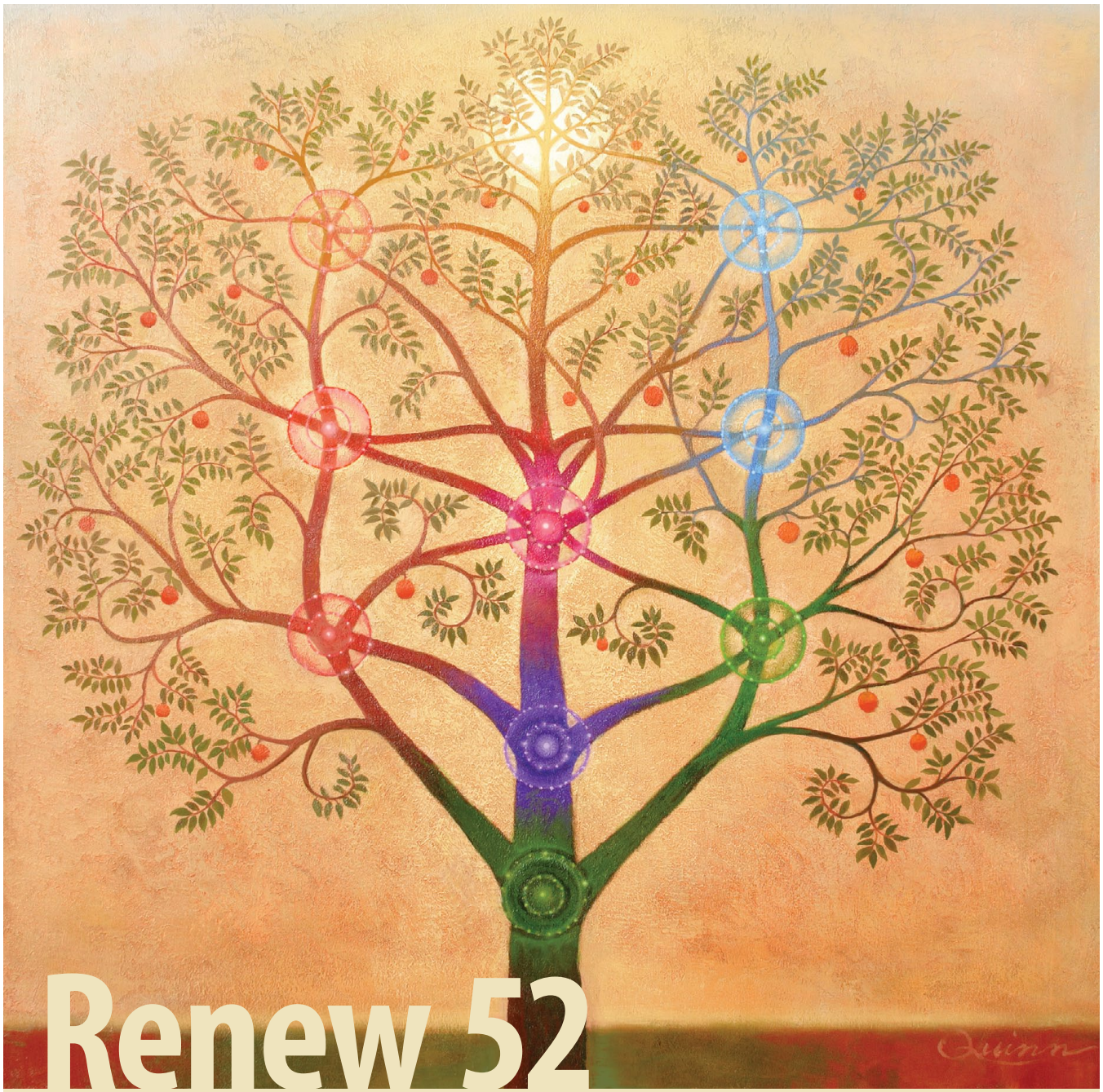

Renew 52

Ideas to Change the Church

50+ Ideas to Revitalize Your Congregation From Leaders Under 50

Edited by David J. Lose
Luther Seminary

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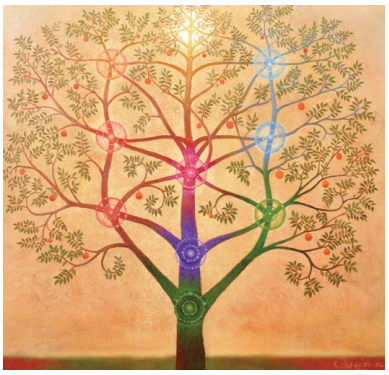

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Introduction

The Renew 52 Project: Who, What, and Why Now?

By David J. Lose

I don't know about you, but I'm tired of people complaining about the decline of the church.

Don't get me wrong, I'm as aware of the dismal statistics as you are. But I'm tired of hearing them for two reasons. First, precisely because *we already know them*, I'm just not sure how helpful it is to repeat them to ourselves endlessly. Second, because it's *not the whole story*. There is a lot of growth, a lot of potential, and a lot of hope in our congregations as well as decline. Moreover, the Spirit is moving in exciting ways and I am firmly convinced that we are on the cusp of exciting, if unpredictable, renewal.

And I'm pretty sure I'm not alone. You, for starters, may feel the same way—aware of the challenges but far more excited about the opportunities in front of us. Recognizing that we're not alone is important, as **together we are a lot more likely to participate in the Spirit's renewal** than you or I could possibly do alone.

Moreover, the movement we are a part of is growing, and this book is evidence of that. *Renew 52* represents the faithful and creative efforts of more than fifty Christian leaders from 15 different faith traditions writing from a variety of contexts and ethnic backgrounds, and all of whom share an incredibly important conviction:

Congregations are a primary place where the Spirit is at work for the renewal of the Church and spread of the Gospel.

This conviction is important because there are a lot of folks who have all but given up on congregations and, along with it, their leaders. Most tragically, some of the people who have given up on congregations and their leaders are, in fact, the very people appointed to positions of leadership in the first place.

But not the folks writing this book!

Each of them has had her or his share of challenges and setbacks, but each has also learned from those and continues to dream, work, plan, write, learn, hope, and lead. And this book pulls together more than fifty of their best ideas for congregational renewal.

A quick story about how the book came together. A year ago, three things collided to push me to do something different:

1. I'd grown convinced that the way I was taught to lead—and the way I was teaching others to lead—was no longer adequate to the needs of the church and world. **Too much had changed too fast to just keep doing it the way we always have.**

2. I found a network of people who felt the same… and were doing something about it. I didn't actually know all these people personally, but I was reading their blogs, their online articles, and some of their books. And it was a great feeling to **discover my tribe**.

3. I stumbled onto the work of Seth Godin, not only his work on marketing, which has been incredibly helpful to me, but also his work on publishing, where he is challenging the status quo and convincing a lot of us that while it's a very difficult time to be a publisher, **it's a great time to spread ideas.**

In sum, I realized that something needed to change, I knew a lot of folks who could help make it happen, and I discovered we had the means to share what we were learning and thinking and dreaming with just about anyone who was interested.

So the invitation went out to fifty leaders all under the age of fifty (that was the original "hook"—clever, eh?) to **write up one great idea they had for congregational renewal** that they wanted to share. And the word "share" matters, as this project was meant from the beginning to be a gift, as all the contributors did their work without compensation to produce a resource that anyone interested can download and use for free.

Then things started growing—that's often what happens as a great idea spreads—and other folks heard what we were doing and wanted in. Before long, we had more than 50 authors and so the book went from *Renew 50-50*, playing off the original hook, to *Renew 52*, inviting folks to read a good idea a week for a whole year. (Ultimately, we ended up with 54 contributions, but we liked the rhyme and reason of *Renew 52*, so there it is. J)

While I've organized the 54 contributions into seven categories, the truth is that many of those placements were somewhat arbitrary: an essay in the children, youth, and family section could just as easily have been placed in the leadership section and so on. Further, the Table of Contents is *not* meant as a reading plan. You might find it helpful to read through the essays as ordered, but you're just as likely to find it useful and enjoyable to jump from topic to topic or essay to essay as the Spirit directs or need dictates (and those are not always mutually exclusive!).

As you read, take note of which ideas seem to prick your imagination or tickle your fancy. Let your mind wander to how you might adapt or apply that idea in your context.

And then try it. Do it. Put it to work. And let us know the results.

We're hoping to create **not just a book, not just a resource, but a movement**—a tribe and generation of lay and ordained church leaders who are willing to poke the box (to borrow again from Seth Godin), to place cherished assumptions on the table, and to challenge the conventional wisdom. Together we can make a difference.

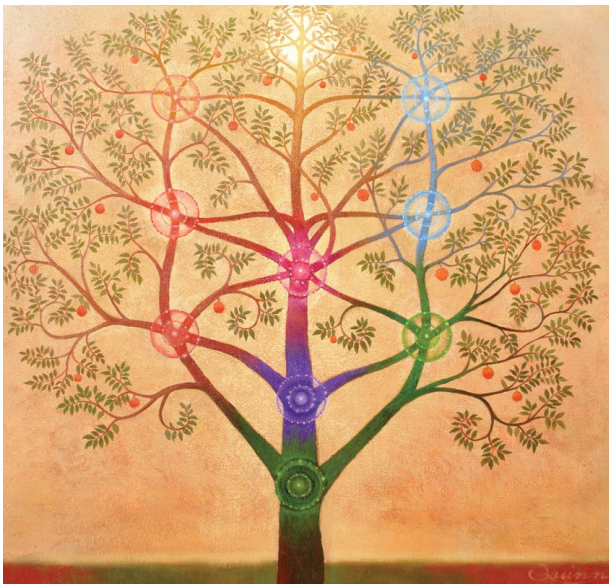
Which brings me to two requests:

1. If you find it helpful, share this book as widely as possible. Colleagues, friends, neighbors, whomever. After all, it's free! So blog, tweet, like, pass along, promote—we'll be grateful for whatever you can do to keep the fire of renewal spreading.

2. Take note of the good people who contributed their time and effort to make this possible—read their blogs, check out their books, offer a prayer of thanks for their faithfulness and creativity. And know that they are also praying for you!

So there it is—the process by which the book you are reading ended up in your hands (or on your Kindle, iPad, or Nook). And a suggestion or two for sharing the Spirit of renewal that animates it.

One last thing: before leaving this introduction, a few brief words of thanks are in order: to Christian Piatt and Adam Copeland, my first partners in recruiting the talented folks who created this volume; to Rolf Jacobson and Joy McDonald Coltvet, who offered additional helpful suggestions; to Ben McDonald Coltvet and Martha McCreight, instrumental in moving the book from idea to reality; to the Lilly Endowment, whose sponsorship of the Vibrant Congregations Project has supported the production of this book; and to the donors of Luther Seminary, whose generosity, faithfulness, and vision make it possible for me and others who work here to think differently, dream big, and take some risks for the sake of the Gospel.



LEADERSHIP

Start with 'Why' to Invite Others into the Vision

By Sara Hayden

How many of us relate to (or are guilty of) this announcement?

> "The Christian Education Team needs 20 people to sign up for 45 minutes to be with the kids during Sunday school this fall. We're asking all parents to take their turn. You don't need to do anything beforehand since the lesson is already prepared. Once you complete your turn, you are done until next year. The earlier you sign up, the more flexibility you have on possible dates."

Inspiring, right? What about this, instead?

> "Sally, you know that the new vision of First Church is to proclaim, enjoy, and share the good news of God together as disciples of Jesus Christ. This year, we have a class of five kindergarteners—something we haven't had in ten years! We want to proclaim, share, and enjoy the good news of God with them and nurture their formation as disciples of Jesus in a special and meaningful way on Sunday mornings. Your name has come up as a person who would bring unique gifts to this ministry as it develops. It's an awesome opportunity to nurture your own faith. Would you prayerfully discern if you feel called to serve in this way?"

Same topic, different approach.

My idea for churches seeking renewal is to start with the "why," the big reason for which the church exists. Every ministry and detail of the church should flow from and come back to that. People are generous and exceedingly gifted by God. Is it not true that we—ministers, staff, and laity—want to share our gifts toward something whose purpose we understand and believe in? Start with the "why," then work out the details.

To do this effectively, your congregation needs a good vision. Some theorists call this a vision statement. Others recommend that a church have a vision and a mission statement. I use the terms interchangeably. The goal is to identify the purpose for which your congregation exists. It should come from God's story. It should connect to Scripture. It should be concise and easy to remember. It should be general enough to be relatable to all people and ages. Finally, it should be *really* important. Something you can base your life—not just the congregation's ministry—around.

If you haven't thought about your congregation's vision in a while, or if it's number nine on a list of ten things to tackle with the church board during its spring retreat, trust me: attention to this matter is time incredibly well spent. A congregation that lacks a clear vision sets itself up for unnecessary conflict, malaise, and apathy. A congregation that knows, believes in, and lives out a great vision is a church empowered to effectively share and enjoy the promises of God.

It will take some time and some faithful people to spiritually discern or reform the vision. Once you have it, make sure you repeat it—often! People have a lot going on. They may not hear or "take in" the vision the first fifteen times it's announced. The vision should be present enough so anyone walking in the door will know what this congregation is about.

Each Sunday, have someone share aloud the vision of the church in worship. Print it everywhere. Start your board meetings and committee work by reflecting on how the agenda relates to the vision. Teach it to your children, talk about it when you are out and when you are at home (Deuteronomy 6:4-9) Here is a good litmus test: If the congregation doesn't consider a vision important enough to occupy that much space in people's lives, then the vision it has is probably not important enough.

People become a part of congregations whose actions and behaviors match the values and vision they set for themselves. Make sure new and long-time members, staff, and ministers are good stewards of the vision. As a rule, people trust and open themselves up to those who "walk the talk." Of course, a bunch of humans, however Christian we are, will not always get this right. That's okay. People outside the church are not looking to join a bunch of "perfect people," either. But a statement that acknowledges our authentic attempts to live into something that makes a real difference in our world and in our lives—and honest confession when we fall short—provides a model pattern for the Christian life.

I have a colleague whose congregation asks new members to sign a covenant promising two things: "I will deal with conflict God's way," and "I will be a steward of the vision of my church." The church is growing, my colleague says, because those within and around the church have rejoiced to see the consistency between what the church *says* it believes, and what it actually does.

Sara Hayden is a native Kansan Presbyterian minister living in Atlanta, Ga. She serves as executive director of the Tri-Presbytery New Church Development Commission (NCDC), which strategically advances the vision to Grow Christ's Church—deep and wide by developing and supporting diverse missional faith communities of the Presbyterian Church USA. NCDC shares great resources for all churches on its website at www.tpncdc.org, and on its Facebook page.

Live in Hope by Proclaiming Christ's Death and Resurrection

By Martha Moore-Keish

"Proclaim Christ's death and resurrection." That might sound like an utterly impractical, abstract idea for reinvigorating the church. But it's the best advice I have for a church looking for renewal.

Many Christian leaders these days are anxious about the future of the church, afraid of declining numbers and shrinking budgets.

And many of us are also anxious and fearful about the world: economic downturns, ecological crises, violence among nations, and more.

Fear drives a variety of responses. Some of us are tempted to despair, seeing only death all around us. We recount the somber statistics, lamenting that things are not what they used to be. Alternatively, fear can inspire avoidance. Weary of grim headlines, we "accentuate the positive," focusing only on the happy endings in sermons, movies, or human interest stories on the news. Beyond despair and avoidance, fear can also motivate a frenetic search for something that we can do to fix the problems.

Proclaiming Christ's death and resurrection is a great antidote to all three of these anxious, fearful responses.

First, Christ's death turns our eyes unflinchingly to the pain of the world. On the cross, Christ is lifted up publicly, a victim of religious and state violence. He refuses to walk away from the depth of human pain, and so neither may we. Death is real, and we rightly lament.

As I write this, thousands of small churches in my own denomination are projected to close in the next decade. The median household income in the United States has declined, and unemployment remains high. Three quarters of a million people are at risk of starvation in Somalia. These are not facts for us to ignore. In his novel *Les Miserables*, Victor Hugo writes, "he who does not weep does not see." The Christ who faced his accusers and his disciples with arms opened wide on the hard wood of the cross does not let us avert our eyes from human suffering. And if we have our eyes open, we must weep. Proclaim that Christ has died, then, to avoid the trap of avoidance.

But second, when we proclaim that Christ is risen, we take a strong stand against the trap of despair. In Christ's resurrection, God has shown us that death, though real, is not ultimate.

How does this help an anxious congregation? It is surely good news to hear that even if the lifespan of a particular community comes to an end, even if the building is sold, not even that ending brings an end to the mercies of God. If God has raised Christ from the dead, then we have hope in God's power to bring new life out of every apparently hopeless situation. A congregation set free from anxiety over its own decline might actually wrench their attention away from themselves and begin living in the confidence that Christ is alive and at work in the world. A congregation focused on Christ's resurrection rather than its own survival might even thrive.

How can we renew the life of the church? This question itself may arise from the third anxious response: the suspicion that we alone are responsible for the future of the church, and if we do not get it right, we have failed ourselves, our people, and God.

Yet the good news is this: *We* do not renew the church. Just as we are not responsible for raising Christ, we are not responsible for raising the church from death. We *are* responsible to testify to what we have seen: that God brings life out of death, and we live in that hope.

This impractical advice might shape many different aspects of church life. In baptism, we can focus more on Romans 6:3-4 and its startling association of our baptism with the dying and rising of Christ. At the Lord's Supper, we can

hold up the connection of the broken bread with the broken body of Christ; this meal does proclaim that Christ has died. Yet it is not a funeral for Jesus, and it should not feel that way. We can proclaim the words of Luke 24 together with the Last Supper narrative and help our congregations wrestle with the tension of that juxtaposition.

At every funeral, we can give voice to deep grief and also offer strong testimony to the promise of resurrection. And perhaps most importantly, every time someone in a meeting raises an anxious question about the future of the local church or the denomination, we can remind them that Christ has died and been raised from the dead, and therefore "neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come ... nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:38-39).

Martha Moore-Keish is an associate professor of theology at Columbia Theological Seminary, where she teaches and pursues research interests in liturgical, Reformed, ecumenical, and interfaith issues. She and her husband Chris are both ordained ministers in the Presbyterian Church (USA). They have two daughters, three cats, and a flock of urban chickens.

Listen Well Through Social Media

By Verity A. Jones

Last year, the New Media Project at Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York conducted six case studies of congregations, institutions and networks that are using social media in innovative ways. As the director of the Project, I was struck by how many pastors, especially younger pastors, use social media for basic pastoral care. They use social media to listen to their flock. What a great idea.

Eugene Cho, the pastor of Quest Church in Seattle, says, "One of the job duties of pastors is to know our congregations, to know the flock that we're ministering to. Social media, in part, is a platform by which people are sharing about their lives. … Social media has helped provide a place where I get a chance to check into people's lives throughout the week, here and there."

Pastors are checking in, but also listening to what concerns parishioners may share online.

Nadia Bolz-Weber, the pastor at House for All Sinners and Saints in Denver, once introduced a conversation on Facebook about an upcoming sermon topic. The format enabled her to hear the deeply embedded associations many of her church members had with the particular Bible passage she had chosen. She was so astonished by their negative reactions to the passage that she changed her sermon to address their concerns. She used social media to listen closely to the concerns of folks in her church.

How else might a pastor or church leader listen well using social media?

First, consider that more and more members of your church or community are on Facebook. The number of Facebook users worldwide is larger than the population of most countries. If that's where people are, perhaps you should check it out.

Then, when using Facebook, don't think you have to post status updates all the time. Read the updates of others for a while instead. Consider what you see or hear therein. Perhaps you could pray for the people you read about on Facebook.

Perhaps all you need to do is "like" their status update or comment to show that you've seen or heard them. I think of the "like" button on Facebook as my own personal "I see you" button, à la the film, *Avatar* in which the lead characters learn to convey love by saying to each other, "I see you."

If you are overly concerned with adding your own clever updates or comments on other people's Facebook updates, you may miss an opportunity to listen well.

Listening on Facebook requires being present on Facebook, just as it does on Twitter. A couple of years ago, a blogger named MickMel ran a blind test on 11 churches in the Atlanta area who featured their Twitter accounts on their website. MickMel mentioned the church Twitter handle in a Tweet and asked what time worship was on Sunday. Of the 11, only one church responded with an answer.

His conclusion? Most churches likely didn't see his request because they weren't paying attention, or they were following so many people that his question was lost.

His advice? If you are going to use Twitter as a church, it's important to devote the time it takes to notice, listen, and

respond to your Tweeps, both near and far. Applications like TweetDeck and HootSuite make it easy to track Twitter and Facebook accounts, including a mentions column that tracks all of the church's call outs.

Listening to the people of God is an essential part of good pastoral ministry. Why wouldn't we use all the tools at our disposal to listen well?

Adapted with permission from an April 6, 2012, post by Verity A. Jones on the New Media Project blog.

Verity A. Jones is the project director of the New Media Project and a research fellow at Union Theological Seminary. Her work has also appeared in The Christian Century, Biblical Preaching Journal, *and* Journal for Preachers. *She is a graduate of Yale College (B.A. '89), and Yale Divinity School (M.Div. '95), and an ordained clergy person with joint standing in the United Church of Christ and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).*

Seize the Opportunity to Talk and Teach about Money

By Nathan Dungan

Where do families go to learn healthy money habits? The issue is more urgent than ever. Are youth learning the right habits from adults? Are congregations helping to shape wise financial values in young people? It is crucial for faith communities to reflect on what role, if any, they are playing in helping youth and adults think and talk about money and the power it has in their lives.

For more than twenty years, I've worked with faith communities on how to lead effective workshops that teach healthy money habits. Specifically, I work with them to devise systematic ways to help youth and adults develop and maintain good money habits that are consistent with their values.

I wish I could say I've witnessed a tremendous transformation in faith communities. It would be nice to report that the majority of congregations now have well-articulated strategies for teaching wise financial values in an aggressively materialistic climate. But for a few exceptions, however, little is happening.

Living at extremes

When it comes to the subject of money, families live at emotional extremes. At one end is silence, born of discomfort or fear or taboo. But at the other end is rancor—the loud voices, embodying worry about jobs, anxiety about savings, or family conflict over financial priorities and planning. By default, these extremes are what young people see and learn from.

Dramatic increases in debt, now considered normal for so many young adults, don't just magically appear when young people turn 18, 20, or 25. The path to debt starts much earlier in life—age 5, 8, or 10 in the form of unchecked spending habits.

My intent is not to demonize spending. Quite the contrary, spending should be joyful. But when the overwhelming consumer message directed at children teaches them to spend first, save little, and share what's left, the imbalance is palpable and poisonous. Our ability to be generous is in direct proportion to our money habits and overall financial picture.

How are families going to break unhealthy patterns of communication and behavior if they don't have places to go and learn how to do money differently? Surely congregations should step forward as a resource.

I am convinced that money literacy is not simply a matter of learning about compound interest, credit scores, or the benefits of tax-deductible contributions. In fact, the *interaction* with money is just as important as the transaction. By interaction I mean our ability to talk openly and thoughtfully about money by sharing our family stories, our money mistakes, and, yes, our values.

Present-day solutions

Let me offer an example of a model that faith communities could replicate. Good people in the Episcopal Diocese of Colorado and the Colorado Episcopal Foundation are working to engage, educate, and equip congregations to take hold of the issue of money and hyper-consumerism for the benefit of youth and adults in their communities.

In 2006, leaders there asked me to keynote at the annual conference of the Colorado Diocese. At the end of the conference they invited any church in the diocese to participate in a future training session based on my *Share Save Spend* curriculum. The goal: educate congregations and equip them to lead multigenerational workshops on the

topic of money, values, and the culture.

Today, nearly forty congregations have been trained in this interactive, multigenerational method. The result: hundreds of youth and adults are discovering new and more sustainable ways to link the choices they make with their money (share, save, spend) with their values and their faith journey.

The congregations of the Colorado Diocese saw their mission as not just to raise money for the annual budget, but also to find new ways to help people engage in conversations that connect faith, money and values.

Return on investment

In a study of stewardship practices of the United Church of Canada (1999-2004), Barbara Fullerton discovered that when congregations offered some type of personal financial training for their members, overall giving was *44 percent higher* versus congregations who offered nothing.

The success of any financial training initiative depends on key elements of follow-through: identify the need, create a thoughtful strategy and achievable action plan, have articulate and passionate leaders, and stay the course despite adversity.

The current economic environment offers a unique moment for reframing the conversation about money and its role in our lives. Now more than ever the church needs to step up and reclaim its voice as a countercultural leader. Millions of youth and adults are eager to live differently and to think more deeply about aligning their faith, money, and values with a sense of call to be the people God created them to be.

Nathan Dungan is the founder and president of Share Save Spend®. For over 20 years, he has interacted with thousands of families to help them align their values with their money decisions. Nathan speaks and consults nationally with organizations and families on the topic of money and the effects of the consumer culture on money habits. His latest interactive book and DVD for families, Money Sanity Solutions: Linking Money & Meaning, *was released in Fall 2010. Learn more at sharesavespend.com.*

Start Dreaming and Imagine Church Anew

By Sarah Walker Cleaveland

"In my dream, the angel shrugged & said, If we fail this time, it will be a failure of imagination & then she placed the world gently in the palm of my hand"—Brian Andreas

I believe the church today is suffering from a failure of imagination. We have a long and distinguished history of being the church and this tradition has served us well. It allows us to function and helps us remain faithful to God's call. But I wonder if we are too comfortable with this tradition and history. I wonder if we are resting too much on the foundations and structures provided by those who came before us.

I have attended, worked at, and visited more churches than I can count. And while each congregation, each community, incarnates God's presence in their own unique way, I find there is a sense of the expected in each of them. When we gather to worship on Sunday mornings we know what to expect. When we become involved in the governing of the church we come to know what to expect. We know what our committee meetings will look like, how long they will take and, often, what their outcome will be.

When we sit in the pews on Sunday morning and hear Scripture readings and sermons it is often as if the stories of our faith have become *old* news rather than *good* news. We are suffering from a failure of imagination: a failure to imagine the new ways in which God is calling us to be church, to do ministry, to be Christians.

When we look to the Bible there are plenty of sources for inspiration. Sarah and Abraham get pregnant at an old age despite the medical impossibility and their own disbelief. David defeats Goliath despite severe and obvious disadvantages and all logic. The Canaanite woman convinces Jesus to heal her daughter despite the protests of the disciples and Jesus' own sense of his mission only to the children of Israel.

When we read these stories we are often called to strengthen our own faith based on the good works God can do in hopeless situations. But if we reread these passages, I believe we can also hear a call to renewed imagination and renewed hope in the promise that God is moving in mysterious and challenging ways.

Combating a failure of imagination is both simple and challenging. It is simple because all it requires is that we begin to imagine anew. It is challenging because often we are unsure how to begin. If we keep in mind that our goal is to allow God to challenge us into new visions of, and practices in, the church, our ministries, and our lives, then it becomes clear that there is no formula—no one way to do this; it will look different in every ministry, every congregation, every life. With that said, allow me to offer a few suggestions to prime your imagination and get you dreaming.

What if we re-imagined our image of God? A common spiritual practice is to recall our images of God from different periods in our life: how did you envision God when you were a small child, a teenager, a young adult, or a new parent? What would happen if we acknowledged those images, including our current vision, and challenged ourselves to imagine God differently? How could that new image shape our ministries? Our sense of call? What new places in the world, our community, our Church, might this new vision of God invite us to explore?

Or, what if we took a familiar Bible story and forced ourselves to find something new in it—something that had never occurred to us before? What if we looked for the most scandalous interpretation we could find or think of? What might this "new" story be calling us toward?

Finally, what if we invited our church into a period of dreaming and imagination? What if we held a retreat or an afternoon session in which we encouraged and prompted people to dream anew about God's call to live into the

Kingdom of God? And, what if we actually went about putting some of these new dreams into practice—even if we knew they would fail? What might we learn about ourselves, our ministry, our God, and the call to risk?

In the name of the ever-present, ever-challenging, ever-new Spirit, may God inspire you with new dreams and imaginations for your ministry and your life.

Sarah Walker Cleaveland is a spiritual director and doctoral student studying Christian Spirituality at the Graduate Theological Union. She received her M.Div from Columbia Seminary and her Th.M. from Princeton Seminary. She is married to Adam Walker Cleaveland and she procrastinates doing her school work by caring for their baby boy, Caleb, and playing with their dog, Sadie. She currently lives in Ashland, Ore.

Plan for Growth: Focus on Vision, Worship, and Social Ministry

By Wayne E. Croft

In 1965, Donald McGavran organized the School of World Mission at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, Calif., which was the institutional home base for Church Growth studies. Since then church growth and megachurches have received an increasing amount of attention. There are numerous books, articles, and even dissertations on church growth. Although the congregation I serve does not meet the "megachurch" criteria, we have experienced significant spiritual, numerical, and financial growth.

When I arrived in 1992 at The Church of the Redeemer Baptist in Philadelphia, Pa., as the interim pastor, the membership was 177. The church had experienced a split causing the membership to decline. Within the first year, however, our church received 123 members into our fellowship; one year later I was elected pastor. Each year we experienced spiritual, numerical, and financial growth. Today our church has approximately 1,500 members.

I am often asked the question, "What do you contribute to this growth?" My first response to this question is *vision*. If churches want to grow spiritually, numerically, and financially there must first be vision: "Where there is no vision the people perish" (Proverbs 29:18, KJV). Churches have watched their membership decrease due to the inability to develop, articulate, and cast a vision.

One of the reasons most churches do not survive or grow is because they are focused on the past. Vision never focuses on the past; it has future dimensions to it and it looks to the future, imagining the results. I imagined Redeemer being the church it is today. A growing church must have vision and that vision must be shared. The prophet Habakkuk is told to "write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it" (Habakkuk 2:2). I learned early on in my pastorate, *writing* and *sharing* the vision are the most important concepts of a growing church. When vision is shared there are those who will assume responsibility and run with the vision. A vision clearly articulated, shared, and not selfishly owned has the potential to cause a church to grow not only quantitatively but also qualitatively.

The other concept that contributes to growth is *worship*. A growing church is sustained by powerful worship. There must be an emphasis on worship being relevant, incarnational, transformative, and filled with hope. Since our church is located in one of the poorest neighborhoods in Philadelphia where there is significant crime, unsafe streets, drug trafficking and addiction, unemployment, dilapidated/abandoned housing, teenage motherhood and the like, we could not deny that we were situated in an area where people are looking for hope.

If one's worship experience does not offer hope, then both the community and church will suffer. "Hope transcends human longing or desires. Hope remains at the center of the gospel of Jesus Christ and therefore at the center of Christian theology. The Christian faith is hope-based and hopeful. It's a hope that is grounded in an intrinsic relationship with God and God's action."[1] People come to our churches asking, "Is there a word from the Lord?" The church must be able to answer that question in the affirmative and with authority.

The last, but not final, contributor to church growth is *social ministry*. When referring to social ministry I refer to the service of a local church that seeks to address specific needs of its community, developing a nexus between the local congregation and its geographical and socio-political context. I came to the realization that if our church was to grow, it was imperative that we not only have ministries to reach those within our church but those outside as well. The people in our community needed hope *and* help, and we needed to offer both.

The Old Testament portrays God as Liberator, involved in the social life of Israel. The New Testament illustrates Jesus, and others, as being socially concerned and involved as they addressed the needs of society. A growing church emphasizes that personal conversion, moral renewal, and sanctification should manifest themselves in acts of justice, charity, and service in the wider world.

As a result of our social ministries (i.e., food cupboard, Community Development Corporation, job placement, housing assistance, low income child care, and the like), our church has experienced tremendous growth. We have felt the heartbeat of the community and our growth has not been limited to numerical expansion but also communal growth.

In an age where megachurches are spotlighted, small churches can also revitalize a community and grow their ministries through *vision*, *worship*, and *social ministries*. They can bridge the gap between the church and its community and experience internal and external growth. Remember, church growth is not simply about numbers. It is a community of faith growing together to transform the lives of those within and without the church's four walls.

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Learn from Facebook: Implement Constant, Incremental Change

By Tony Jones

Facebook was in the news this week.

The fact is, I could have written that sentence just about any week over the past several years. Actually, it's rather shocking that when this company makes a minor adjustment to the user interface, not only do people complain about it on their Facebook walls, but the *New York Times* prints a front-page story on it.

By Google's count, there were 3,000 news stories in the week following the transition from the personal profile to the timeline. Some decry this as the end of civilization as we know it, and others revel in the change. When Facebook makes an even minor change, users respond.

Part of the reason is the sheer size of Facebook's user base. There are about 850 million profiles on Facebook, making Facebook's population larger than every country on Earth except China and India. Some of those profiles, of course, are duplicates (I have two), and some are inactive. But over 100 million people use Facebook daily. Another few hundred million log on at least once per month. That is an astounding adoption rate, unprecedented in the history of humanity.

There's a very important lesson for the church in the way that Facebook innovates.

Not a week goes by that Facebook doesn't change something significant. What used to be on the top header is now in the right sidebar; then the whole profile gets pitched in favor of the timeline. The group function, which a lot of our churches used initially, gets phased out in favor of pages. Then a whole new group function is introduced.

MySpace didn't change for a long time, then—when it was too late—rolled out a complete overhaul of their entire site, causing mutiny among its remaining users. Facebook adopted the opposite tack. Facebook is socializing all of its users to expect *constant, incremental change*.

They change something; people complain; there are news stories on it; the change sticks.

That's the pattern. Facebook surely does market research before they make the changes, and they listen to criticism. But they are ultimately not persuaded by the inevitable backlash. And they do not cater to the sticks-in-the-mud among their millions of users.

When Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook's founder, stood up in front of a sold-out room at a tech conference to roll out the changes in timeline, he didn't mention the criticisms of the changes that had been in the news for a week. He was introduced by comedian Andy Samberg, who did a spot-on impersonation of Zuckerberg. "We're going to change the universe!" Samberg shouted; then he chuckled and said, "I say that every year."

That punchline got a laugh not just because of Zuckerberg's oversized ego. It's also because change is a refrain at Facebook. You might say that change is their one constant.

An easy punch line at a church supper is just the opposite: We don't change. Isn't that funny? Actually, it's not.

Even as the world changes around us, we church leaders have socialized our people into thinking that the church is the one institution in their lives that will not change. They can't drive cars without catalytic converters, because the government won't let them. They can't use rotary dial phones, because the phone companies no longer support that technology. They don't wear the same eyeglasses they wore 40 years ago, or watch a black-and-white television. Yet they expect the church to stay just the same as it always has: same music, same rhythms of life, same values.

Further, because of the very biblical value to listen to even the most undervalued and marginalized voices, the malcontents often have an inordinate amount of say in the life of the local congregation. Those who complain the loudest get the most attention. And, suffice it to say, the malcontents in a congregation almost always stand against change.

We have basically done the opposite of Facebook: *we have socialized the people of the church to expect no change*. Then, when we, as leaders, want to make a change, be it major or minor, we get so much push-back that it's paralyzing.

When I speak at pastors' conferences, the blame for the church's inability to change is often laid at the feet of parishioners. But that's incorrect. Facebook's hundreds of millions of users are not demanding constant change. We didn't ask for our profiles to be changed to the Timeline. No, the leadership of Facebook made that change. Then they massaged us and cajoled us into the change, and that was made much easier because they've inculcated a *culture of change*. This is just one in a long line of changes.

Leaders in the church would do well to learn from this. And there's no better time than now—immersed in a world of rapid change—for the church to become a site of constant, incremental change.

This chapter is adapted from the forthcoming book, Like Me! Lessons for the Church from the World of Social Media *by Tony Jones. Used by permission.*

Tony Jones is the author of many books, including The Church Is Flat: The Relational Ecclesiology of the Emerging Church Movement *and* A Better Atonement: Beyond the Depraved Doctrine of Original Sin. *Tony is theologian-in-residence at Solomon's Porch in Minneapolis and an adjunct professor at Fuller Theological Seminary. He blogs every day at Theoblogy. He is a speaker and consultant in the areas of emerging church, postmodernism, and Christian spirituality.*

Take Care of Yourself Because Your People Need You

By David L. Everett

One of the more intriguing aspects of congregational leadership is the time spent serving the congregation versus the time devoted to self-regeneration. Congregational leaders commit so much time and energy to meet the demands of their position that they spend very little time attending to themselves. This results in a constant battle of selfless versus selfish.

The ensuing battle is a spiritual and leadership conundrum! From a biblical perspective, it is exactly what we are not supposed to be—"Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves" (Philippians 2:3). And yet, in a practical sense, it is a definite requirement—"How can a leader pour out that which hasn't been put in?" (Jim Collins, *Good to Great*). We need not only to serve others but just as importantly, we need to ask the question, "What about me?" Let me stress, however, that this is a matter of balance: You should not always concentrate on your "self," but you should also be careful not to lose yourself. Here are a few ways to ensure that you don't lose "you":

1. **Be prayerful.** Prayer is powerful tool that the Bible tells us to use continually (1 Thessalonians 5:17). Praying for strength, understanding, and wisdom will go a long way.

2. **Accept your limits and realities.** Leaders have the uncanny ability to try to do everything! But why do *we* have to do everything when God is better suited than we will ever be? Releasing something is not the same as refusing it! The former requires submission, the latter borders on repression.

3. **Become comfortable with criticism.** No matter who you are, you cannot please all of the people all of the time. My grandfather used to say, "If Jesus was perfect and he had critics, what makes you think you won't?"

4. **Find time for you.** Taking time out from others and away from things allows you to relax, refresh, recharge, and more importantly, return! Life has a propensity to deaden even the most attentive person. If you do not get away from time to time and take the opportunity to enjoy something other than the challenges you face as a leader, the bright colors of life will begin to fade into shades of gray.

5. **No "guilt garages."** In our home, what started out as a garage has turned into a storage unit. We have piled so many things into the garage that it no longer serves the purpose for which it was intended because it is holding onto things that either no longer work or no longer have any use—we just refuse to let them go. Feeling guilty about being conscious of "self" serves no purpose; just let it go.

So right now, if you have a life that looks like my garage, filled with chaos, clutter, and debris, sort through it all and find you. Perhaps you have become so consumed with any and everything else, that you have lost you, your joy, and your peace. You are like a car whose odometer indicates that it be brought in for diagnostic analysis and complete check-up.

Before you find yourself stalled emotionally, physically, or spiritually, please ask, "What about me?" That will allow you, in the end, to serve your neighbor and the Lord even better.

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Change Your Self-Image from Performer to Coach

By David J. Lose

Think about how most ministers are trained in seminary. They are trained—we were trained!—to *do* things. In particular, we were trained to execute certain skills—preaching, teaching the Bible, offering pastoral care and counseling, and so forth. Ministers are trained to perform certain religious tasks on behalf of a congregation.

This "performative" model of ministry—so called because it emphasizes *performing* certain activities—served the church well for the last century or two. It was particularly effective when the larger culture was, if not Christian, at least highly supportive of church life. For many years, in fact, going to church was considered not simply normal but actually desirable, a mark of education, civility, and good moral standing. Further, and not all that long ago, the larger culture actually helped ministers tell the Christian story by teaching it in the public schools and showcasing it on televised Christmas and Easter specials and the like.

Curiously, while we all know those days are pretty much over, we haven't necessarily changed the way we think about professional ministry and often find ourselves surprised that we now live among a generation of Christians who a) no longer privilege going to church over other activities and b) do not know the Christian story very well. As a result, more and more of our people simply don't find the Christian story helpful in navigating their daily lives, and so increasingly wonder why they're spending their Sunday mornings in the pew.

In response to this drastically changed situation, pastoral leaders also need to change. In particular, *we need to stop executing religious skills for our people and train them to perform them for themselves*. Otherwise, they will continue to be spectators, appreciating the faith but never really learning how to do it for themselves.

When my kids were young, we started them in violin lessons. They've been playing now for about a decade, and I sometimes think about where they'd be if each week they spent their hour-long lesson listening to their teacher play. That wouldn't have been a bad way to spend an hour, when you think about it, as over time they would have learned much of the Western canon of violin music, to appreciate classical music more generally, and to recognize and value good technique and musicianship. But despite all this, they never would have learned to play the violin themselves.

There have been several generations of ministers trained and commissioned to perform the Christian story to the delight and edification of their congregations. But while we have trained a multitude of Christians to *appreciate* the Christian story, very few of them can tell it themselves, either as a guide to their daily decision-making or to share with others. And I think the only way to reverse this trend is to re-make our self-image.

In previous generations, it was common to compare ministers with two other well-educated and well-respected professions: doctors and lawyers. While I have great respect for doctors and lawyers, however, I am increasingly uncomfortable with this comparison, as you typically go to these professionals when you need expert counsel on something you know you can't do yourself. After all, most of us wouldn't prescribe medicine for ourselves any more than we would represent ourselves in court.

But does this model serve us well, where ministers are the experts who perform specialized tasks for our people, tasks they could never do themselves? Don't get me wrong—I greatly value the expertise we develop in seminary, but I hesitate to endorse a "cult of the expert" that sets up some as "doers" and others as "receivers" or, even worse, "consumers." So I want to prod us not to abandon expertise, but to deploy our expertise differently.

With that in mind, let's go back to our opening list of some of the skills we learn at seminary: preaching, teaching, and pastoral care. Can part of our task not only be doing these things well but also teaching our people to do the

same? After all, why can't everyday Christians learn to interpret Scripture, make connections between faith and life, and share their faith with others—all of which are elements of preaching and teaching? And why can't our congregations learn to visit, listen to, encourage, and pray for each other—elements of pastoral care?

Of course they can learn these things—as long as we teach them.

So let's shift our self-image from doctors and lawyers to coaches and teachers, highly skilled people who are capable not only of doing these things very well, but also of the more challenging task of helping others to do them for themselves.

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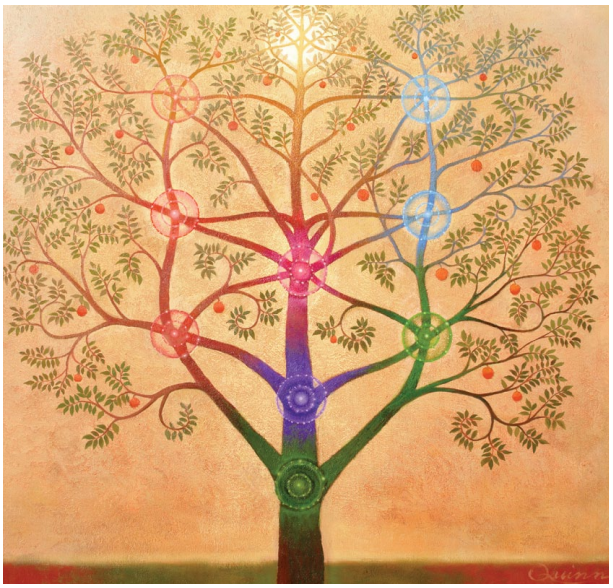

COMMUNITY

Make Space for Questions

By Adam J. Copeland

A significant part of my job consists of taking young adults to lunch, to cafés, or perhaps to enjoy a happy-hour special at the bar. Usually these 20/30-somethings are not members of a particular faith community, so I listen very carefully to what they say about their values, faith, and views of the church. Nearly all the young adults I meet tell me they wish they had a place to consider the questions they have about faith and life. Contrary to popular opinion, the young adults I encounter would love to find a supportive community in which to ask faith-related questions. But, from their perspective, many churches aren't actually open to their questions. With this in mind, my idea for the church is that congregations make space for open and welcoming consideration of all people's faith-related questions.

Asking questions is a basic human trait. How many children go through phases when their go-to response to any statement is the question, "Why?" How many thousands of discoveries have humans made in our search to answer questions? And yet, in many congregations, curiosity is not encouraged. Question-asking—at least for those post-confirmation age—has receded from the agenda. Too often our churches act as if questions are only appropriate for secular life. In a variety of ways we communicate that church must be a place where only those with answers are welcome. Instead, I propose that Christian congregations embrace a new openness to faith-related questions.

Practical Ways to Welcome the Inquisitive

For some people, the church building itself may be perceived as a barrier to question-asking, so let's first consider some opportunities to make room for questioning outside our church walls.

For example, your congregation could host a theology discussion at a local restaurant or bar. Make each session's topic a question (for instance, "What's the point of salvation?" "Can faith and science coexist?" "How does God speak?"). In my experience leading such events, the challenge quickly becomes getting folks to stop talking and go home at the end of the night!

The arts can serve as further opportunities to welcome people's questions. Consider hosting a chat after a theater production that takes on faith issues, or tour an art exhibit with an eye toward faith. Some congregations even have space in their buildings that could be used for art studios and installations. Sponsoring local art projects and partnering with artists shows openness to those who are curious and inquisitive.

In my experience, a focal point of many individuals' faith-related questions relates to interfaith and ecumenical issues. Welcoming public conversations with those of other faith traditions can go a long way to also welcoming Christians with questions.

Though I have noted a few possibilities for special forums and events outside the church walls, there are also ample opportunities within more traditional models. For example, when I served as pastor in a small rural congregation, I led a series of intergenerational classes on big questions. Instead of meeting in different age groups, the whole church education program came together to consider topics such as "Is God on Facebook?" The setting allowed youth to share their experiences using social media via their cell phones while also giving an opportunity for elderly members to reminisce about the time when a first phone (of any kind) was installed in their farmhouse. The classes' novel nature—and the intergenerational aspect to the conversation—became a positive topic of conversation in many corners of our town.

Finally, churches might take worship-related questions head-on by providing a special worship service in which worship leaders explain the reasoning behind each element of worship. For example, instead of launching into the confession of sin, the pastor would explain (perhaps through a Q and A format with another leader) why we confess

sins each Sunday. Rather than actually giving a sermon, the pastor could explain what sermons do and why we read the Bible each Sunday. Taking a service to reflect on why we worship as we do shows a congregation concerned not with "going through the motions" but open to self-reflection and engaging questions.

Years ago St. Anselm wrote, "Faith seeks understanding." It's just as true then as it is now, that with knowledge of God comes a search for a deeper understanding of God. My experience with 20/30-somethings, especially, has shown that many of them yearn to find communities in which to ask faith-related questions—not to be immediately spoon-fed an answer, but to be surrounded by a group open to faithful questioning and conversation. So I'll close with a question of my own: will your church welcome the question-asking stranger?

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Introduce Postmodern Seekers to Jesus

By Amy Reeder Worley

Dogma. Catechism. Creed. These are modern words, each evoking suspicion in the postmodern mind.

Disdain postmodernism if you will. Argue about its philosophical merit or moral implications. But in the parlance of my profession, it is an undisputed fact that young people, Generation X-ers and younger, view the world through postmodern eyes.

Born after the assassination of President Kennedy, post-Watergate, at the end of or after the war in Vietnam, this group of people generally does not hold to absolutes. Our experience is of a world where long-standing taboos were re-forged into normative value judgments. Unlike the Greatest Generation, our wars were not fought against an identifiable axis of fascism. Rather, we have lived among the ashes of the War on Terror and the military deployments in Bosnia, Kuwait, Iraq, and Afghanistan. We don't enjoy a common secular enemy in communism. Rather, the world as we see it is at war over God—a *jihad* against the West in retribution for years of Western imperialism.

What does this mean for the church and its leadership? It means that the church, which has enjoyed centuries of presumed legitimacy, must now welcome into the fold the doubters, seekers, and the "spiritual-but-not-religious"—the children, that is, of post-modernity who are quite comfortable in the world of the indefinable. It also means that in order to speak to such people, the church must change the manner in which it speaks and address a new lack of presumed legitimacy as it moves into an era of less privilege and power.

We under-50s are not looking for a church that answers all of our questions, but instead are seeking a community of faith where we feel comfortable asking them. Just like people for millennia before us, we are moved to find spiritual answers. But we aren't satisfied with literalistic, dogmatic answers that do not hold up to reason. Not only are we postmodern, we are post-Enlightenment. We need to understand our faith as much as feel it in our heart. Churches that insist on adherence to a literal reading of the Bible will find their pews emptying as their congregation ages. We under-50s believe in evolution and are fascinated by quantum mechanics and the possibility that answers about God may be found in physics labs or on rocket ships. Our science and religion must go hand-in-hand.

Many of us haven't been raised in a church and we want to talk about questions that traditional churches sometimes take for granted. What is God? Where did the Bible come from? How should it be read? What does the Bible mean for marginalized groups like African Americans, Latinos, and women? We need to understand what it means to be Christians in a world where fundamentalist Christians are mocked on late night TV. If church isn't radical, it isn't interesting. And if we don't understand it from the ground up, we aren't likely to sign on.

The good news is the old news. Jesus is the answer to the postmodern problem. An anti-imperialist radical himself, Jesus would be right at home among us latte-toting under-50s. He would call us to action, to be God's light in the world. Postmodern churches must root themselves strongly at the feet of Jesus, because it is there where the cornerstone of the church rests and the faith stands most strongly.

Rooting ourselves in Jesus gives us a common, living center—the ready and able shoulders of the Lord. Centering the church in Jesus removes fear of questioning tradition too much. Jesus was not about tradition. He thwarted it, turning over the tables of the moneychangers in the temple. Jesus asked why. He did not take the presumed legitimacy of the Jewish aristocracy of Judea for granted. Rather, he offered another way. It is that way, the other way, which keeps the church relevant today.

Finally, it is Jesus' message of hope, his Kingdom message that speaks to the postmodern seeker. Jesus was intentionally inclusive; he sought out the untouchable and dined with them. So should the church. Jesus called upon us to feed the hungry and provide aid to the sick. So should the church.

A church that focuses its message on Jesus, on radical grace, will remain relevant in postmodern times. It will not fear doubters and seekers. It will, like Jesus, welcome them with open arms. It will intentionally wipe out tribalism in the church, which scares away would-be comers. It will lovingly redirect literalists, who fear change. And it will proudly stand upon the Gospel of Jesus Christ as relevant and vital in the world today, the postmodern world.

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Avoid McDonaldization and Advocate Distinctive Discipleship

By Ronnie McBrayer

"McDonaldization."

I love that word. It was first coined by sociologist George Ritzer to describe American culture in 1993. The predictable, robotic means of producing hamburgers and fries, according to Ritzer, has overtaken our society. Like one giant automated system, everything in our culture—from fast food to childcare to education—rolls off the assembly line to be delivered to the consumer in order to save time, money, and effort. Ritzer contends that what is saved by means of efficien cy is, however, lost in taste, creativity, and naturalness.[1]

Scottish theologian John Drane has rightly applied the term to contemporary spirituality. For the most part, he says we have lost our spiritual imagination and daring.[2] I think he's right. I also think McDonaldization applies specifically to the American church. We have so motorized, organized, and institutionalized the church that songs, sermons, programs, and prayers just roll off the spiritual assembly line. The religious consumer can then peruse the products and make their purchases.

Churches have become chains or brands so that if you've been to one, you been to them all. Every movement and word is orchestrated to ensure the customer is guaranteed a consistent experience, for efficient production is the most important thing, even if creativity and authenticity must be sacrificed in the process. What are actually produced are congregations where appearance is more important than substance. Sound-bite, quick-fix consumers are targeted at all cost. Don't risk the customer going down the street to another spiritual one-stop-shop that offers all the latest products and services with a 30-day-money-back guarantee if not completely satisfied.

As Christians, we want so much for our churches to "succeed" that we will go along with most anything the culture decides is successful. Whatever will draw a crowd, whatever will fill the offering plates, whatever will keep people in the pews. These we will embrace without discretion or good judgment. After all, if the goal is to make the church bigger and better, then this is what we should do. Raise the sanctified golden arches and use whatever method will ably deliver the goods to the religious shopper. Just get the right preaching, the right music, adequate parking, proper advertising, and the most alluring programs. Then people will surely flock to the campus. It is a "build it and they will come," approach to faith. But is this even the point?

What if efficiently "succeeding" isn't the goal at all? What if having the biggest and finest crowd isn't the primary objective? What if our carefully controlled, mass-produced spirituality ends up being a distraction to true growth? Instead, what if the goal is for us to learn to be partners together on this journey of following and becoming like Christ? What if the goal is to be the unique, counter-cultural, community of God? What if the goal is to love our neighbor and aid people in becoming who they were created to be? Then, with all our big plans and strategizing, we probably have our ladder propped up against the wrong wall. While the culture around us can cookie-cutter its marketing plan to draw the biggest crowd, this does not mean the same practice is right for the church.

Now, I am not suggesting that our churches should be anti-growth or that they should not be places full of life and growth. I am not saying that at all. On the contrary, we may be fortunate enough to have an abundance of energized fellow-travelers on this journey. Yet, I am saying this: Churches should cease in their efforts to build spiritual shopping malls and focus instead on helping people become committed followers of Jesus. This may reduce our attendance numbers and the financial bottom line, but without a doubt this will increase our distinctiveness and our credibility.

Jesus did not teach, bleed, and die to give birth to a super-sized American corporate entity concerned with expanding its market share. Jesus bled into existence his own body, the church. Consequently, the church does not have a

product to sell or merchandise to pitch to would-be consumers. Spirituality cannot be mass produced, wrapped in wax paper, and put under a heat lamp. Genuine spirituality must become a way of living; an alternative lifestyle; a collection of people who become what Jesus is.

Ronnie McBrayer was born and raised in the North Georgia Appalachians. In addition to the pastorate, Ronnie has been a chaplain, a leader in social justice ministries, and a columnist. His post-Katrina relief work was featured by the CBS Evening News *and the* New York Times, *and his syndicated column "Keeping the Faith" has more than a million readers. Ronnie blogs at www.beliefnet.com and is the author of* Leaving Religion, Following Jesus *and* The Jesus Tribe. *Visit his website at http://ronniemcbrayer.me.*

Nurture Young Adults by Creating Accountable, Sustainable Groups

By Amy Thompson Sevimli

Starting a young adult group is easy if you live in an urban area. Even if you don't, you should be able to gather a few young adults given the enormity of the millennial generation (larger than the baby boomers!). Nurturing that group so that it remains healthy and sustainable, however, can be easier said than done.

So, here are a few lessons from some congregations in the Washington, D.C., area that aim (at least initially) to create sustainable young adult ministries despite the normal comings and goings of today's 20-somethings.

First, set an age limit. Yes, I know that everyone is young at heart, but many a young adult group has been soured because an older, "young-at-heart" man finds his way to the table of twenty-something women. Given the D.C. demographics, we say 18-35 year olds. Pick what will work for you but do not go higher than 40.

Second, pay someone to do this. "Ha!" you might say. These are supposed to be doable ideas; we don't have the money for this. I know, I know! But it might be more doable than you think.

Young adults are incredibly transient. They go where the schools, jobs, and relationship are. This is why a person committed to and accountable for leading the group is essential. You can try well-meaning volunteers, but they don't usually get very far. Instead, use a part-time person. There are a number of congregations making this work with someone who is working 10 hours per week. In other places, the pastor has taken this on as a part of his or her work (which means the pastor has given up something else!). The key is that the person must be good with young adults, committed for more than one year, and willing to be held accountable.

Third, meet with one to two young adults per week for coffee, dinner or beer. This may seem like a lot of coffee each week, but considering the number of meetings we attend each week, it's really not. What's more, this is just a good evangelism practice. So, if this is new for you, think of it as a way to begin expanding your evangelism program.

But "*What do I say?*" There are lots of things you *could* say; some of them you shouldn't. Here are a couple of ideas. Caution—use them only if you mean them. Young adults are experts at cracking a façade.

1. Say that you want to learn from young adults who don't go to church. Tell them this is not to convict or convert but simply to learn. Ask: Why don't you go to church? What do you think about Jesus? The church? My congregation?

2. Tell them you want to start a young adult group. If you take this route, be clear about why you are starting the group, when it will meet, what you think the person will get out of it, and what you will expect them to contribute to it.

3. Tell them you want to talk about God (gasp!), that you have been told young adults are spiritual seekers, and you would like to talk with them about what or whom they are seeking. Then ask about their spiritual journey, their faith, their doubts, and how you can pray for them. (Start with people you know if you use this.)

Fourth, follow up. It may be nothing more than an e-mail of thanks, or it may be an invitation. *Do* follow-up; *do not* make an invitation if you said you would not!

Fifth, *only after* you have a group of at least 10 committed people (because only 5-6 out of the 10 will come to any given event), begin your events. You can start with a social event—wine and cheese, din-

ner, a picnic, etc., but don't leave it simply social for long. Move to substance quickly. Try something like this idea from Luther Place, D.C.: "Sin Boldly: Luther's on Tap." It's a monthly event held in a restaurant and led by an area pastor who talks about a passage out of Luther and then asks the group to discuss it.

Whatever you do, remember, these young adults can go to a bar, dinner, or picnic anywhere (with more young adults and better beverages). These young adults are attending your event because they want to connect with God. Give them that chance—sooner rather than later.

Sixth, e-mail this group regularly (two to four times per month). Use Facebook reminders for your events. Use Twitter if you are good at it. Don't if you are not.

Seventh, continue with the individual meetings, the events, and the online presence. If it grows to a point at which ten hours per week aren't enough, then you have a (good) problem on your hands!

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Embrace the Virtual Body of Christ

By Deanna A. Thompson

I have to admit that in life before cancer, I had a dim view of the Internet's ability to bring people together. Living and working with others constantly connected to digital tools left me skeptical that any new relational depth was being plumbed through our increasingly wired lives.

Then I got sick. Really sick. In a matter of months, I went from being a healthy 41-year-old religion professor, wife, and mother of two to a virtual invalid with a broken back, a stage IV cancer diagnosis, and a grim prognosis for the future.

To keep family and friends updated during the early days following the diagnosis, my brother created a Caring Bridge site for me, a website dedicated to connecting people with serious illnesses with those who care about them. News of my diagnosis spread quickly; just as quickly, loved ones signed up to receive my Caring Bridge postings.

From my narration of what stage IV cancer had done to my body to the grief of having to resign from my very full and wonderful life, each of my posts was met with dozens of postings to the Caring Bridge site, as well as additional e-mails, cards, packages, visits, and calls from people from all corners of my life. I started to realize that through our connectedness via Caring Bridge, I was being surrounded by a cloud of witnesses greater than any I could have imagined before.

Thus it is through this cancer journey that I've been awakened to a new—indeed, almost mystical—understanding of the church universal, mediated through what I've come to call *the virtual body of Christ*; that is, the body of Christ incarnated in, with, and through the power of sites like Caring Bridge.

Now let me be clear: I'm not trying to sound New Age-y or to issue some feel-good platitude about how cancer made me more appreciative of the value of community. What I'm talking about is a new understanding of the church universal, a breathtakingly broad embodiment of Christ's hands and feet ministering to my family and me during our walk through the valley of the shadow of cancer.

This is also not to say that before the Internet people were without the benefit of vast networks of prayers and support. But Internet connection has exponentially increased the speed and scope of such connections.

While many churches are rightfully cautious about our hyper-connectivity and 24/7 access to Facebook, Twitter, and whatever else, I want to suggest that our churches should consider the Internet's potential as a profound vehicle for pastoral and congregational care during times of crisis and serious illness. It's true that not everyone in pain has a Caring Bridge site. It's also the case that not everyone who's dealing with a serious illness wants to share many of the details of that journey in such a public way.

But many do—and are.

Recently a beloved member of our congregation was dying of cancer and each week until he died there was a message in the bulletin and in our weekly e-newsletter from his family with the address of his Caring Bridge site. These messages served as a weekly reminder for many of us to check his site, to post a message, to respond with prayer and assistance to the needs of the week.

I'm not recommending that relying on sites like Caring Bridge for care and connectivity during times of crisis replace the face-to-face care that is and should be provided by members of the *actual* body of Christ. Being included in the weekly prayers of the people, having church members lay their hands on my shoulders as they prayed with us during worship, receiving hugs and words of support from our congregation when we were able to be present at church during the darkest days with cancer were all vital gifts to my family and me.

Rather, I'm suggesting that the church acknowledge and even utilize tools like Caring Bridge as a way to enhance to the ways in which we minister to one another as the church.

Technology is changing the way we live in the world, the way we relate to one another, and the way we understand what it means to be the church in twenty-first century America. Not all the changes are positive and the church should call us to account for our misuse of such tools. At the same time, wired connections are opening new avenues to experiencing the Spirit's power at work in our lives.

My life—as it continues to be held up by the ongoing love, prayers, and support of the virtual body of Christ—is living testimony that God's saving grace is mediated through our humble and flawed human creations. Thanks be to God for the Internet.

Deanna A. Thompson is associate professor of religion at Hamline University, St. Paul, Minn. She earned her doctorate in theology from Vanderbilt University.

'Take 10' for Casual, Theological Conversations

By Amy E. Orstad

Even with the great work that Lutheran scholars and congregations are doing on the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's Book of Faith initiative, I find most of our young adults are completely intimidated by Scripture. I therefore dedicated our adult education hour together on Sunday mornings to casual conversation. Twenty—and 30-somethings gather each week after worship for something we call Take 10. It is a 10-minute conversation-starter focused on various life topics.

I refuse to call it a Bible study since that would quite possibly send this group screaming from the building. Instead of them being drawn into a Bible study to learn what they don't know, they avoid it out of fear that their lack of basic Bible knowledge will make them look ignorant. The Take 10 topics vary from week to week, but are always connected with a current event or something from mainstream (secular) culture.

The leader's task, then, is to ask the question "Where is God?" in each scenario or to help discern what may be an appropriate Christian response. Topics have ranged from the congregation in Florida burning the Qur'an and issues of capital punishment to Occupy Wall Street and the anniversary of 9/11. Yet the highest attendance came in what is arguably the busiest time of year: Advent. The topics those weeks? De-stressing the holidays and holiday traditions, including foods and practices shared with family and friends.

My impulse is to give the answers—or at least my opinion of what I think the answers are. But answers aren't always the point. Certainly the facilitator must be prepared with an opinion if asked, but she or he must also step back and facilitate the conversation so others may draw their own conclusions.

Creating an atmosphere of trust and respect has allowed a wide variety of opinions to be shared. Even more striking to me is the sound theology that comes from these Christians, who tend to shy away from overt Bible talk. I emphasize in our conversations that, as Lutherans, we do theology together in community. We're not really about creating space for each person to create their own religion. Instead, and as much as possible, we strive to read the Bible and do theology within the context of our community, both the congregational level and within the greater church.

Take 10 has been a great way to invite visitors into community as well. We find it non-threatening to offer them a free cappuccino from our youth coffee cart and the opportunity to hang out and chat with us. Everyone has 10 minutes to spare and, really, who can pass up free food?

As you may expect (and just as I had hoped), the conversation always evolves into more than 10 minutes, so participants jest it should be called Take 45. Perhaps attendees are gluttons for punishment, but I prefer to think they return to this dialogue because it challenges them to think for themselves and because they enjoy building relationship with one another.

Most importantly, I am convinced our time together is meaningful because participants sense that seeing and being the Body of Christ in the world is not only relevant, but imperative to daily life.

Amy E. Orstad is pastor of First Lutheran Church of Columbia Heights, Minn.

Build Ubuntu through Relationship

By Terrance Jacob

I was asked to help a few predominantly Caucasian congregations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to plan and execute a multicultural outreach strategy for them as their neighborhoods were rapidly changing racially.

Being from South Africa, where we had a long history of Apartheid, I was believed to be qualified to advise! "After all," they said, "you guys went from a harsh racist nation to being a 'rainbow nation'!" (Archbishop Tutu's description of the new South Africa.)

Before I agreed to help, I decided to visit these churches unannounced and anonymously. At one church, I was greeted by the designated greeter with a simple, "Welcome!" and handed a bulletin. I wandered in and found a seat. During the passing of the peace, I received many warm handshakes and polite nods. At best, there was awkwardness on the part of the other worshippers.

When the service was over, everyone rushed out past me, to meet with their friends and catch-up on their lives. The greeter, to her credit, stopped me to say, "It was good to have you. What is your name?" "Terrance Jacob," I said, to which she replied, "What a nice name … so easy to say." That was the end of the conversation—not by my choice, but hers. That church got an "F" for readiness for racial diversity outreach!

At another church, I was given a bulletin and found a seat in the last few rows. During the passing of the peace, I was simply greeted with, "Peace be with you." At the end of the service, I followed a stream of people to their fellowship time downstairs. Nobody had invited me. I then spoke with the usher who had given me the bulletin earlier. He then asked if I was visiting.

Without asking me where I was from or anything about me, he asked, "I know this guy from India, maybe you might know him. His name is…" Now, I look Indian but I am from South Africa; further, there are one billion people in India. This congregation, who said they wanted to do outreach into their diverse neighborhood, also got an "F."

Now I was ready to meet with the leadership. As we discussed their plans and motivations, they listed many ideas: from block parties to food pantries and monthly free dinners. Without dismissing their ideas, I shared my experiences as described above. I shared with them that both experiences were far from welcoming.

On the contrary, the interactions made me feel more like an outsider. First, each of the greeters had engaged me based on our differences. Could they not just engage me as they would anyone from their culture or ethnicity—even ask me about the weather?

Second, they did not bother to get to know me. It was about them. The first was about how easy it was for *her* to pronounce my name. The second was about someone *he* knew in India. If either of these conversations went further, I would cut them some slack, but that was the sum total of our engagement.

When Jesus embarked on one of his "racial diversity strategies" with a Samaritan town, he started by sitting down with a Samaritan woman at a well (John 4). He asked *her* for a drink first; so his focus was her. He focused on what was common, rather than what was different: they were both at the well; they both wanted water. He then had a conversation with her about her life. He spoke to her about her relationships and about "everything (she) ever did" (John 4: 39, NIV). He did share things about himself, but only as they related to the context of the conversation about her.

When we engage people about themselves, we begin to build a relationship with them, we begin to understand them, and they begin to understand us. In the context of relationship, we are able to shape our future together.

Our commonality brings us together in relationships; not as one trying to "help" the other, or making the other feel welcome, but one taking the time to get to know the other in relationship—almost incarnational, I dare say!

In Africa this concept is called Ubuntu: "I am because we are," a biblical concept applicable anywhere.

So here are some basic steps to begin your outreach for racial diversity:

- Prepare your leaders first—the greeters, the frontline people and your congregational leadership—to be as racially competent as possible.
- Get some material to go through the process together or engage a consultant to help you with the basics on race.
- Then have the same group trained in the exercise of building relationships and having one-on-one conversations.

How you get people through your doors is another matter, but once you do, you will be prepared to build healthier relationships.

Terrance Jacob is a Lutheran (ELCA) pastor who grew up Pentecostal, was ordained as a Reformed pastor (1992), and worked ecumenically for over 20 years. He is South African-born with Indian heritage and moved to the United States in 2007. Terrance has served two congregations in Minneapolis, Minn., does diversity work within the ELCA Minneapolis Area Synod, and blogs at Being Prophetic.

Tell Sacred Stories

By Anjeanette Perkins

Testimony is often something unfamiliar or uncomfortable for members of mainline Christian traditions, even lifelong church-goers. But storytelling is powerful when it comes out of personal experience. Knowing and telling our own faith stories as a spiritual practice can connect us anew to the ancient stories of our faith and give us courage to share them. When we tell and hear our own stories of the Creator's activity in our lives, we may even become more attuned to the presence and activity of the Holy in our midst both individually and as a congregation.

This is one model to begin to engage people in the spiritual practice of sacred storytelling, sharing God from their own lives. I wonder what the Spirit might unleash if a whole congregation—all ages—took up this practice, and began to listen deeply and to share testimony with each other?

- Gather small groups for six or seven weeks. A group should be small enough to give each person adequate time to share during 90-120 minutes and include a facilitator who is able to keep the group on track.
- Gather in or prepare a space that reflects the sacred nature of the spiritual practice in which the group will engage. Sit in a circle so everyone can be seen and heard. Perhaps at the center is a small table or alter with a cloth, candle, cross, or other items that remind the folks in your setting that this is a form of worship.
- Make the time sacred, whatever that means in your context with your group. Perhaps open with a call to worship and candle lighting, pray a psalm together, sing songs of praise, share joys and concerns. Include a period of silence after each sacred story. Close with prayer. Share a meal afterwards.

Each week, ask the group to take turns sharing stories around one theme or question. This is sacred storytelling. It isn't a class discussion; it's not gossip, nor is it therapy. These are stories of the participants' own experience as Jesus' followers, with no pressure to share anything they choose not to. The storyteller has the floor and the rest of the group listens actively. After everyone has had a chance to tell their story each week, the group might share where they heard God in the stories.

In the first week or two, use themes of a less personal nature so that participants gain comfort with each other and in storytelling, and build to deeper questions. In the final weeks, invite people to share their larger spiritual autobiography, the fuller story of their life's spiritual journey, built on the storytelling they shared in the previous weeks. Take longer with these stories; it might take two weeks to give everyone time.

Weekly themes might include:

- Tell us about a Bible story that is very meaningful for you right now and why.
- How have you sensed or heard God's presence in this Bible story?
- Tell us about a spiritual mentor you look up to.
- Tell about your baptism/confirmation.
- Tell us how the story of your spiritual life intertwines with the story of this congregation (past, present, future).

The facilitator must be prepared to help the group listen deeply to each other, in a respectful and hospitable setting, while also being willing to share stories. The facilitator isn't a teacher with answers or critical judgments, but someone who shares his or her own stories in the group and helps the group cohere.

In the first week, ask the group to talk about what it means to listen well; perhaps come to consensus about how this group will listen carefully and confidentially to each other. Some people will have a hard time with things like not giving advice or monopolizing the time, so a sensitive facilitator will respectfully help the group remember and practice its listening.

There are many ways these small groups might be part of a whole-congregation practice of renewed listening and telling. Perhaps sacred storytelling or witnessing could be incorporated into regular worship in ways that build up the body. Perhaps the stories shared in the small groups are part of a larger process of discernment of what God would have this community of faith do.

With permission (don't violate any group confidentiality expectations), perhaps themes from stories of our life with God within and between small groups might be shared with the leadership or the whole congregation.

Themes might point to passions, gifts, or involvement in the community that could bubble up into ministries. Themes might point to needs. Perhaps this sacred storytelling will lead to important new questions for the congregation, like "What do we still need to learn about listening to people who aren't like us (such as neighbors, unchurched people)?" or "Do we even know what God is doing outside of our own church walls?"

Rev. Anjeanette Perkins serves alongside First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Nevada, Iowa, and is affiliated with the online congregation DisciplesNet Church. A recent graduate of Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis, ordination was one step in a journey following Jesus which included wildlife biology and serving as a Habitat for Humanity Executive Director. Following Jesus isn't building or maintaining institutions; it's living transformed lives of wholeness and hope together both as faith communities and out in the world.

Learn from Crisis and Rethink God's Promises

By Roger S. Nam

In teaching introductory classes on the Hebrew Bible, I am always a bit discouraged at the lack of understanding on the book of Chronicles. Through the process of collecting and editing material from Samuel to Kings, Chronicles gives us a unique example of how an ancient Israelite community read and understood earlier narratives of their own history. Significantly, the compiling of Chronicles likely occurred during the post-exilic period (539-332 BC).

This was a time of great poverty and conflict during the history of Judah as they struggled to survive under the hegemony of Persian imperial rule. Such an oppressive existence was a far cry from the earlier promises given to King David: "When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever" (2 Samuel 7:12-13).

How did Chronicles respond to the promise of a "forever" kingdom with the knowledge that both the Davidic monarchy and the Jerusalem temple had been completely destroyed (587 BC)? Undoubtedly, the Judean people experienced great confusion over this promise.

But instead of abandoning their worship in YHWH, Chronicles took the promise and incorporated it into its own historical narrative, reflecting the realities of Persian rule, and thus creating new theological understandings. Specifically, two changes at the end of the promise to David fit the Chronicler's method for dealing with frustration with God.

First, Chronicles omits the 2 Samuel 7:14b warning, "When he sins (future child of David), I will punish him with a rod such as mortals use, with blows inflicted by human beings." This omission indicates that during a time of poverty and brokenness, the people needed encouragement more than admonition.

Second, Chronicles changes the association of the promise from the defunct Davidic dynasty—"*Your* (David) house and *your* kingdom" (2 Samuel 7:16)—to God's "*My* house and *my* kingdom" (1 Chronicles 17:14). With this simple change in possessive pronouns, the promise no longer directly connects to the long-deceased historical King David, but rather the promise is now tied to the everlasting God, who will surely guide the people during troubled times.

In this sense, the book of Chronicles models for us a way that we can rethink God in light of challenging circumstances. Trauma and hardship often transform our identity, mission, and understanding of God. Chronicles demonstrates that the people of YHWH did so honestly and reflectively. They did not abandon God, but rather grieved and re-understood their covenant relationship with God in light of their hardships.

In order for Christian leaders to bring such a message to their congregations, I offer a simple exercise that may help to re-engage God in the spirit of Chronicles during periods of crisis. I ask the participants to close their computers, tablets, and notebooks and with a single notecard in front of them to just listen.

I then play for them the song "Just the Way You Are," by Bruno Mars. I ask the students to consider the message of the song along with the tone, mood, energy, and the overall artistic effect of the music and to record any observations on the notecard.

After a brief discussion, I play the same song, but a cover version by Boyce Avenue. This cover version takes the upbeat, energetic song, and gives it a dark and contemplative flavor. I allow space for the students to articulate and describe this new interpretation of the song. Several have imagined the Boyce Avenue version as a melancholy reflection of a good relationship that ended painfully. Although the lyrics are nearly verbatim, the message is contextualized in a completely different way.

This exercise guides the congregation into thinking about how a community deals with a text, and reinterprets it in a way that is powerful yet honest in light of challenging situations. Different communities can use different songs (Roberta Flack and the Fugees, Bob Dylan and Jimi Hendrix, just about anything from the TV show *Glee*) according to the congregational culture.

With music, this exercise allows the people to experience the reworking of a text beyond mere intellectual cognition, but through a much more visceral expression of the emotions. As Chronicles shows us, disappointment in God can surprise, frustrate, and frighten us. But ultimately, the people of YHWH are to reconsider our divine promises, for God is willing to hear our disappointment and lift us to higher, broader visions on how those promises will be fulfilled.

Roger S. Nam (Ph.D., UCLA) is assistant professor of Biblical Studies at George Fox Evangelical Seminary. He is the author of Portrayals of Economic Exchange in the Book of Kings *(2012) and he is currently writing a book on the economies of Judah during the Persian period. Before entering the academic field of biblical studies, he was a pastor at Choong Hyun Presbyterian Church in Seoul, Korea, (1994-1996) and a financial analyst at Maxim Integrated Products (1997-2000). Follow Roger on Twitter.*

Journey Together to Build a Church on Spiritual Formation

By Ryan Sato

Oh the slow process of spiritual formation!

At First Baptist Church (FBC) in Edmonton, Alberta, we are trying to build a church on the inward-outward journey of spiritual formation.[1] When I explain this journey, I try to keep it focused on three things: journeying together, journeying inward, journeying outward.

Journeying Together

One of the things that challenges us at FBC Edmonton is how to function as a "destination church" in the city. People drive from all over the Edmonton area (a city of one million people) to gather on a Sunday morning and many will not be back in the neighborhood during the other six days of the week. So when I say we journey together as a church of 200 people, what does that mean? I think it means that for 52 Sundays we follow Christ by means of the Christian calendar. Each year we start the journey together at Advent and we follow Christ by paying attention to his first coming, his birth, his growth, his self-understanding, his joy, his suffering, his journey to the cross, his death, his resurrection and then his exhortation to the church to go and grow. Thus, when people show up week after week at FBC, they are nurtured and challenged by this yearly rhythm, and the weekly Sunday gathering provides a weekly rhythm for Sabbath themes, the Lord's Table, and the fellowship of the saints.

Journeying Inward

Now I would like to say that some deeper journeying happens on Sunday mornings but this is pretty minimal. We gather for spiritual formation education pre-service gatherings 3-4 times a year for 3-4 weeks at a time, but this is a fairly limited attempt at cultivating the journey inward. We give people a taste of spiritual formation group practices through activities like the prayer labyrinth, group *lectio divina*, group spiritual direction, and Celtic spiritual practices.

My hope is that what people learn during these pre-service gatherings would inspire them to find some people to carry on with these practices in a small group setting. For example, rather than have a small group meet for traditional bible study, I'm urging groups to gather once or twice per month to share a meal, and then do 90 minutes of group spiritual direction together. I am growing in my conviction that people do not need more propositional Bible truths crammed into their brains in the group setting—they need formation! They need to create a time/space where they can listen to God with one another, and then speak into one another's lives with words of encouragement, revelation, grace, and healing.

Journeying Outward

When I think about FBC Edmonton and the journey outward, I am hoping that we might find natural ways to proclaim Christ and be the presence of Christ in our places of work, school, and play. I find that people who come to gather from Sunday to Sunday are not looking for more things to do at church during the week. I believe they need to hear the church saying, "This is a faith community that will be a place of nurture for your soul as you are formed in the way of Christ; your Christian vocation during the other six days of the week is to walk in the way of Christ for the good of the world." And the "world" is whatever context you are placed in at any given time. This means that the average FBCer should be out in the world, out at work, out at recreational events, out at school, out in neighborhoods being the good news of Jesus. And maybe it's in the midst of these natural social connections that congregants find those who

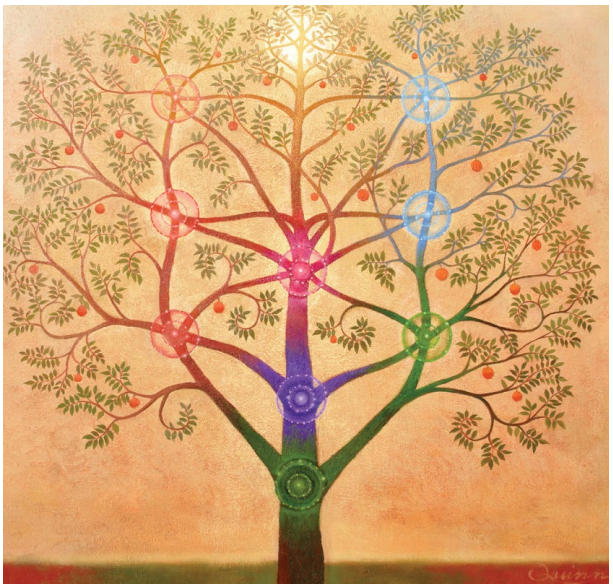
need to hear a message about the Christ who lives in us all. Elaine Heath, in the book *The Mystic Way of Evangelism*, puts it this way: "The hermeneutic of love is grounded in the belief that Jesus really does live in the people around us, that Jesus thirsts in our actual neighbors. Jesus is bound with eternal love to every person I encounter" (125).

Closing Thoughts

The ongoing experiment at FBC Edmonton is to see if we can build a sustainable church on the themes of spiritual formation. As I said at the beginning of this reflection, this is a slow work. It is a "long obedience in the same direction" (kudos to Eugene Peterson). My prayer for FBC Edmonton is that God would continue the gradual, excellent, challenging, joyful, and hard work of forming us First Baptist saints in these movements of spiritual formation. Not just for the good of us, but for the good of the whole world.

FBC Edmonton's "Five Year Identity Plan" for spiritual formation can be found at the church website www.fbcedmonton.ca.

Rev. Dr. Ryan Sato is the senior minister at First Baptist Church Edmonton. A Canadian prairie-boy at heart, he ventured to California for graduate school and his first vocational ministry posting and then looped back to the prairies via Vancouver, B.C., where he picked up a little more education and church-land inspiration. He's married to Sandy, has two younger boys and spends his time reading, driving his kids hither and yon, and dreaming of P90X.



WORSHIP

Ask Why Worship Is So Boring and then Connect It to Experience

By Andrew Root

This is a confession of a mind-wandering, TV-holic: I find most of what we do in worship gatherings boring. (See, I said it). I know your response: Well, when was worshipping God supposed to be entertaining? And why in the world would your boredom be the criteria for a good worship service?

Good questions. I heard the story about a man who was really into Jesus, was passionate about Jesus, but confessed that he was bored stiff by worship at his church. The passionate follower of Jesus was asked if he would be willing to die for Jesus, if he believed enough that he would die for his beliefs. After thinking and pausing, he responded that he would, that he thought that he would be willing die for his love for Jesus. The inquisitor then said, you mean you're willing to die for Jesus, but not be bored for him?

Oh, snap! (Wait, is that now lame to say?) The point of the story is to show the inconsistency in this person's commitment—willing to die, but not be bored in worship?—and to make a point that we shouldn't make entertainment the criteria for worship.

I guess I agree, but in a digitally-saturated context, boredom and death are somewhat synonymous. What I mean is, in a culture like ours we are used to being creators—creating things on our social networking sites, creating things by interacting with them. We create and interact to construct meaning. There was a time when the church's job was simply to give people meaning, and the people in the pews simply swallowed the church's pill.

But this perspective no longer holds. The church is now not the only meaning-creating, pill-pushing show in town (to push the analogy too far). In late-modernity meaning has become liquefied, allowing us to create, construct, and rework meaning for ourselves (of course, this has its risks and negatives).

The problem with nine out of ten worship gatherings isn't that it's necessarily boring in and of itself; the problem is that it is boring because the worship gatherings don't invite people to make meaning, to be involved personally in something meaningful in the worship gathering.

Now you might say this is just cultural accommodation. Maybe. Theology and ministry have always been a dialogue with culture. But there is also a theological rationale. To confess God as Trinity—to confess the Spirit's continued work in calling us into the redemptive work of the Son and creating work of the Father—calls us to personally participate with God in the process of creating, wrestling with our humanity and with our God, and to live into questions such as, "What is the meaning of life and why do we live it?" or "Who is this God?" What's missing in worship gatherings is the opportunity to create meaning, theological convictions, and beliefs that actually matter to us.

But how do you do this without it falling into some kind of subjective chaos? In our little church, we are trying to make the prayers of the people the place where the whole congregation is invited to create meaning and do theological reflection. We create this meaning by engaging and seeking for God in each other's narratives of joy and suffering. So we invite anyone to come forward to share their prayer with the congregation, and together we pray.

But they are not invited (through modeling) to simply provide a prayer request like you would provide a list of the needed ingredients for a recipe. Rather, they are invited to share these prayer requests in narrative form. It is one thing to say, "I pray for people without jobs." It is quite another to say, "I pray for people without jobs because my brother lost his job and the hurt in his eyes hurts me, and his kids … I worry about his kids."

Lending our prayers narrative shape pulls us into constructing theological meaning, placing God's action next to

our story of suffering and joy. It makes "the prayers of the people" not merely interesting—that's not the point—but meaningful.

And in the end I think this is what our worship gatherings are missing: an understanding of where God is present and how God moves in our process of creating meaning together.

Andrew Root, Ph.D. (Princeton Theological Seminary) is the Carrie Olson Baalson Chair Of Youth And Family Ministry at Luther Seminary. He is the author of The Promise of Despair (Abingdon, 2010), The Theological Turn in Youth Ministry *(with Kenda Creasy Dean, IVP, 2011),* The Children of Divorce: The Loss of Family as the Loss of Being *(Baker Academic, 2010),* Revisiting Relational Youth Ministry: From a Strategy of Influence to a Theology of Incarnation *(IVP, 2007) and* Relationships Unfiltered *(Zondervan/YS, 2009).*

Lose the Pews to Make Space for People to Be Themselves

By Nadia Bolz-Weber

For the first 1,300-plus years of the church there was no seating in churches (except for stone benches along the back wall for the elderly or infirm). The Protestant Reformation saw to it that the sermon would now be the primary focus of Christian worship and, well, folks are gonna need to sit for that kind of thing. So starting in the sixteenth century and really revving up in the seventeenth and eighteenth we saw fixed pews become a norm in Christian churches.

But the pews came with some pretty disturbing practices. Namely a pay-to-stay system by which wealthy members of the parish would purchase private pews which, as long as they kept up their pew rents, gave them exclusive rights to them. As a bonus, the wealthy were allowed to decorate their pew boxes to suit their tastes with ornate fabrics and cushions.[1] This was reserved seating, not general admission. As absurd as this may sound, many churches still have a type of reserved seating system (i.e., the Olsons ALWAYS sit in the third pew back on the left).

Pews, especially lovely carved vintage pews, can be really quite beautiful and an efficient way of seating a lot of people at once. No question about it. But here's the problem my church is having in finding a new home: we can't abide pews. And it's more than simply an issue of taste.

See, House for All Sinners and Saints (for the most part) worships in the round, with the altar at the center. There is no space set aside in front for the special people in robes to which everyone faces. Our liturgy (liturgy meaning "the work of the people") is led by about 15-18 people who, when they came in, decided to pick up the worship booklets that have jobs written on the front. So from where they sit in the round, they stand and either say the prayer of the day or the Gospel reading or the benediction or any other number of elements of the liturgy. The absolution, sermon (usually), and words of institution are mine … the rest is up for grabs.

Even the music at HFASS is created by the people who gather. We sing everything a cappella. In glorious four-part harmony we sing the ancient liturgy and hymns of the church. There is no band or organ. All the music you hear in the liturgy (and make no mistake, it is glorious … except when it's awkward, but mostly it's glorious) comes out of the bodies of the people who show up.

There is a critical "why" to the reason we do things this way that extends far beyond taste: it's missional. In a post-modern context, people are increasingly leery of organized religion and its attendant obsession with hierarchy. We have peeked behind the curtain and seen only scared little men.

So a shared, communitarian experience of liturgy in which we live as the priesthood of all believers is inviting in a way that the formality of the traditional church is not. (To be clear, this is not the same as saying that we no longer need clergy—I still hold the office of Word and Sacrament, but I hold it on behalf of the whole community and with their permission).

This population of urban, postmodern young-ish people have a deep critique of consumer culture and as such are far more interested in being producers than consumers. This goes for church as well. And being able to worship in the round creates an accountability of presence to each other and a shared experience that allows for the community to create the thing they are experiencing rather than consuming what others have produced for them.

The point here is that fixed pews in churches prevent us and, I would argue, prevent many Christian communities native to the post-Christian cultural context in which we find ourselves, from using that space.

If everything in a sanctuary is movable then it can always be configured in the really traditional way. But wait! Here's the awesome thing—it can also have other uses too! There is nothing *wrong* with a traditional church setup. But

when everything is nailed to the floor, the use of that beautiful, sacred space is now limited to two hours on Sunday mornings.

The House for All Sinners and Saints T-shirts don the church logo on the front—a piece of parchment with a nail at the top à la Martin Luther and the Wittenberg Church door (I have to get my Lutheran-ness in where I can since there are precious few Lutherans at HFASS)—and on the back it says "radical Protestants; nailing sh*t to the church door since 1517." So maybe the title of this article should have been "missional churches; un-nailing sh*t from the church floor since 2012."

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Reach the "Godforsaken" through Missional Worship

By Christian Scharen

"Flowers for Hitler" is disturbing, I know. It was the title of a 1964 volume of poems by Leonard Cohen. He was a poet even before he started playing guitar and singing his poems. On first glance, the book of poems is as disturbing as the title. But the title and its collection of poems was, in this sense, meant to be "like" the cross: God refusing to allow anyone, any place, to be Godforsaken.

Of course, as a practicing Jew, Cohen did not mean the collection to be a Christian collection, or even a Jewish one. What he did mean, though, was to break the thrall of glory surrounding his work as a celebrated Canadian poet, "the voice of his generation." He wanted to write poems about lives and communities that are not golden, not glorious, but might be mistaken for Godforsaken. The poems, then, were "flowers" for the supposedly Godforsaken, for Hitler.

How might congregations shift from understanding worship as glorious, as "golden"—that which "speaks to me" and "spiritually connects"—to worship grounded in the cross, as that which praises God and connects to the God-forsaken? How do we make a transition from "golden" worship by and for *us* to "missional" worship broken open for the sake of the world?

Interestingly, much so-called creative or contemporary worship fits within the frame of golden worship, "meeting people's felt needs" and "spiritually connecting." Of course it isn't all bad. Try planning worship that has no spiritual connection to those who gather! The real question is, spiritually connecting for what end?

I recently had the wonderful opportunity to serve a congregation for three months during the pastor's sabbatical. Like the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America as a whole, this congregation has been on a steady decline over the last 25 years, busy with many internal programs and external mission commitments. Members love the church and want it to thrive.

Yet the way they think about worship and congregational life keeps them caught in the "golden worship" paradigm. They want to do worship well, worship that fits with the taste of the congregation and that is relevant to their lives. I wanted a simple practice that would allow us to imagine and practice the idea that we are caught up in the Spirit's work in worship and consequently are sent as the body of Christ to reconcile, empowered through the Spirit to offer manna and mercy to the Godforsaken.

My last month there was June. I proposed a practice that would pick up on the seasonal move into summer, and I wanted this practice to break open our missional imagination for worship and congregational life. The congregation always had altar flowers, usually professionally done and paid for by memorials to departed family members. They were beautiful and were often taken after the service either by the family who paid for them or as a gift to a sick or homebound member of the church.

My idea was to invite members to bring flowers from their yards. I would set out a large glass vase on a stand next to the altar. During the opening hymn, people would come forward and place their flowers in the vase, creating an impromptu bouquet bursting with the glory of God in bloom that week. Then during the sending, I would ask for a volunteer who would take the flowers and give them away to someone they met later that day. The next week, the whole thing repeats but with the added piece that the last week's give-away person stands up during the sending to tell what happened to the flowers.

The first part went brilliantly—everyone got into it. People showed up at church with all manner of blooms and some inevitably tended the bouquet as it was created to give it some shape and help others place their flowers. One Sunday a little girl walked down the aisle holding high her daffodil, stem broken from being held too tightly, and an older woman smiled as she gingerly helped the girl place the flower in the vase. Smiles abounded.

The second part never really clicked. People liked the idea of giving away flowers, but out of habit they gave them to insiders—friends, sick and homebound members, and so on. We took one step, showing that what we do collectively in worship is not ours but God's and is to be given away.

But we needed more time and work together to get to the second step, to get beyond giving flowers to dear Aunt Sylvia. With time and practice, however, I think we could have even learned to give "flowers to Hitler" insofar as we tried to bring the transformative love and beauty of God to those places we assume—*wrongly*—to be Godforsaken.

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Use Weddings to Build Community

By Meg Peery McLaughlin

Confession: Sometimes I feel like a Rent-a-Pastor. The church I serve has a beautiful long aisle lined with clear windows that look great with candles nestled in the sills. Couples like to get married there, many of whom have rarely been in the sanctuary before and many of whom who will not return there again. More than a few times, I've sat with such couples as they ask me to tone down the "God" part of the wedding. But, wait, isn't this worship?! I stand inches from them, close enough to hear the intake of breath and watch the sweat creep across the brow, as they make one of the most life-altering promises a human being can make to another and then I don't ever see them again.

But here's the thing: there is another life-altering promise that I pay attention to in light of my frustration. That is the promise that we, the Church, have made to these young couples—the promise we made to them at their baptism. We promised that we would be the church to them, nurture them, love them, stand beside them in joy, support them in sorrow, and tell them the stories of Jesus. So, even if the church only gets to do this at the time of their wedding, then we'd better do it well. It is a holy chance and a sacred privilege.

Five years ago, the practice at my church, Village Presbyterian, was to have each couple meet with the pastor who would be marrying them to do premarital counseling and worship planning. This happened in varying degrees. My husband and I started a required premarital class. Yes, required. Required of all in-town, young couples, members or not, who want to be married at Village. The class meets five Wednesday evenings in a row. In the first four weeks, we cover marital expectations, communication & conflict, inlaws & outlaws (family boundaries), sex & money (the two things that only go together in the classroom), and in the final week we focus on the theology of the wedding ceremony. We have each couple take an online version of the PREPARE/ENRICH inventory, which is at www.couplecheckup.com. The online version is much more useable than the old Scantron test, and the couples can print out their results and a discussion guide to actually use in class and at home.

Each night, we begin with a bit of recreation, introduce the topic of the evening, give space for group and couple conversation, and close with prayer. The goal of the class is not that these couples receive instruction from experts, but rather that these couples begin some conversations in class that will be continued over a glass of wine later that evening and into the coming weeks of preparation.

Beyond the curriculum, though, what makes this class reinvigorating for the Church is that these couples start to build community with the Church and with one another. At weddings, couples are reminded that they are in the presence of God and then they make their promises to one another surrounded by a community. And yet, so many couples navigate the often-turbulent waters of marriage unaware of God's presence and feeling alone in the depths. Why surround a couple with community at the start and then leave them to their own devices? Marriages need support. Yes, two is all you want in the bedroom, but to have a faithful community around to support you as you live out your vows can be a real gift that the church can give.

Out of this class come reunion gatherings when couples bring their pictures, tell their wedding bloopers, and start sharing post-honeymoon stories of life together. Out of this class comes trust—couples who come seeking further counseling or a referral to a professional therapist because they're aware of some deep issues that need work. Out of this class comes a small group Bible study—couples who became friends and seek to remain connected to the church. And sure, out of this class have come couples whom I've never laid eyes on again, but I can be grateful that as they were preparing to make their vows, the church was fulfilling its vow to them in love and fidelity.

Rev. Meg Peery McLaughlin is Associate Pastor for Pastoral Care at Village Presbyterian Church, Prairie Village, Kansas. She is married to the Rev. Jarrett McLaughlin, Associate for Mission and Young Adult Ministry at the same church. They both hail from North Carolina and graduated from Union Presbyterian Seminary in Richmond, Virginia.

Create Sustainable Sanctuaries by Finding Right-sized Alternatives

By Carol Howard Merritt

My husband, Brian, was doing a bit of research for a project. He scrolled through church websites and membership numbers. "Look at this, Carol," he called with some urgency. "This is a church in North Carolina."

Immediately, rapturous images flashed through my mind. I'm Presbyterian, and North Carolina is where most Presbyterians go when they die—or at least when they retire. It's beautiful there. A large concentration of our ilk resides in those rolling mountains. Brian showed me a picture of a large sanctuary, magnificent, and spacious. "Pretty," I remarked, with a smile.

"Yeah, it is. Except that the sanctuary seats 500, but they only have 50 in worship."

"Oh," I said, my heart sinking along with my voice.

"It's not the only one. I keep clicking through the websites and the numbers. There are a lot of churches in the same position."

I had been the pastor of two small congregations that were blessed with small sanctuaries. But my experience made me realize what this church was facing—high maintenance cost, an internal vacuum, and a sense of failure—which could likely work together to the congregation's demise.

Let me unpack that a bit. The large space meant that there would be a small number of people fighting to keep the electricity bills paid, the maintenance at bay, and the roof from leaking. Even the cost of keeping the organ and piano the right temperature during all months of the year would be draining. There would not only be the dollars that went into the building, but at what cost to the environment as well?

As the money of the congregation became focused into the building, the energy would follow. As people paid attention to each new capital campaign project, they faced the danger of fighting over the carpet choices and forgetting the needs of the neighborhood surrounding them. As a higher percentage of the budget went into preservation of the sanctuary, they would have less money for mission and outreach. They would have to cut the staff that ministered to children and youth, which would effectively cut off the next generation. Parents with family ties to the congregation (and its building) would stay, but the newer families would look for a place where they knew that the faith formation of their children would be taken seriously. Before they knew it, the building would become a giant suck of money *and* ministry.

Another thing would happen as well, something that will not be as easily measured. The empty pews would be a weekly reminder that the congregation was no longer living in the glory days. A new person could slip into a back pew and never run into another human because of the vast emptiness of the space. There would be a loss of community. Not only that, but the pastor would feel that sense of failure. Even on Christmas or Easter, the minister would never have that satisfaction of a full sanctuary.

(Does that sound vain? Are you thinking the pastor ought to be concentrating on something more spiritual than the empty pews, that we should not be worried about that sense of failure on the day of Christ's resurrection? Perhaps so. That's why we don't talk about the feeling much. But it still lingers in the air as strong as the scent of Easter lilies or pine wreaths.)

This is a time of transition for many of our congregations. We had a boom of membership in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and our sanctuaries reflect those bygone days. As we look to the future, we can't afford to pay the cost of maintenance, energy, and defeat.

What will we do? Could we imagine an alternative that would be more practical for the transitioning life of our congregations? Would that alternative be easier to envision if we could see a drawing or photo of it? Would it be helpful for our congregations to imagine a move into something more suitable if they could see a sensible, sustainable, and stunning option?

As I looked at the large sanctuaries and small congregations on my husband's laptop, I wondered, "What if denominational churches came together to create an environmentally friendly, beautiful building that would fit our needs rather than engulfing them?" The building could be used for transitioning congregations as well as new church developments.

Perhaps it could be something like a prefab sanctuary and we could create it by having a contest between architects, like *Dwell* magazine did. We could let Frank Lloyd Wright be our muse. We could create smaller worship spaces that are more like Wright's economical Usonian Homes, which could allow for the harmony of nature, larger gathering spaces, and accessibility for those with disabilities. What if we put our money and energy into something more sustainable?

Carol Howard Merritt is a pastor at Western Presbyterian Church in Washington, DC. She is a speaker and the author of Reframing Hope and Tribal Church. She also cohosts the God Complex Radio podcast.

Take the Incarnation Seriously: Read Scripture Like It Matters

By Karoline Lewis

When it comes to worship, I wonder when we forgot that God became human? When, that is, did we stop taking the incarnation seriously in our worship practices? When did we get comfortable with the "Word became flesh" in worship? When did we start to ignore that God's presence is at stake when it comes to what we do in our worship and preaching?

I think it began when we stopped reading Scripture in worship like it mattered. Let me explain. In too many church services, systematic and organized theology has trumped the very real and unexpected presence of God. For the sake of orthodoxy, liturgical correctness, and worship traditions to which few of our church members have any meaningful commitment, we have eschewed the embodied revelation of God and Jesus in our midst. When did this happen? How did this happen? Why did this happen?

On the one hand, the state in which we find ourselves is rooted in a post-Enlightenment, modernity-driven evangelicalism. For the sake of truth (Truth), historical reliability, and a desperate search for meaning, the Bible—the basis of our preaching—has been reduced to mere instruction, historical data, and morality.

At the same time, there is a persistent, deep, and ongoing belief that Scripture is not capable of encapsulating our humanness. That is, the extent to which the Bible is an expression of both the human and divine sides of God and the manifested conjoined relationship to which God has committed God's self is rarely acknowledged. We hesitate to recognize the relational, covenantal dimension, and we doubt the reciprocity between God and God's people. We do not articulate where, how, and why the human and the divine intersect. For some, the totality of faith, the fullest expression of our belief, can only be voiced in anonymity and individuality.

And here's the thing: our worship is capable of communicating this kind of heresy, a heresy that places the intensity of effort and effect on the believer alone.

As a result, it's impossible to see God's actions or God's presence in the world in any way that affects communal change and transformation. When incarnation happens, it messes up the whole lot. It messes up our theologies, christologies, salvation theories—everything.

Maybe God knew that that's how it needed to be. Once theology, or God, becomes reliable, even predictable, does God cease to be God? If we can make sense of it all, if we can figure it all out, then who is God, after all?

This is exactly why it's essential that we acknowledge the intersection of the human and the divine, between God and God's people, between "In the beginning was the Word" and "the Word became flesh."

So how do we—as preachers, pastors, and congregations—capture this ethos, this essence, this relationship between God, God's Word, and God's people?

One starting point is to read Scripture aloud on Sunday morning like it really matters.

Tap into this mutuality, this moment of connection, this moment of shared commitments and realities. Tap into the sense that what is being read or what you are reading actually matters and could make a difference.

Most, if not all, reading of Scripture out loud in the context of worship gives the distinct impression that the Bible is the most boring book on the face of the planet. All too often, the Bible is read in the tone of extraordinary seriousness, as if affect and emotion don't matter, as if we don't expect our words to have any impact, and as if our oral

reading is not itself an interpretation. Worst of all, when we read with such bland seriousness we convey the sense that our hearers are simply a collection of disembodied minds or denominational bobble heads that sit passively receiving information.

As a result, the Word of God—what we call Scripture—ends up being nothing more than the communication of information, a statement and arrangement of words that we assume should mean something on their own. The assumption, or perception, or presentation is that the reading aloud of Scripture could not possibly involve all of us.

The next time you read a Bible passage in your congregation, especially when the passage you are reading aloud is the passage on which you are preaching, imagine that the impact of the sermon begins with the oral reading of scripture. Practice it. Aloud and a lot. When you read the passage in the context of a worship service, invite people to listen. Do not allow them to read along. No peeking!

As a result, there may actually be an invitation to feel, taste, hear, smell, and see a full-bodied experience of the read Word, the *Incarnate* Word. And transformation might actually happen.

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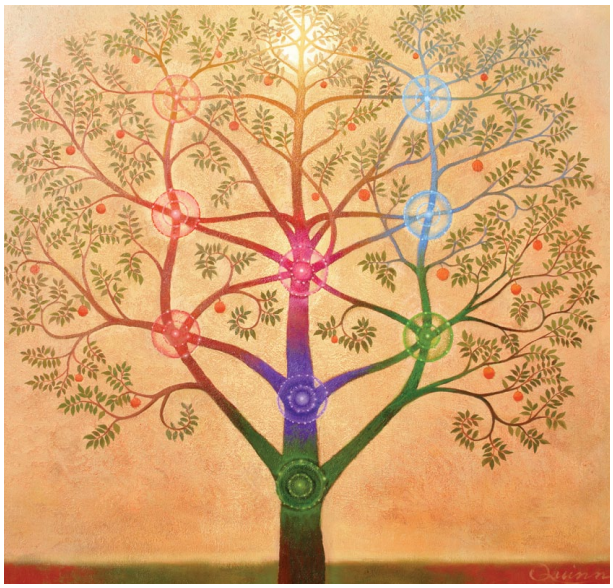

CHILDREN, YOUTH, AND FAMILY

Reinvigorate Youth Ministry by Learning from Eli and Samuel

By Kathy Wolf Reed and Nick Reed

Among the multitudes of models for youth ministry practiced today, one favorite is based on the story of Samuel and Eli (1 Samuel 3:1-18). One of its best attributes is that this model can be adapted to a congregation of almost any size, location, and composition. The story is one of mentorship that grows into friendship through the partners' mutual pursuit of God. Eli is neither flashy nor up to date on the latest trends in youth ministry models, but we do see evidence of a strong bond with his young friend Samuel (3:2-5) as well as a desire to empower Samuel in his own ministry (3:8-9).

While this story could easily lend itself to volumes of reflection upon youth ministry revitalization, we limit ourselves to three aspects of the text that provide a solid framework adaptable to congregations of any size:

Intergenerational

The story of Eli and Samuel is innately intergenerational. At its best, so is youth ministry. Integrating adult advisors into youth programming helps the entire congregation invest in what the young people of the church are thinking and doing. Youth then find that they have adults outside their biological family they can turn to with questions or concerns (3:18). In a larger congregation, such as the one we currently serve, one of the greatest benefits of having adult advisors is that if we are out on vacation or study leave, the youth group carries on as it would any other week. Eventually, when we as paid staff leave this congregation, we truly believe that our adult advisors will ease the transition with their comfort and consistency.

So how do you identify these adult leaders? Within a few weeks of beginning our current call, we gathered all of the youth together and handed them slips of paper and pencils. We asked them: "If you found yourself in trouble late one night and you had only a cell phone and a church directory with you, who (besides your family) would you call?" Each youth gave us names of adults in the congregation. When we approached these adults and told them that they had been named by three, five, or even ten of the youth as someone they would turn to in a time of need, many of them were shocked—all of them were honored.

Authentic

Identifying adults trusted by the youth may not be difficult. The next step—convincing these adults that they possess skills for youth ministry—may pose more of a challenge. In our context, it was clear that while many of the adults were willing to contribute to the youth program by providing meals, space, and even their physical presence, they did not actually see themselves as youth ministers.

In our focus text, Eli's greatest gift to Samuel has little to do with his "cool-factor" and everything to do with the honesty and authenticity with which he treats Samuel. Eli is an older man in danger of losing his sight. From what we can tell, he spends the bulk of this story lying down in his room (3:2). And yet he teaches Samuel two invaluable lessons: how to listen for God (3:8-9) and that sometimes speaking truth in love (Ephesians 4:15) is not easy (3:17). Eli is every bit himself in his interactions with Samuel, and Samuel (like most youth) senses the care and respect with which Eli treats him.

Reciprocal

The final aspect of the relationship between Samuel and Eli that cannot go without mention is the fact that throughout the course of the text, their relationship grows from one of mentor/mentee to a mutual partnership in ministry.

Eli is genuinely excited to see Samuel grow in his faith (3:8-9), recognizing that wisdom need not come from his own mouth when it might come directly from the mouth of God. Once Samuel has received his vision from God, Eli willingly accepts that Samuel now bears knowledge that Eli himself does not. Though he may not like what Samuel has to say, Eli does not challenge it, but accepts it as God's truth (3:17-18).

Most congregations are not used to understanding youth as partners in ministry. Many adults with gifts for relating to young people do not believe they fit the youth-minister mold, when truly their authentic care and compassion for youth people is all that is needed to give life to a solid and faithful youth ministry. Following this authenticity, youth must then be trusted as not just mentees but partners in ministry, bearing their own wisdom and insights to contribute to the faith development of adults in the congregation. The original youth minister, Eli, and his protégé, Samuel, provide us with a model of youth ministry that is intergenerational, authentic, reciprocal, and therefore faithful at its very core.

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Nick Reed is the associate pastor for youth and families at First Presbyterian Church in Tuscaloosa, Ala. He has led youth ministry in four congregations of various shapes and sizes, and has served as the keynote speaker and recreation leader for many youth conferences and retreats in and around the southeastern United States.

Steward and Teach Generosity by Asking Youth to Set Outreach Priorities

By Kurt Borgmann

One aspect of congregational renewal that I have found challenging to nurture over the years is in the area of stewardship, especially of our financial resources. No longer can we count on people giving their resources just because they think they should. How do we teach a new generation to be generous? How do we let our sharing of our resources energize and inspire us instead of bore us? Here's one idea we tried in our congregation.

A couple years ago, one individual in our congregation agreed to give an anonymous donation to the youth fund of $10,000. At the time, there were ten high school youth in the youth group, so $1,000 was designated for each youth to "steward." The project was called "Grand Ideas" and the stipulation was that each youth would decide on (and help to carry out) a grand idea for ministry or outreach in the local community. The only condition was that it couldn't be self-serving and it would need to be reported back to the church at some point.

The youth pastor got the youth talking about their grand ideas. The congregation watched from the sidelines. For a while, nothing happened. The congregation wondered about that, but it turned out that the youth saw this as a high stakes matter. This money wasn't frivolous; it wasn't to be wasted. They talked, and thought, and talked some more.

Finally, one of them took a step. He put together a community meal. He prepared invitations, posted them on bulletin boards around town, and left them at the local thrift shop and the food pantry. He recruited church members to serve the meal, and the head cook at the high school to cook. He bought the supplies and oversaw the arrangements and set up.

Was it a huge success? It was hard to say. Some people came to the meal who wanted to support him. Others came for the free food. It was a mix of church and community people. By some measures you wouldn't call it a big success, but it certainly got the ball rolling, and it opened the eyes of that boy to the difficulties of doing good things for others. Good intentions aren't enough but, at the same time, we can't let our uncertainties hold us back.

Shortly after that particular grand idea, a girl in the youth group consulted with the art teacher at her high school, then approached a business owner with a large block-walled building at the edge of town. She designed and then painted a huge mural on the side of the building. It is a fantastic painting with seasonal images familiar to our Midwestern locale. I still smile every time I drive by it on the way into town.

Another girl designated her share of the money for jail ministry at the county jail. But she knew she couldn't just give the money—she had to follow where it led her. She bought supplies for a project where women inmates were given the opportunity to participate in craft and knitting projects; then she went to the jail and did projects with them. When she came back, she couldn't stop talking about it.

Perhaps the most interesting story had to do with a boy who was not really part of the youth group, but was just friends with a few of the youth. He listened to them talking about this grand ideas project they were doing at church and decided he liked the idea. He had a $1,000 of his own, recently given to him by his grandparents. He came and talked to the youth pastor. He wondered what he could do. They talked about what mattered to him, what he noticed in the community, and what it means to give.

In the end, he decided to give half of his money to a local day care program in our community that aims to help low income community members. He and the pastor went and visited the center. They talked to the director about

how his money could help. He gave it with a light heart. More than a year later, when the pastor invited him to tell his story to the congregation on a Sunday morning, he did.

The "grand ideas" project had, I think, three kinds of impact on our congregation:

1. The congregation got the chance to see the needs of the world through the eyes of a young person
2. A young person got to be the responsible party in ministering in the community
3. Our local community received some surprising, compassionate, and even beautiful benefits.

Such things change us as a congregation. They change our sense of stewardship and they change our sense of self.

Kurt Borgmann is pastor of Manchester Church of the Brethren in North Manchester, Indiana.

Create Family-Friendly Worship Spaces

By Theresa Cho

More and more churches want to provide a comfortable and welcoming experience for families to worship together. Worshipping with children in our midst can be a vital asset to a faith community—not solely because they need to learn something from us, but because we need to learn something from them as well. Having a faith community that loves children—their noises, outbursts, jittery movements, and all—is a wonderful gift to families as well as the whole community at large.

Having children in worship challenges us to examine how we engage in worship, our faith, and with each other. They remind us that there isn't a right way or one way to worship. They remind us to be open to the spontaneity of the Holy Spirit. They remind us that God is present in the messiness of our lives. They give us opportunity to reexamine the meaning of sacred and holy. They provide us lots of opportunities to exercise patience, grace, love, forgiveness, and generosity. They remind us to worship with our hearts as well as our heads. They give us opportunity to broaden our acceptance of those who are different from us and challenge us.

Young families in particular have unique challenges in worship. Two things to consider:

- Does the seating arrangement in the sanctuary accommodate and allow for stroller parking? Strollers hold more than just babies. They hold the diaper bag, sippy cups, snacks, toys, sleeping babies, and anything else you can squeeze in there.
- Are there options for families with babies and toddlers to worship together if they aren't ready or willing to go to the nursery? Providing space for children to wander, a table to color on, pillows to read books, or a basket of stuffed animals to play with can do wonders for a family's worship experience.

These suggestions merely help make families feel more invited, but there are also plenty of opportunities to teach and theologically engage the young ones as well.

One thing my congregation did was to create interactive boards that helped teach theological concepts in tangible and concrete form. These boards were not only interactive, but they were also set in the corner of the sanctuary where toddlers could move freely and engage with their parents during worship.

Interestingly, most of the materials used to make these boards were old, unused items found in the storage closets and attic of the church. It's amazing what you can find in a church that is over 100 years old. Also, if you can find an art store that reuses junk for art parts, you can find a lot of items for minimal cost. When I did have to purchase items, I mostly went to Home Depot, Michael's, and Oriental Trading Co.

The interactive boards focused on these four themes:

Board #1: God Created Me

A mirror to examine one's face

A magnetic Doodle board to draw their own creation

Magnetic face parts to create their own face

Board #2: God Chose Me

Different symbols of baptism to feel and touch

Spinning beads with different Trinitarian names to explore

Board #3: God Loves Me

Different characteristics of love from 1 Corinthians 13 to explore

Crayon and paper to make their own love notes

Board #4: God Calls Me

Different characteristics of a disciple

A felt board to use their imagination playing with different characters in the Bible

It's not hard to make children and families feel more welcome at church. It just takes the commitment and a little bit of imagination. Trust me, if we did it, you can, too. (To view a slideshow with detailed pictures of how I made these four interactive boards, visit http://theresaecho.wordpress.com/2011/04/18/interactive-toddler-boards)

The Rev. Theresa Cho is an associate pastor at St. John's Presbyterian Church in San Francisco. Her experience teaching children with special needs and working in a multi-racial urban congregation in Chicago and Seoul, Korea, contribute to her passion for child advocacy, creating intergenerational worship experiences, and urban ministry.

Let the Most Vulnerable Set the Pace of Worship

By Jodi Houge

Let's face it. Most of us do not plan worship with young people in mind. We tend to plan worship for those who can read, sing, walk and stand. We preach to those who are educated and have a fairly long attention span—unless it's the annual youth-led worship.

But, how might you respond if next Sunday, those who are six-years-old and under outnumbered the adults? Think about your pews, sanctuary, communion rail...

I serve as the mission pastor at Humble Walk Lutheran Church. Most weeks, we have a large population of young people in worship. Often, the stars align and at least half of our population is under the age of eight-years-old.

On one particular Sunday, half of our population (*half!*) was under the age of six. Neighbors, friends of friends, regulars. It was lively and amazing. Do not get me wrong, the adults and teens were nothing to sneeze at either. Yet, I cannot help but think that on a Sunday where the Gospel centers on Jesus welcoming children that there are powers at work beyond our comprehension.

We happened to have a guest preacher that day. The Rev. Susan Tjornehoj delivered the Gospel and sermon. Sue said two things that I cannot stop thinking about:

1. "That in order to pick up a child who needs attention, you often have to put something else down." Like groceries. Or a computer. Or sense of control. Or a neat/orderly/contemplative worship service designed for adults.

2. That her favorite verse in the Bible is Genesis 33:1, the story of Jacob and Esau. This part of their story involves major travel—and the entire community traveled at the pace of the children.

Huh.

Children out front—setting the pace. Sometimes slow and whiny, yet often frantically full-speed ahead. Meandering as an expectation. Stuttered starts and stops.

Humble Walk is not doing youth ministry. Humble Walk is not a program. Humble Walk is a worshiping community. And sometimes our community is largely birth through eight-years-old.

What if we just claimed that we will move at the pace of the children and let that be our model? Most of us know other models—the "pipe down and sit still in church!" model. The "church is for adults so kids are invited to the nursery or to Sunday school during worship" model. The "bring enough quiet toys to get us through this hour" model.

What if we put the children in the front of the pack and let them set the pace—and then we as a church and all our expectations followed? Not children's church. The rest of us are here, too. But a community whose pace is set by the most vulnerable among us?

Huh.

The Rev. Jodi Houge is led by Humble Walk Lutheran Church in Saint Paul, Minn. Humble Walk is on the cusp of their fourth birthday and gathers in bars, coffee shops, homes, alleys, parks and art galleries in St. Paul's West End neighborhood.

Make JAM by Gathering Midweek for Education and Worship

By Daryl Thul

With a population of 639 people, Balaton is a little town on the prairie in southwestern Minnesota about 17 miles west of Walnut Grove, of Laura Ingalls fame. The community reached its peak population back in the 1940s. You better believe that the churches in town peaked at about that time, too.

Like most small churches, Trinity Lutheran Church and the Balaton United Methodist Church were seeing their numbers slip away through most of the 1990s and 2000s. When your primary method of evangelism is having babies and the birth rate goes down… well, you get the picture.

So in the summer of 2010, two neighbors, Denise Hoek and Debbie Smith, got together and put forward an idea to their respective pastors, Methodist pastor Lori Von Holtum and ELCA pastors Jennifer Thul and me.

Their big idea was to move Sunday school to Wednesdays. The Methodist Church had only a handful of students and the Lutherans would see the 40 or so kids dwindle to a handful of the teachers' children after the Christmas program.

I pushed to offer it on both Sundays and Wednesdays but got shot down by the quartet.

Realizing that busy families would have trouble feeding their kids and getting them to church, JAM (which stands for Jesus and Me) would also need to include a community supper. Both church councils agreed to sponsor the food costs that were not collected by free-will offering.

Volunteers sign up, provide the food, and turn in receipts, if they desire. Most choose not to turn anything in and the JAM account has grown to more than $4,000 in 16 months (and we keep taking out money for various expenditures).

We pastors, realizing that this is a prime opportunity to get kids in worship, too, advocated a schedule that would include church time. Supper starts at 6 p.m., worship at 6:30 p.m., education at 7 p.m. and activities at 7:30 p.m.

When we started in September 2011, we averaged 45 children and more than 70 people at worship. In December 2011, we had almost 100 children involved and worship consistently tops out at more than 175. We have more than 40 adults involved in JAM, from the teachers to the worship leaders, and from the kitchen guides and servers to the activities leaders.

Both the Methodist Church and Trinity have seen growth in our Sunday worship numbers as well. One of the bigger concerns was that the JAM would bleed off Sunday attendees—but this did not materialize; in fact, the opposite has been true.

We (at Trinity) are using the narrative lectionary this year and it has allowed us to work through the Bible in a deeper fashion than we otherwise could, and that has been an excellent teaching tool on Sundays but especially on Wednesdays where people are learning the story of God. The worship at JAM is loud and fast moving. The screen and projector are used for songs and the messages are always interactive (see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UWs_OL2uSNI for a snippet). The kids come up to be song leaders and "blessers." We "Feed the Pig" for the offering. Everyone has lime green JAM T-shirts.

It's a blast! It's a blessing! And, crazy enough, it's easy to do! So make time to make JAM.

The Rev. Daryl Thul is pastor at Trinity Lutheran Church in Balaton, Minn.

Remake the Gospel as Film

By Adam Thomas

Tags: context, film, Gospel, imagination, interpretation, remake, youth

Every other movie coming out these days seems to be a remake of an older film. Could the film industry possibly have run out of new ideas? No, but the old ideas don't cost as much to develop, so the studios see dollar signs, combined with the potential of tapping into the nostalgia of the older market and the excitement of introducing the younger market to a faster, louder, flashier version of the old film. I loved 1999's *The Thomas Crown Affair* with Pierce Brosnan. So I went back and watched the 1968 original with Steve McQueen, and I couldn't make it through. Total yawn fest. (Sorry, Steve—but I still love *The Great Escape*.)

Now, I know the analogy I'm going to make is flawed because the Gospel is still awesome, even though it's pushing 2,000. But I wonder if the younger generations inside (and outside) our churches respond to the Gospel the way I responded to the Steve McQueen original.

The Gospel takes place halfway around the world in the dusty backwoods of antiquity. It is peopled with characters who walk everywhere. They don't have cars, let alone smartphones. They walk and talk—well, mostly one person talks. And the fact that the guy is Jesus doesn't keep the young mind from being distracted by the latest message just buzzing on their phone.

Please don't misunderstand. I am neither downplaying the power of the Gospel to transcend contexts nor the presence of God to meet anyone, anywhere, at any time. Rather, I am trying to imagine how we might invite young people to encounter the Gospel (and the rest of the Bible) using their own context as a lens to view the text. If the Gospel as we present it feels like the old version of the movie, let's invite our young people to "remake" it.

Here's how we do it. Since I work with high-schoolers, I'll use them as my example. We come together for our weekly meeting. I tell them that we are going to be screenwriters for the day. The studio has tasked us to put together a plot treatment for a remake of the Gospel according to Luke. But the studio doesn't want the film set in first-century Israel, but in twenty-first century Boston (which is where I live but of course you can fill in your own location). We've got the old film (the Gospel text) as a guide for our scriptwriting, but we have to set the film in Boston in 2012.

Perhaps in the first meeting of the script team, we decide that Mary and Joseph go to a hotel in downtown Boston, but all the rooms are booked. They wander out into the street, but Mary starts having contractions. It's raining and cold, so Joseph pulls her into the hotel's parking garage, and she collapses in a handicapped parking space. Joseph dials 9-1-1 on his cell phone, but the ambulance hasn't arrived by the time Mary begins to deliver. Mary is terrified that her baby won't make it away from the hospital and the competent hands of the obstetrician, but Joseph buckles down and does what he has to do. The baby slides into his arms, and he wraps the boy in his bomber jacket. Mary is exhausted, her body wracked from labor, but the love on her face when Joseph hands her the baby radiates through the parking deck, filling the dank garage with maternal light.

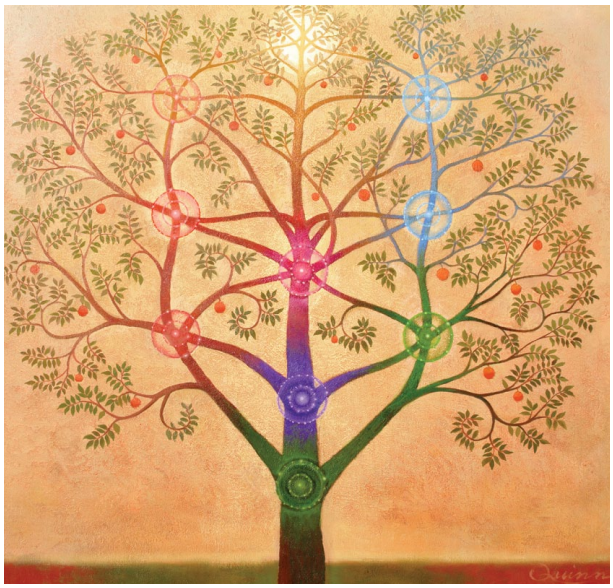
What changes about the story? What about my youth group's context remakes the Gospel? The parking garage is our version of the stable. It's a dirty place—certainly not where you want to deliver an infant. On the other hand, what stays the same? What eternal moments of the Gospel reach through time and space? Mary's love transcends the ancient context and feels right at home here and now.

As the group imagines the script, work through the other pieces of filmmaking: What are the costumes? Other locations? Casting? Perhaps Mary is a high-school senior who wears Hollister and Uggs to school. Then she becomes a teen mother who is stigmatized in her school.

With this exercise, members of the youth group imagine and interpret the Bible while at the same time training themselves to see the story playing out in their own world. By remaking the Gospel, we honor the *timeless* nature of the text by making it *timely* for us.

We use our imaginations to bring the Gospel out of its context and into ours and, by doing so, the Gospel takes us into itself. We find ourselves in the story because the story is happening here and now, as it always has been and always will.

The Rev. Adam Thomas serves God as Associate Rector at St. Stephen's Episcopal Church in Cohasset, MA. His first book, Digital Disciple: Real Christianity in a Virtual World, *was published in May 2011 by Abingdon Press. His blog, wherethewind.com, and his ordination to the priesthood both had their fourth anniversaries in June 2012. Adam lives in Weymouth, MA with his wife Leah, who brings him more joy than he thought was possible.*



PREACHING

Try Open-source Preaching by Adding Voices to the Conversation

By Bruce Reyes-Chow

There is something really comforting about a pulpit. After a while it feels like that old comfy chair that you've had since college.

When you curl up into that pulpit space on Sunday morning, you know where you can lean, you know every nook and cranny and there is protection from all that might ail you in the world. For preachers it is the place that is "ours," a place where no one else can tell us what to say—it's all between me, the text, and the Holy Spirit. With fear and trembling we get up there each week and pray that the Holy Spirit shows up.

If you are a preacher, it is in that moment of proclamation that we find our calling to a particular congregation. They called us there to inspire people to action, to tease out the nuances of the text, and to share God's gift of hope for the world. Preaching is an honorable and awesome task.

But what if not everyone to whom we speak has those same expectations about our role as preacher? Maybe they want to take part in the inspiring, the teasing, and the sharing. What if adding their voices to the preaching moment did just that? Many of us are discovering that one way of preaching invites the entire congregation, not into a metaphorical conversation about the text, but an actual one.

When I was in seminary, I was taught how to construct and deliver a solid sermon. We studied the text, took into account the life of the congregation, and then we determined what they needed to hear from the pulpit on any given Sunday. This is a fine form of preaching and many people still gain a great deal from hearing a good sermon whether it is a creative narrative or a heady three-pointer. But in a growing culture where "open-source" community is becoming more the norm ("open source" being the idea that the more voices engaged in seeking the truth, the closer we come to discovering what that truth is), it seems wise to also encourage an open-source style of preaching.

The conversational preacher

When I was serving what many would call an emergent-style congregation, the traditional sermon time lasted about 25 minutes. My role was not to talk that entire time, but to frame Scripture and context in a way that invited and encouraged people to engage in conversations during worship. I would ask questions for which I did not have some preset answer in mind—no fill-in-the-blank sermons here—and then moderate the flow of interaction between the congregation as they mused about the text.

While it took a while for me to get used to "giving up" the security and comfort of my unidirectional pulpit space, I found that the church discovered its inspiration, nuance, and hope in one another. I had my role as the seminary-trained person, but it was not to gift wrap the Word of God, give it to them, and see what happens; rather, it was to allow each and every person in the church to bless one another with their particular insights, stories, and perspectives.

Getting there is not easy. The preacher must be prepared to respond to the outlandish and the tangential; the congregation must be willing to engage in church conversations as they most likely do in their day-to-day living (but may not be used to in church); and the entire congregation must see the value in their own voices and the voices of others. Shifting to this style of preaching requires the preacher to be better prepared in order to respond well to questions; be nimble in word and thought in order to help a group of individuals to stay focused, and be willing to give up the traditional authority of the pulpit. It's hard to do, but well worth it when it works.

Emergent gimmick?

I know that for many, this conversational style might seem like a gimmick of the emergent church, but it is so much more than that. It's about recognizing that, while that old comfy chair has been good to us for so long, there is a time when it must be moved to another room, re-upholstered, or given away all together. Preaching has never been about the preacher's technical skills but about the gathered community discovering God's hopes and intentions for us all.

It is time that we find new ways to help this happen. Enjoy the conversations!

Ordained in the Presbyterian Church (USA) since 1995, Bruce Reyes-Chow has served two congregations, one an intergenerational church in need of redevelopment and a new church plant made up of 20s and 30s hoping to reclaim church life in urban San Francisco. From 2008-2010 he was Moderator of the 218th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA). He is currently one of those "consultant" types who makes his way, writing, speaking, teaching, and drinking coffee. He is also studying for a doctor of ministry and helps to parent three daughters and one dog. Bruce's social networks of choice are Twitter, Facebook and his blog where he muses on issues of faith, culture, technology, race, politics, parenting, and urban living.

Abandon the Lectionary and Shape Worship around Bible Discovery

By Sandhya Jha

Our worship planning process at First Christian Church of Oakland (FCCO) might be described as "Paulo Freire meets Bible boot camp." I've been at FCCO about five years now, and it took me a year to realize that the members of the congregation who had attended Bible study and Sunday school faithfully were just as unlikely to know the narrative arc of the Bible as were the people who were brand new to Christianity. And as much as I love the ecumenical commitment of the lectionary, as much as I love the way it pushes pastors past their favorite passages, I came to believe that it was failing my people.

So I did a little experiment. I called together a Bible study on Song of Solomon. When people showed up, I told them that each of the five of them who had shown up was going to become an expert on a different interpretation of the book. I handed out complex articles. And the next week, they shared with each other a different way of reading the book. We had in that Bible study group everything from Ph.D.s to high-school dropouts, people making six-figures and people living on the streets. And they led us in a discussion about womanist theology, liberation theology, the intersection of sexuality and faith, and medieval mystics.

And then the twist: the last session of the Bible study, I had them create an outline for our church to experience the Song of Solomon as a five-week worship series, with Bible study participants pointing out the issues they thought I needed to lift up in my sermons, and making sure we lifted up things like feminist interpretation, GLBT inclusion, the fact that the Bible celebrates dark skin as a beautiful attribute, and what it would feel like for our congregation to have a relationship with Jesus that had as much give and take as a healthy marriage.

Some people in the Bible study had grown up in churches that wouldn't let them read Song of Solomon, so there was something excitingly risqué about the whole venture. And some people in the congregation went home to brag to their friends about their pastor who said "B-J" from the pulpit. (In my defense, it was the feminism sermon, and I said that the biggest tragedy about teen sexuality occurring younger and younger in our community was not just that youth were having sex younger, but that it was sex rooted in inequality, rooted in pleasuring a man instead of celebrating equal joy in union, which was the sexuality celebrated in Song of Solomon and the type of relationship God called us to. The skyrocketing rate of blowjobs among junior-high youth just happened to be the most concrete illustration of the point.)

We've hit a rhythm at FCCO with worship series that makes my heart sing after four years of bumping along toward this point: those who are interested gather to discuss the theme (a Hebrew Bible book in the spring, a New Testament book in the fall, and themes related to our community in between). I show up with some additional materials on the book or the theme. I do a basic overview. We discuss what we know about it collectively. We discuss where we experience liberation (a really important spiritual practice in a socioeconomically, racially, gender—and orientation-diverse congregation like ours).

Then we ask the critical question: What does our community need to learn, be comforted by, be challenged by, or be inspired by in this material? And piece by piece, we create a worship series. Different people are captivated by different elements, and they create that specific worship service. They choose special music and prayer practices. They tell me what to highlight in my sermon that Sunday. Sometimes they even suggest someone else who should preach.

This fall we've started a series we're calling "Reclaiming Revelation." The planning took four weeks. We divided up the book itself and applied liberationist, feminist, and historical-critical interpretations. An 18-year-old in our congregation, who was terrified of the book and who brought her boyfriend (whose church had forbidden him to

read it as a youth) to our first planning session, has shown up for every planning meeting, is planning two services, and is inviting all her friends to learn that this is a book of liberation for the oppressed. She's even preaching on the first chapter in Revelation that she studied in our planning process, asking *if Revelation is calling existing churches to reflect on their relationship with God and the world, what is it calling our particular church to get right with God about?*

Liturgy—*leiturgia*—means work of the people. I feel like God is smiling down at FCCO every time we get that right.

Sandhya Jha serves as co-pastor of First Christian Church of Oakland and also as director of the Oakland Peace Center. She recently published Room at the Table: The Struggle for Dignity and Unity in Disciples History*, a book about people of color in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). Her passions are Jesus, jazz music, and Indian food (sometimes in that order).*

Practice Intergenerational Homiletical Brainstorming

By Kenyatta R. Gilbert

A *brainstorm* is defined as a spontaneous group discussion to produce ideas and ways of solving problems. Intergenerational homiletical brainstorming is an exercise of corporate reading, hearing, and sharing of one's initial impressions on a Scripture passage to bring about mutually influential collaboration across age groups.

The goal of this information-gathering and listening stage of sermon preparation is to prompt unseasoned theological conversations around both familiar and seldom-explored Scripture texts in an intergenerational forum. Implied in the definition of *homiletical brainstorming* is that such conversations should be uncomplicated. A good starting point is to raise questions such as: What do you see in and hear from the text after reading and meditating on it? What does the text say or seem to say? What details stand out?

Good sermons rise out of the Holy Scriptures and dare to speak of a promise-bearing God who addresses the real needs of real people in real time. They are theological conversations birthed in peculiar places where particular people's lives and what they value matter and converge. Put differently, good sermons mediate what God intends and expects of God's own human creation by fusing our horizon of assumptions and cultural selves today to the horizon of the world of the ancient text.

Because biblical texts and human lives as texts are historically conditioned, preachers do well to remember that obtaining footing in ancient sacred texts is never value-neutral or risk-free. The wise exegete who would rightly and fittingly interpret the gospel's concern for the community's care recognizes

- the invariable risk of reducing biblical texts to fit one's own ideological imaginings and homiletical outlook;
- that our running life transcripts accompany our deepest searching for God's fresh revelation from the past events recorded in Scripture; and
- that there is no faithful speaking about the mind of the text's concern for human life in the absence of the goings-on of the world we inhabit.

We can learn from the author of 2 Timothy, who exhorts Timothy to remember his heritage and the purpose and utility of the Holy Scriptures in a society where lovers of the world "will not put up with sound doctrine."

> "But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work." (2 Timothy 3:14-17)

What is intriguing about what is communicated in this commission to Timothy for cultivating an effective ministry is its intergenerational and interpersonal witness about Scripture's radically transformative power and how Scripture is to be used. Here one veteran offers life and knowledge of Scripture as an aid to a young pastor—no babe in scriptural tradition to be sure—to recall his own lifelong tutelage in the Word. This sagely conferral of biblical wisdom from one pastor to another, from one generation to the next, reminds us of the importance of intergenerational sharing and bringing our cultural selves to an unchanging Word in times of radical social and ecclesial change. Clearly, the overriding purpose of this teaching is to ensure that the church's vision and mission is kept vital.

The following observations can guide a preacher's course of action when interpreting Scripture in intergenerational collaboration.

Four assumptions

1. Interpreting Scripture is an act of worship and the most fundamental task of the preacher.
2. Scripture is not "self-interpreting"; we have to handle (wrestle, interrogate, and embrace) biblical texts if we are to expect any divine revelation from them.
3. "Lone Ranger" interpretations of Scripture almost always end in disaster.
4. All preachers have blind spots and therefore can benefit from hearing other perspectives.

Rules of art

1. Read/meditate on a pre-selected passage (take, for example, Luke 4:17b-21)
2. Pose a question or concern the text raises for you.
3. In no more than three sentences, compose and share critical insights.
   Shared insight on Luke 4:17b-21:
    1. This is the vision of Jesus and His proclamation in wide scope.
    2. Good News equals Word of God as provision for the poor; freedom for the locked down and locked up; and the removal of our physical and spiritual cataracts.
    3. This texts points out the fact that community wellness is a divine concern.

Rev. Dr. Kenyatta R. Gilbert is Associate Professor of Homiletics at the Howard University School of Divinity. He holds degrees from Baylor University and Princeton Theological Seminary. Dr. Gilbert specializes in the history, theory and practice of African American preaching. He is the author of The Journey and Promise of African American Preaching *(Fortress 2012) and founder of The Preaching Project, a web-ministry organization dedicated to the promotion of preaching excellence and effective leadership in African American churches and communities.*

Preach through the Biblical Narrative

By Rolf A. Jacobson

As a biblical scholar, I love to quote systematic theologian Robert W. Jenson's dictum, "It is the whole mission of the church to speak the gospel ... *to tell the biblical narrative to the world in proclamation* and to God in worship, and to do so in a fashion appropriate to the content of that narrative."[1] To this, add the following conclusion from the famous Old Testament theologian Gerhard von Rad: "It would be fatal to our understanding of Israel's witness if we were to arrange it from the outset on the basis of theological categories ... *re-telling remains the most legitimate form of theological discourse* on the Old Testament."[2]

Add the two conclusions together and what do you get? A prescription for what ails preaching: Preach the biblical narrative.

At its heart, the Christian gospel is a story. The old, old story that tells the truth about the world (God's good, but fallen creation) and about the Triune God (whose purpose for the world is to reclaim, redeem, and be reconciled to the world). To preach the gospel is to tell this story.

But notice one thing: the dominant ways that we engage Scripture in worship fragment the biblical story. The two dominant paradigms for preaching in our culture are lectionary-based preaching (and I mean here the Revised Common Lectionary, or RCL) and thematic preaching (sermon series based on biblical themes or books). According to the recent scholarship of Joy Moore at Duke Divinity School, both of these approaches create preaching that fails "to convey to listeners the overarching story depicted in Christian Scripture as narrated from Genesis through Revelation."[3]

Most charitably, one can say that both RCL preaching and thematic preaching assume that the congregation already knows the broad biblical story from Genesis to Revelation. Working from this (faulty) assumption, such preaching "samples" the biblical story from week to week: dipping a big toe into the story of Jesus one week, feeling the temperature of the Red Sea in the Exodus the next week, testing the water in Paul the next week, etc.

But here is the reality. Even most active, engaged Christians do not know the broad outlines of the biblical story—from creation and fall; through the election, exodus and exile of Israel; to the life, passion and resurrection of Jesus; and into the mission of the church. Let me say that again: even most active, engaged Christians do not know the bare *outlines* of the story.

So, the prescription is simple. Preach the biblical narrative. Tell the stories. Don't think this is preaching? See Jenson and von Rad.

There is more than one way to tackle preaching the biblical narrative. Briefly, here are three ways to approach the task:

1. First, a congregation could stick with the RCL, but during the Pentecost season, simply adopt the semi-continuous readings for the Old Testament lessons. In this approach, over the span of three years of Pentecost readings, one could cover the Old Testament story. Upsides: This approach is thorough when it comes to the Old Testament and leaves the RCL intact for congregations already in the RCL. This approach also leaves the Festival portion of the church year intact. Downsides: It takes three years. It does not cover the New Testament story in a narrative way. And it happens mostly in summer, when worship attendance is often lower.

2. Second, a congregation could cover the Old Testament in one year and then the New Testament the next year. Upsides: Thorough coverage of each testament. Downsides: This is a long time to remain in the Old

Testament. It makes navigating the Festivals of the church year problematic. And only going through the story once might not repeat the story enough for formation to really occur.

3. Third, a congregation could try out the Narrative Lectionary, an experimental lectionary that has a four-year cycle. Each fall, a congregation preaches through the Old Testament in hops, leaps and bounds from September through Christmas. Then, the congregation goes through one of the four Gospels from Christmas through Easter. In the Easter season, a congregation works through the story of the early church. This approach is supported at www.narrativelectionary.org.

Upsides: The approach is repetitive, which aids retention. It honors both the church year (especially the Festivals) and also the North American school year (which is a reality for many families). A congregation can stay with this approach for one to four years (or longer), depending on how well the practice is supporting Christian faith formation in a context. Downsides: The rapid pace in the autumn of each year can be a challenge. Portions of Scripture such as the Psalms, Proverbs, Hebrews and Revelation are not directly addressed (although they can be attended to in the summer).

Rolf Jacobson is Associate Professor of Old Testament at Luther Seminary. A noted speaker, author, and educator, his works include Crazy Talk: A Not-So-Stuffy Dictionary of Theological Terms *(Augsburg Fortress, 2008),* Crazy Book: A Not-So-Stuffy Dictionary of Biblical Terms *(Augsburg Fortress, 2009) and* Soundings in the Theology of the Psalms *(Fortress, 2011), and two books on the psalms that will be released in 2013. His articles have appeared in* Theology Today, Word and World, Interpretation, *and other places.*

Preach the Biblical Story to Help us Understand Our Own

By Joy J. Moore

What do your listeners do with the sermons you preach? Are their lives a continuation of the drama of God, or do they leave the Sunday service as consumers imitating the world as presented by the media? Just how do we captivate the imaginations of a high-tech audience used to instant global news and portable movies on handheld devices?

Many sermons begin with a funny story or captivating movie image told right after the reading of Scripture. This is called the *hook* in homiletical jargon, a way to capture the attention of listeners who have gathered from various quadrants of the community with a multiplicity of concerns ranging from loss of faith to loss of employment. Our knowledge of the latest breaking news, international and local political unrest, and impending weather seem to provide the best commentary for acknowledging the shared existence of the community of faith.

This instinct to move to a common cultural touchstone betrays a lack of biblical literacy even among those who regularly hear sermons. Members of mainline denominations and independent congregations alike lack the capacity to express the biblical revelation of God's activity in human history as demonstrated in the life of Jesus Christ. Which means that *the sermon's task must be to counteract the amnesia that has undermined so much of Christian expression*.

A few years ago, one of my students prepared a sermon on Psalm 34 that captured the fear and turmoil of David hiding from Saul in 1 Samuel. The sermon captivated us as we listened because we were invited, through the preacher's skillful re-telling, to actually fear for our own lives. After the sermon, the other students asked how the preacher had imagined so clearly such anxiety. The student acknowledged that he described for us his own feelings experienced in a near-death incident in his own life.

What made his message so captivating was that during the sermon, he never injected his life experience directly into the sermon. While he had used a real-life incident, he didn't deviate from the biblical narrative by inserting a personal illustration. Instead, he described distress, despair, and disorientation, leaving the story of David central in our imaginations against these feelings of anxiety.

This seamless narration proved more memorable than raising our sympathy toward the speaker as he recounted his own story. I marveled at the impact of this telling of the biblical story as it must have been originally passed down through the generations of ancient Israel. Since then, I have encouraged preachers to focus their sermons on a biblical *story* rather than merely a biblical *idea*.

When one thinks of an illustration to employ or an idea to insert, consider if it truly belongs in the scene from Scripture that one is rehearsing. If so, can the point be made directly in the biblical episode?

For example, what would it be like to describe John's care for Jesus' mother after the crucifixion as ministry to a middle-aged Palestinian women who has just attended her son's public execution? In our current political reality, these words carry the weight of both the death of Jesus and the massacre of young men today in ethnic wars. Who cares for their mothers?

Or consider the impact of describing Eve's parseltongue encounter as leading to the first residential foreclosure. While beckoning images of our movie-going imaginations, the context remains a narrative of detrimental consequences resulting from a verbal exchange with a serpent. Suddenly J. K. Rowling is not so original and the biblical narrative is recovered as humanity's foundational story. One-liners and intentional turns of phrases register the force of the biblical image against the realities our listeners experience today. God's people then and now can trust the comforting intrusion of the Holy Spirit.

Here we are, thousands of years later, reading an ancient equivalent to Facebook. Everything from the transcripts

of the spoken messages of Jeremiah to the Letter to the Hebrews are like ancient blog posts sent out through the progressive technological advancement in communication known then as writing.

Such fluency with the language we call Christian faith requires a grasp of the entire biblical narrative. It also requires an imagination shaped by God's purpose and the speech. Why? So that preachers can convey this message to a world that can't imagine God's intention to restore the goodness of creation.

Our sermons must expose our listeners to the drama of God's love and justice demonstrated in the life of Jesus. Such a message will recover the witness to the God of Jesus Christ as the shared knowledge of the community of faith called Christian. I believe the most effective proclamation of the word of God—the most effective way to tell this story—is to tell it in such a way that the drama it tells happens all over again among the listeners who call themselves followers of Jesus.

The Rev. Dr. Joy J. Moore (Ph.D. Brunel University) serves as Associate Dean of African American Church Studies and Professor of Preaching at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California. She is an ordained elder in the West Michigan Conference of the United Methodist Church.

Preach to Shape Congregational Identity

By Christopher A. Henry

The summer after my sophomore year of college, I had the opportunity to preach weekly at a twenty-five member church in a small town in northern North Carolina. When I announced this to my campus minister one afternoon in her office, she immediately scanned her bookshelf and handed me a worn copy of Reinhold Niebuhr's classic diary *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic*. The book became a constant companion that summer and still rests within reach in my own office.

Reflecting on his first experience in parish ministry, the young pastor (and brilliant theologian) writes, "I am not surprised that most prophets are itinerants. Critics of the church think we preachers are afraid to tell the truth because we are economically dependent upon the people of our church. There is something in that, but it does not quite get to the root of the matter…I think the real clue to the tameness of a preacher is the difficulty one finds in telling unpleasant truths to people whom one has learned to love. I'm not surprised that most budding prophets are tamed in time to become harmless parish priests."[1] Many pastors who serve congregations can corroborate Niebuhr's hunch. The temptation always exists to submit to the taming effect of parish life, to become harmless parish priests committed to the comfort and stability of the status quo.

But the call to congregational renewal moves us beyond safety in all parts of our ministry, and I propose that this begins with our preaching. I am convinced that Protestant theology has the most powerful and meaningful message for twenty-first century American culture, but we can't convey it without visionary preachers who proclaim the gospel in compelling, challenging, and genuine ways. Or, as the Apostle Paul boldly and rhetorically asked in his letter to the Romans, "How are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard?" (10:14). Church renewal will require bold preaching that speaks the truth in love and skillfully combines the prophetic with the pastoral.

In a time when churches must adapt to compete with countless activities, programs, clubs, and events, I am concerned that the ministry of preaching gets moved further down the pastoral list of priorities. I understand why this happens (*believe me, I really do!*), but I think it is a mistake. Attention to the crucial importance of preaching can help us set a vision for renewal, lay the foundation for necessary change, and provide pastoral care and affirmation to a congregation.

The preaching task is the way in which we can reach the most people at one time with messages of God's grace, compassion, and love. It offers a communal setting in which we can name aloud the promises of God that have the most resonance in a specific time and place. Perhaps most importantly it provides a weekly opportunity to "make plain" a vision for renewal that is rooted in the biblical text and congregational context. Taking the time and making the effort to prepare and preach relevant, biblical, compelling sermons is an essential component to congregational renewal, and meaningful pastoral leadership.

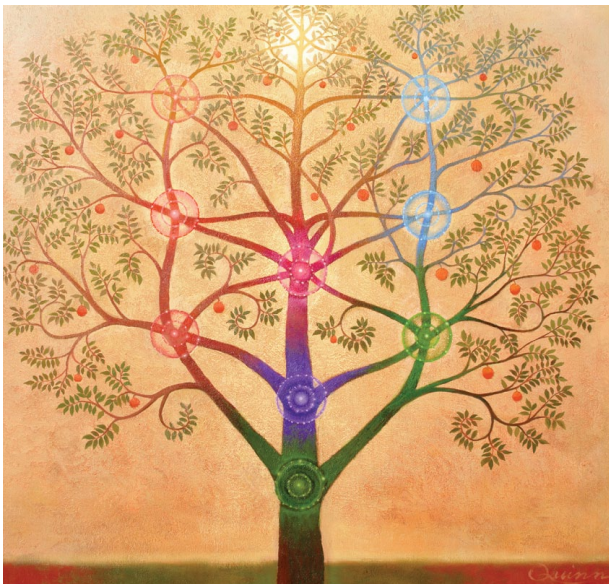
I've been fortunate enough to witness two remarkable examples of congregational renewal in recent years. The histories, theologies, and personalities of the churches were quite different, and therefore the tasks of renewal were also distinct. But the common element was the ministry of preaching. In each case, the church called a new pastor for whom preaching was a priority. In both cases, the new pastor carefully crafted sermons that were rooted in Scripture, acknowledged explicitly the context, and began to forge a renewed congregational identity. As members were able to articulate and affirm this hopeful identity, growth and renewal took place as well.

Transformational preaching is a foundational element to congregational renewal, and it is a constant, exhilarating challenge. It requires us to affirm and celebrate the best parts of what our churches have been and are, to challenge

members to live into a renewed sense of identity, and to offer a compelling vision for change rooted in gospel truths rather than political ideology or self-preservation.

Niebuhr's description of the harmless parish priest still plagues me, but I have also seen the blessing that comes when a preacher expresses love in ways that challenge and inspire a church to renewed mission and ministry. I've seen it begin in the pulpit and spread to every part of the congregation's life. I've heard difficult truths spoken in ways that evoke change rather than resistance. I've witnessed the powerful impact of the Word proclaimed with authenticity, passion, and grace. Such preaching enables, encourages, and evokes lasting renewal in the life of a congregation.

The Rev. Christopher A. Henry is pastor/head of staff at Shallowford Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, Ga.



SERVICE & MISSION

Hang a Yellow Banner to Engage the Public with the Gospel

By Alan Storey

The Central Methodist Mission (CMM) is an inner-city congregation in the heart of Cape Town, South Africa. Its towering gothic steeple shadows a very popular African curio market frequented by tourists and locals all year round. The headquarters of two daily newspapers stand diagonally opposite. Provisional Government Chambers are a city block away while the National Parliament is a five-minute walk from our front door to theirs. All this positions CMM in a very strategic public space. The question we asked ourselves: How can we use our position to best engage the public with the Gospel?

Since the dawn of our democracy in 1994 the mainline churches that were so instrumental in the struggle against Apartheid have all but lost their prophetic voice. We have learned that it is easier to say "Thus says the Lord" to our enemies than to our friends. The question we asked ourselves: How can we as a local congregation speak truth to power even if the hierarchy of the church does not?

In the broader society, a false dualism exists between the sacred and secular resulting in a compartmentalized faith-life that has little bearing on social issues—a Sunday divorced from the rest of the week. The table of the Eucharist unrelated to the kitchen table at home or the boardroom table at the office. This divide is further entrenched with the phrase, "Religion and politics don't mix." The question we asked ourselves: How can we reveal their oneness and celebrate the marriage of the sacred and secular?

The inside of the CMM sanctuary is filled with stained-glass windows that rely on the light from outside to shine. However, one has to be an "insider" to appreciate them. A notice board with the service times is all that "outsiders" are exposed to. The question we asked ourselves: How can we offer meaning and not just self-promotional information to outsiders?

One small way in which we have tried to honor and address these questions has been the making of large (16 feet by 10 feet) banners that we hang from the CMM steeple. The banners are yellow in color with black writing for the same maximum-visibility-reason as taxi signs. Here are three examples:

1. The first banner addressed the contentious issue of the Protection of State Information Bill otherwise known as the "Secrecy Bill." This legislation included severe penalties on whistle blowers and restrictions on press freedom. In response our banner declared, **The truth will *keep* us free—say no to the Secrecy Bill.** By quoting Jesus (with a slight adaptation) our hope was to help people to engage this bill from a Gospel perspective and to remind the Ministers of Parliament and public at large that this was as much a theological bill as it was political. It was a reminder that in fact we should be passing laws that encourage whistle blowers instead of threatening to punish them.

2. The second banner read, **South Africa betrayed for 30 pieces of Yuan—We are sorry HH Dalai Lama.** This was in response to the South African government's refusal to grant the Dalai Lama a visa to enter South Africa to attend Archbishop Bishop Desmond Tutu's 80th birthday celebrations. The banner created a great deal of public discussion as to the significance of the "30 pieces of Yuan." By calling to mind Judas' betrayal of Jesus we inferred that South Africa's relationship with China compromised/crucified our own Constitution and Bill of Rights.

3. The third banner states, **The Arms Deal was Holy Corrupt**. In the mid-90s, the South African government signed a multi-billion dollar arms deal. Since the onset there have been allegations of bribes and corruption attached to the deal. Under persistent pressure for many years the President of South Africa finally relented and instituted a Commission of Inquiry that is presently under way. Our banner declares

the arms deal "holy corrupt" even before the outcome of this commission of inquiry because we do not believe Jesus would ever trade in arms and that every cent spent on arms is preventing money from being spent on the real security threats to our people like inadequate housing, education and health care.

All these banners address a hot topic of the day. They contribute to the public debate around the issue as well as introduce a Gospel perspective to the narrative.

If we were in the United States in 2011, perhaps we would have printed the following banner: **What is truth? Ask Bradley Manning.** The Emperor Pilate, like other global empires, needs help to see the truth.

Pastor Alan Storey serves Central Methodist Church in Cape Town, South Africa. He is known within and beyond South Africa for his engaging manner of teaching and his gift for inviting others to dive more deeply into their spiritual lives. A selection of his work, including sermons, is posted at http://www.aslowwalk.org.

Don't Just Talk Interfaith, Be Interfaith

By Salim Kaderbhai

Interfaith existence is becoming a reality of the world we live in. Minnesota—where I live, for example—is no longer full of only white Scandinavian or German Lutherans and Catholics but rather a melting pot of diverse cultures and faiths. The definition of church and the boundaries of whom the church connects with have dramatically changed. It includes the Hmong student who comes for the after-school program, the Iraqi refugee seeking to make connections, or Jewish and Hindi peers working side-by-side in faith-based community organizing.

I believe the church is not only for those who share the same faith or passion but exists for those who may believe differently, be from another part of the world, speak a different language, or even understand God in a very different way.

It is not enough for the church to participate just in interfaith or inter-religious dialogue, but rather the church needs to create space for people to come as they are. Historically the church has coerced, killed, maimed, raped and tortured others to spread Christianity and establish a colonial stronghold around the world. If the power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is as powerful as we claim it to be, then we do not need to berate, ridicule, demean, or belittle someone else's faith for the truth of Christ, God's abundant mercy, and God's desire for all creation to be reconciled back to God.

I was raised in a Muslim home in Tanzania. I attended an International School where I had classmates from all over the world, which exposed me to a religious, cultural, and racial diversity that shaped my worldview. I spent my years of high school at St. Mary's School in Nairobi, Kenya, which is a Roman Catholic school. I was required to take religious education that included exposure to both the Christian faith as well as Islam.

However, Islamic teachings about converting away from the Muslim faith were clear and violent. Because of that, it took me almost eight years before I told my parents about my conversion. For eight years I had prepared for rejection, anger, and disownment, but they received my confession with love. They told me that I was still their son, that they still loved me, and that their only concern was about my health (because I drank too much Coke!).

They came to visit a couple of years later, right as I was beginning my internship at Redeemer Lutheran Church in Minneapolis. I was excited to see my parents and to be more forthcoming and open with them about my work and my faith. I invited them to come to the first sermon I gave at my internship site. The Gospel reading for the day was the Parable of the Two Sons from Matthew 21. Obviously, connecting with my parents on the question of Christian theology was going to be difficult, so it helped for me to speak to the core values that they had raised me on: faith, family, and education, and the depths of love in our relationship.

The faith I was raised in is no longer the faith I profess. The family they imagined was probably different from the inter-racial, cross-cultural, inter-religious one we find ourselves in now. Their hope of me becoming a computer engineer has not been realized now that I am a seminarian. In all of this, I brought my parents, my congregation, and myself back to the question asked in the parable: "Which of the two did the will of his father?" I was obedient to both my parents and my heavenly Father. Christ's call on my life was being actualized.

When I was a Muslim, I experienced God in very powerful ways, but there was always a burden of unrighteousness that I carried around with me. In my conversion to Christianity, I experienced forgiveness and a claim on my life that I had never experienced before. It is this freedom, this liberation, this breaking off of the shackles of oppression that I want to share with those to whom I have the privilege of proclaiming the good news of Christ.

When I left Tanzania in August 1998, I had no idea that I would be where I am in my life today. God has been faithful and I feel very thankful and blessed to be doing what I am doing, to have my family, and the sacred task of sharing the good news of a God who forgives, renews, and welcomes us into divine presence.

To *be* interfaith rather than just talk about it is to celebrate authentic relationships, show real vulnerability, and provide room to talk about the similarities of our faiths, but most importantly, to have the courage to wrestle with the various exclusive claims and sit in that tension. In the end, the gospel of Jesus Christ is far more powerful than our human weakness.

Salim Kaderbhai is a 2012 graduate of Luther Seminary who served as intern pastor at Redeemer Lutheran Church in Minneapolis, Minn.

Eat, Learn, and Respond to Community Needs

By Michael D. McLaughlin

One Sunday in January 2009 I heard my name called. Seven months into my time with the congregation, I was accustomed to post-worship conversations in the pastor's study but none of my previous meetings had prepared me for what was now afoot. I faced two teachers, one an elder, and one a friend and future member of the congregation, both women fiercely gifted for shaping young minds, and both in the grip of the Holy Spirit.

It had been a rough week at Westwood Elementary, a school struggling against the hounds of poverty, drugs, and hunger in the lives of many of the students' families. The three of us were gathered together that day by a confluence of a student in crisis and the Spirit's movement through the Word proclaimed.

"We believe God is calling us to do something for these kids," they said. I responded, "You are teachers. You already do so much." They answered, "No. We are sure there's more." We sat, explored, questioned, and prayed for discernment. We agreed to study and pray over the path forward and we made a plan to get back together in a week. In the meantime, I gathered resources for our task.

I read David K. Shipler's *The Working Poor: Invisible in America,* re-read sections of Sara Miles' *Take this Bread: A Radical Conversion,* and drew on my seminary training. Most importantly, I explored Scripture and set about the discipline of praying the Holy Spirit would enliven our imaginations and guide our efforts.

One week later we were brimming with enthusiasm and possibilities. We agreed we wanted to deepen our connection to the children in the community; we agreed to draw on the gifts and character of our small, feisty congregation long engaged in community ministry through the local food pantry. Wherever we were being led, food would be involved.

With God's children and food in our imaginations, we read in Scripture what would become our guiding images: Jeremiah 32 and Acts 4:31—37. Jeremiah 32 offered the wisdom of the prophet carrying out God's command to make what would appear to be history's worst real estate purchase ever. As Babylon laid siege en route to Israel's eventual exile, Jeremiah followed God's instruction to buy land in the very path of destruction. Why? Because God promised restoration, even flourishing. The promise of God's provision in spite of staggering odds became essential as we planned a costly new ministry during America's worst economic crisis since the depression.

Acts 4:31-37 offered the wisdom of the power of prayer, the unquenchable influence of the Holy Spirit, and the beauty of Christians sharing possessions in one heart and soul. We prayed for boldness as our 75-member congregation stepped out in faith, and God did not disappoint. Our bold requests for resources, energy, and time were met with a dizzyingly generous response from the community.

With boldness only the Spirit can provide, undergirded by the richness of Scripture, and encouraged by our church leadership, our new ministry would be called All God's Children. We provided breakfast five days a week and lunch twice a week during the summer break when over 70 percent of the Westwood Elementary students were without school meals that were so important to growth, development, and learning.

The cost of the first summer program was estimated to be over $12,000—a daunting need that was more than met thanks to the response of multiple churches, businesses, banks, nonprofits, and individuals joining our struggle to follow our Lord's command to feed his sheep.

We served 700 meals a week for twelve weeks in an apartment in the local housing authority during the summer of 2009. When summer ended, we thought it might be time to rest up… until God called us to convert the apartment into a space for healthy snacks and homework help four days a week during the school year.

As we've now finished our third summer program and entered into our third year of the afterschool program, we've experienced much growth. We've added a computer lab; we've provided arts workshops, clothes closets, and school supplies. Our congregation and ecumenical partner congregations have held Vacation Bible School, ice cream socials, and Trunk or Treat with the youth of All God's Children.

Some stories are still hard to hear, but now we share new stories with All God's Children—stories of kids streaming in daily to eat and learn, stories of names now on the honor roll, stories of nourished bodies, minds, and spirits. Our congregation has been blessed with renewed energy and new members; the community has been blessed with one mind and spirit in feeding the flock. Indeed, our foolish move during historic economic insecurity has resulted in the flourishing God promised. Jesus called us to feed and, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we answered with All God's Children.

Michael D. McLaughlin is the pastor and head of staff of First Presbyterian Church in Cleveland, Miss. Michael is married to Lisa with whom he delights in their children Madeline, Sophia, and True. A graduate of the University of Tennessee and Columbia Theological Seminary, Michael's interests include ministry, art, music, politics, social justice, the sciences, elephants, and mustache wax.

Love Out Loud by Preaching the "Preferential Option for the Poor"

By Keri Day

As a scholar-preacher, I am deeply committed to themes of social justice found in the gospel readings. But I have certainly experienced parishioners who got upset when confronted with this liberationist message. They told me I should keep politics out of pulpit and, most importantly, out of the church. It led me to ponder how pastors can help their congregations better understand the church's commitment to the "preferential option for the poor."

What is the "preferential option for the poor"? Simply the insistence that as much as God loves all God's children, God has a particular concern for those who are most vulnerable. Think of it as a parent looking out for the youngest child or a triage nurse attending first to those most in need of attention and assistance. Throughout the Bible, God expresses greatest concern for those in need and urges us to do the same.

When I served as a youth pastor, my church was once in the midst of a major capital campaign when the issue of immigration became headline news. Preaching on a theology of hospitality for the "stranger/resident alien" was not at all popular within this upper-class congregation and one of the campaign committee members suggested it would be more prudent for the sake of the campaign to postpone preaching on anything "controversial" for at least six months.

I'm embarrassed to say it did give the pastoral leaders (including myself) cause for concern as we were committed to the financial success of the campaign. However, as church leaders, we realized that we were *more* committed to fulfilling the mission of the church, which includes meeting the needs of the vulnerable such as immigrants.

As church leaders, we certainly want to be accepted and liked, even popular, which is often at odds with being faithful to preaching the counter-cultural message of the gospel of Jesus Christ in our society. Hence, a natural and real tension emerges.

Yet, I have found practical ways to break open themes of social justice when congregations seem resistant or hesitant. For instance, rather than trying a one-time homily on themes like social justice, it may be helpful to try to develop these topics over several weeks, allowing the homily to break open the Scriptures. This could help congregants hear the challenge of the gospel and better integrate faith and life together.

What preachers may need to witness to more than anything else is the conviction that authentic, mature faith demands the hard struggle of thinking and choosing to "love out loud" by courageously and unapologetically preaching the central gospel mandate to care for the poor and oppressed, even when it is unpopular. No matter how carefully you craft your message, some people simply will not hear or embrace the liberating thrust of the gospel.

However, when we are faithful to our primary duty as preachers or pastors, we will not have easy answers, but raise questions in our homilies, walking with our people as fellow pilgrims, and together seeking deeper faith in and relationship with our gracious God.

Keri Day is assistant professor of Theological and Social Ethics and Black Church Studies at Brite Divinity School at Texas Christian University in Fort Worth, Texas.

Reach Beyond Charity to Seek Social Justice

By Christian Piatt

My mom is a Southern Baptist; my dad is an atheist. So I like to say I split the difference and became a progressive mainline Christian. For ten years I had nothing to do with church, after being invited to leave in my teenage years over some heated discussions about the scope of salvation. But I found my way back, though not exactly on the same path I had traveled before.

My wife and I co-founded a church in southern Colorado in 2004 that we feel reflects the missional church model. My mom and I go back and forth about what it means to be "missional," "emergent," and "postmodern." I talk to her about the sense of loss when it comes to community and how emergent church in many ways reflects a more ancient, tribal approach to relationship.

We argue about whether the focus of church should be "bringing people to Jesus" or "being Jesus to others." We quibble about whether membership matters and what it looks like to have a ministry that is not contained by the walls of a church building. Sometimes we find common ground; other times, we agree to disagree. But we kept getting hung up on this idea of a social justice emphasis in today's missional church.

To her, it seemed like we were just slapping a new label on something that really hasn't changed. Her church has a food pantry, after all, and they offer appreciation dinners for local police officers and firefighters, and provide everything from coats to school supplies for local elementary school students. Churches have been doing this kind of ministry for ages, so why try to distinguish yourself with semantics?

There's a common confusion among people within organized religion about the difference between charity—which I would label all of the above ministries—and social justice. Wendy McCaig offered an article on the Burnside Writers Collective website in July 2011 called "Hand Outs Do Not Equal Social Justice" that helps make the distinction.

"Christian social teaching has two feet," she writes, recalling the words of a former colleague at an urban retreat center. "One is the foot of charity or kindness and the other is the foot of justice. Charity says 'That man is hungry,' and feeds him. Justice asks, 'Why is that man hungry?' and works to ensure that he will not go hungry in the future. We need both feet moving alongside one another if we want to get anywhere."

It's important that we have both feet of the so-called ladder. As Maslow's famous Hierarchy of Needs tells us, it's hard to focus on systemic change when your feet are bare or your stomach is rumbling. Simply focusing on justice without charity ends up compromising both efforts.

However I've witnessed far too many Christians claim that we are not called to charity at all. Two sayings often mistakenly attributed to the Bible are:

- "God helps those who help themselves." (This came from ancient Greek fables, not Scripture.)
- "Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime." (This is an old Chinese proverb. Jesus never said this in the Gospels.)

This harks back to a sort of Gospel of self-reliance, suggesting that our charity only makes matters worse. To the degree that we offer the fish and nothing more, it's true we're doing little to affect the change necessary to alter the future's course. But the second saying above in particular begs the question: who will teach the man to fish, if not me?

In addition, a ministry absent of social justice ignores several other important questions:

- Does the man even have a fishing pole?
- Does he have access to fishable water, or have they been polluted by the local factories?
- Does he have the means to prepare the fish if he catches it?

You get the idea. Often there are deeper systemic issues we tend to neglect in our charitable work as church. While meeting people's short-term needs, or even empowering them with skills to become more self-sufficient, are both important emphases, Jesus requires more of us.

My understanding of the Book of Revelation is that it tells a story of hope, when all will be made right, and when brokenness, injustice, and despair will end. We can stand by, hopeful we've done enough good to remain in God's favor, or we can accept the mantle of collaborators in realizing God's Kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven.

This is the call of social justice, and it is the responsibility of every Christian.

Christian Piatt is an author, editor, speaker, musician, and spoken word artist. He is the creator and editor of Banned Questions about the Bible *and* Banned Questions about Jesus**.** *Christian has a memoir on faith, family and parenting published in 2012 called* Pregmancy: A Dad, a Little Dude and a Due Date. *Visit https://www.facebook.com/christianpiattauthor*

Give Your Church an Expiration Date

By Russell Rathbun

What if we were freed from the responsibility for the survival of the church? Not the church as a whole, but the local expressions of the church that we are tasked or called to serve. As a new church developer for the American Baptist Churches USA and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, I have talked to many church groups, pastors, and enthusiastic folks who are starting churches and a lot more who are trying to keep churches from dying. About 4,000 new churches are started each year. Less than 10 percent will ever average more than 40 souls in regular Sunday attendance or last more than five years.

Additionally about 3,600 churches close every year—the majority of those being "historic" congregations. Once a church begins to decline in attendance, it is extremely rare for it to reverse the trend or even hold steady. Both starting a new church and reviving a dying church are very hard to accomplish. So, I had an idea. What if you started a church with an expiration date? Say, five years. So, if your inaugural worship service was on April 1, 2012, set the timer for April 1, 2017.

That would be just enough time for an energized core group to get together to

- build a unique community/incarnation of the Body of Christ that addresses the particular time, place, and context in which they are living;
- invite and welcome friends and newcomers alike who are intrigued and drawn in by the body's particular vision expressed in the way they worship, serve, study, and create together;
- become part of each other's lives; and
- begin to articulate new visions for changing contexts and to develop new core groups around those visions that would then go out and start several new churches with new expirations dates.

This could solve some of the major quandaries that arise in starting and sustaining churches. The greatest help would be giving a particular incarnation of the Body of Christ permission to be done—to say that our mission in this time and place, this context is finished. To say, "We may not have done everything we wanted, but we have been faithful to our vision." Or to say, "We did everything we hoped to do. Now let's go do something else."

If this permission to say, "It is finished!" caught on, then maybe churches that have been around for a long time could close up shop without feeling like they have failed. It would give any small group of folks who had no resources but shared an emerging vision of what God could do in their context the permission to do something for just awhile. Maybe it planned to expire in a year or two. And they wouldn't have to feel bad for not building the next megachurch or successful mission outpost.

The Church of Jesus Christ is not closing its doors—just particular contextual expressions of that church. Is the church in Ephesus still going strong with the same vitality and vision it began with? Contexts, people, visions and relationships change, but the charge to go into all the world making disciples does not.

The Church with the Expiration Date would guard against our human tendencies to idolatry—to idolize dynamic leaders or our ability to build institutions. It would curb our pretense to power and require a continual refocus on how we proclaim the Gospel as this particular group of people in this particular cultural context. The Expiring Church could produce two, three, or even ten new, vital, living, unique incarnations of the Body of Christ—and you would never have to start that building fund. The church that lives and dies and is reborn would look a lot less like a business start-up or emerging empire and a lot more like Resurrection.

Russell Rathbun a founding preacher at House of Mercy in St. Paul, Minnesota, the author of several books, including Midrash on the Juanitos (St. Paul: Cathedral Hill Press, 2010) and the curator of the lectionary blog, The Hardest Question.

Change Our Posture by Serving the Other

By Rozella Poston

"Jesus gave us a new norm of greatness. If you want to be important—wonderful. If you want to be recognized—wonderful. If you want to be great—wonderful. But recognize that he who is greatest among you shall be your servant. That's a new definition of greatness. … You only need a heart full of grace, a soul generated by love. And you can be that servant."
—"The Drum Major Instinct," by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

The term "navel gazing" took on new meaning for me when I was in seminary. During my Lutheran Confessions course, I learned about Martin Luther's "Lectures on Romans" where he expounds on Paul's understanding of sin as revealed in Romans 7:15, 18-19. Luther states,

Our nature, by the corruption of the first sin, being so deeply curved in on itself that it not only bends the best gifts of God towards itself and enjoys them (as is plain in the works-righteous and hypocrites), or rather even uses God himself in order to attain these gifts, but it also fails to realize that it so wickedly, curvedly, and viciously seeks all things, even God, for its own sake. (Martin Luther, *Lectures on Romans*)

Augustine of Hippo coined the phrase *Incurvatus in se*, which Luther uses to provide the imagery for the English translation of this phrase: being "curved in on oneself." This imagery broadens my perspective of sin. No longer is it merely about my *behavior*, but rather it is about my *fundamental posture*.

As my theological studies continued, I began to see my call as a leader in the community of faith as one who helps people reorient their postures. I believe that service and being overtly aware of others leads us to be more compassionate, caring, and faithful people. These qualities affect our posture. How can I notice the other when I am literally curved in on myself? How can I be an agent of change when I am unaware of the needs of my brothers and sisters who surround me? How can I be a disciple of Christ when I wear blinders that keep the suffering, loss, and tragedy at a distance?

So what does this mean for those of us who are called to lead God's people, wholly aware of our own shortcomings but trusting in God's promise that those who are called are then equipped to lead? A key aspect of congregational leadership has to be a willingness to engage in prophetic action that bridges the gap between what we believe to be true with the opportunities we provide to our members to practice this truth.

For me, helping people experience abundant life has to include service to others *and* reflection upon that service that connects our faith with our context. And here's the thing: service cannot be just about making us feel better. It has to come from an understanding that being a person of Christian faith is first of all being a servant, living one's life in recognition of what God first did for us and loving others through acts of service that build community and strengthen our interdependence.

This is not something that is done with one segment of the congregation. It must be an intergenerational, all-inclusive effort that is relevant. What does this look like?

- It looks like an MLK Day of Service (or an annual day of service) that calls together people of all ages and abilities for worship, sends them out in the community for service, and gathers them back to celebrate and reflect on how God is continually calling us to not only behave in particular ways but to change our posture from one of self-focused to other-focused.
- It looks like intergenerational teams of people focused on issues that bridge their passions with tangible needs, reflecting Frederick Buechner's words in *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*, "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." These teams can focus

on the environment, sex trafficking, domestic violence, HIV/AIDS, hunger and poverty, to name a few. For every issue, there are people who care and want to *do* something.

- It looks like churches advocating for changes within the political system that bring about justice, mercy, and humility as described in Micah 6:8.
- It looks like every ministry board/team/committee/council/group reflecting on what it means to be a servant of all and instituting yearly opportunities that help the leadership of congregations uncover their prophetic voice and lead by example.

It's easy for me to envision this reality. I know putting it into practice is much harder. It takes people who are willing to take risks. Not just any risks, but divine risks—actions that are God-ordained and Spirit-sustained. But here's the thing—if we aren't willing to go there, what's the point? Why are we doing what we're doing? I know that we are sinful and will continually return to our navel-gazing posture.

If we as leaders are not willing to constantly fight the good fight and work towards creating God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven, then we should probably think about doing something else with our lives. We are a part of a long line of leaders, like the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who were divine risk-takers and prophetic leaders. We can be those servants.

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Start with Gender Equity and Commit to Good Old-fashioned Liberation

By Peter J. Walker

I'm a 30-something, already bored with talking about cutting-edge technology and radical paradigm shifts… give me good old-fashioned liberation!

Just a few years ago my brain buzzed with trendy terms like *postmodernism* and *emergence*. Breaking free of fundamentalism, I was ready to participate in something "completely new" (forgetting Ecclesiastes 1). I saw the ancient-future fusion of traditional liturgy with high-tech multimedia and cultural savvy as salvation for a scared and confused Christendom. But today, the church remains in ruts that predate the contemporary conversations intended to save it.

After years of obsessing over the perfect ingredients to ignite vitality and spark growth, I'm left with some very mundane-sounding thoughts on what we actually need in order to experience genuine, Spirit-led reinvigoration. These thoughts begin with a renewed commitment in our parishes, communities, and our homes to gender equality.

How retro!

As a "peculiar people" (1 Peter 2:9), the Body of Christ is meant to live in a constant state of perfecting—always drawing closer to the image of the one whose name we bear. To this end we are called to be one, as articulated so succinctly in Galatians 3:28.

To discuss gender equity as a cornerstone for revitalizing our churches is merely to return to what's been given lip service too many times. There is a gaping, bleeding wound in the souls and in the bodies of our sisters in Christ; there are other wounds among our LGBTQ sisters and brothers; there is racial reconciliation left undone as well. It is our duty to address all of these injustices because we are the Body of Christ, and we are called to carry and climb onto such crosses. Whatever mission or evangelism we undertake without attending to these diseases dooms us to perpetual false advertising.

Today, the church-at-large assumes it has dealt with the issue. Conservative Evangelical churches allow women to lead children's ministries, and give them pseudo-titles like *director*. While most mainline denominations now ordain women, condescending attitudes and careless local praxis undermine symbolic victories. This pervades both congregations and leadership.

Recently an online friend lamented, "Even in the most liberal denomination in America, as a female pastor not a day goes by that I do not feel the sting of misogyny."

Every time I look at rosters of contributors on websites for the "next big Christian thing," I'm reminded that my sisters' voices are lacking as all-but-tokens. The "big solutions" proffered there largely fall into one of two categories: missional or attractional.

The *attractional* crowd searches for new ways to bring people in: sofas and espresso machines... now what? How do we achieve megachurch explosion? This model seeks growth through comfort, charisma and promises of a better life.

Missional folks venture into the world to embody Christ, and eventually to evangelize. Although they reject mainstream entrapments like prosperity and comfort, in the end they appeal to a sense of adventure and relevance, which easily become co-opted to the same interests of better living.

But Christianity isn't about a "best life." Being the church has never been about being happier or healthier—our collective history should prove that much. Nor was the church founded on excitement or trendy relevance. Instead, we are called to participate in "making all things new," (Revelation 21:5) not "catching up with all things present."

Catching up is the language of the contemporary church. Afflicted with an addiction to pop-corporatism, we chase after the next big business model: how can our church be the next Apple or the next Starbucks? The next Enron?

Today, we know enough about marketing, sociology and psychology to grow a church without the Holy Spirit. But to reinvigorate a church through the Holy Spirit's gentle power means giving up on formulas that make big business thrive and make dynamic media viral. The fantasy of a hip and sexy Christianity is just that—a fantasy.

By committing ourselves and our communities daily to practical equality is heroically ordinary and radically mundane. It won't lead to explosive growth. Instead, it can lead us to the kind of transformation that reveals the counterintuitive Kingdom of God. This is not the stuff of bestseller books or magazine covers.

There is so much work left for the church. Widows, orphans, AIDS patients, racial and sexual minorities: all are still waiting for us to fulfill the vision of Amos: "But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (5:24).

But if we cannot get beyond this very elementary, foundational step of repenting from living in camouflaged episodes of *Mad Men* and learning to treat our sisters as fully equal partners and leaders in the Body of Christ, we don't deserve to be attracting anyone into our churches, much less sending anyone on missions into the world.

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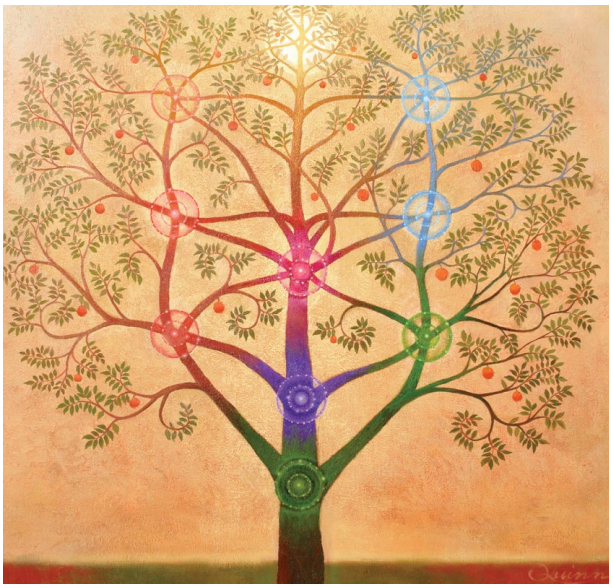

DISCIPLESHIP & SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

Make Space for Sabbath

By Kara K. Root

Our small, 90-year-old congregation has found new life and vitality. Our secret? We've stopped having worship services every Sunday. A couple of years ago we made the decision as a congregation to embrace the Sabbath and practice it communally.

Actually, the secret was a process of intentional discernment—exploring the question: *Who are we now, and who are we called to be for this time and place?* This meant grieving and letting go of the way we were in the past—when the congregation was ten times the size it is now and much younger. But it also meant letting go of all the messages that we're bombarded with that tell us how we *should* be doing church in order to be "successful."

Instead, we asked ourselves: *Where is God already moving in and among us? How do we already embody the mission of God here and now?* Our new understanding of our identity became centered in worship, hospitality, and Sabbath. We recognized and celebrated all the myriad ways we worship and experience God's presence—and while sitting in a pew on Sundays made the list, it isn't by any means the only way. We learned that hospitality is the practice of intentionally living inside God's abundant welcome, and welcoming others authentically and mutually. But the big shocker for us was Sabbath.

Sabbath, we discovered, is a revolutionary, counter-cultural practice that reorients us to God's presence and prominence in our lives and the world. It helps us notice and remember *whose we are*—that we belong to a living God for whom resting is part of creating, and whose Spirit is moving in our lives and the world, even when we are too distracted or busy to notice. And Sabbath reminds us *who we are*—individually and communally. We are created in God's image, set free to live out our particularity instead of being enslaved and defined by production or consumption.

For several months we read about Sabbath, we retreated with some Sabbath-keeping nuns, and we had lots of discussions about the needs in our busy communities and our own lives. And we asked ourselves: *How can our life and faith come from our* being *and not our* doing*?*

Thus began an experiment of keeping Sabbath as a community, an experiment that has altered us remarkably. On the first and third Sundays we worship on Sunday mornings in all our Presbyterian glory. On the second and fourth weekends we meet Saturday nights by candlelight and harp, and sink into Sabbath rest together. The "preached word" takes many forms, looser in format than the Sunday sermons, and often very interactive. We hold silence each week, two whole minutes that sometimes stretch into eternity, but which have become life-giving. Simple, Taizé-like music is woven throughout the service, and we center our worship around shared prayer (something that has invaded our Sunday morning services as well). Our Saturday worship continues with a communal meal—lingering together around warm food and conversation. Then we go home.

And on Sunday, we spend the day in Sabbath. Here and there, all over the city, individuals and families purposely *stopping*. The guidelines we give ourselves are to try to do nothing from obligation, to pay attention to the struggle to stop and offer even that as a gift of gratitude, to get outside some, to play some, to do something that gives us delight. To be with others if we're alone a lot. To be alone if our lives are crowded. To make the day *different* than our ordinary days. To pay attention to what our souls need. And to rest.

Practicing Sabbath in this way has infected our whole communal life. Our session (church board) meetings are full of worship, we retreat more as a community, we remind each other to rest, we say "no" more, and "yes" more too. Sabbath is continuing to teach us *who* we are and remind us *whose* we are. And our one-year experiment has become a way of life for our church community.

It hasn't always been easy, and we've had our ups and downs, but Sabbath-keeping has become a communal rhythm that grounds us, feeds us, and offers respite for our community. It has opened us up to encounter God more candidly throughout our week, un-anchoring worship from Sunday mornings and placing it within our souls and the community instead. It has also expanded our hospitality and our encounter of others. Whenever we have a fifth Sunday, for example, we worship at a nearby county emergency children's facility, sharing/leading chapel with and for the kids there as our own worship service.

Anxiety no longer rules around here; we're more settled and joyful. Most importantly, though, I think we'd all say we no longer *go to* church; we *are the* church. I suspect that Sabbath has taught us that.

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Rediscover the Power of Daily Prayer

By David Gambrell

Do you remember what got Daniel thrown into the lions' den? Do you recall the radical, treasonous act that precipitated his sudden fall from darling of King Darius to panther bait? It was prayer—specifically, falling to his knees three times a day in praise and supplication to God (Daniel 6:10).

I have come to believe that one of the most revolutionary things the church could do in our age would be to follow Daniel's example—to recommit ourselves to the transformative practice of daily prayer, to reclaim and recover this ancient and abiding gift and calling of the people of God. I can think of nothing with greater potential for renewing the church and revitalizing its mission and ministry.

Daily prayer has always been an integral part of the covenant life of the people of God. Sleeping and waking, at home and away, the people of Israel remember God's words and call on the name of the Lord (Deuteronomy 6:4-9). The psalmist teaches us to declare God's "steadfast love in the morning" and "faithfulness by night" (Psalm 92:2). This way of life carried over to the earliest Christian communities, as day by day "they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2:42).

Yet recent studies reveal that the practices of daily prayer and Bible study are on the decline in contemporary Christian life, especially among mainline Protestants and Catholics. The church at every level—from members and ministers, to congregations and denominational offices—needs to return to this life-giving practice. Without an everyday, authentic encounter with the living God, how will we know who and whose we are? Without regular, disciplined dialogue with the one who is our source and strength, how will we know what we are called to be?

It need not be complicated. If you don't already, start by saying the Lord's Prayer when you lie down and when you rise. When this has become a habit, you might add the reading of Scriptures from a daily lectionary (you can have them delivered to your inbox every morning). Meditate on this message from God, seeking to discern its implications for your life this day. Let the words of the Psalms give shape and substance to your prayer, challenging you to pray with wide-eyed wonder, expectant hope, and unflinching honesty. Give thanks for God's providence and grace, and remember the needs of the church, world, and community.

Start small and keep it simple. Experiment and explore. And for goodness sake, don't give up on January 3 or the first Friday in Lent if you haven't been able to keep your resolution! Remember: *perfectionism is the enemy of practice*.

As the habit of daily prayer begins to spill over into your whole life, you'll discover that one truly can "pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:17). When a friend recovers from a grave illness or a stranger shows unexpected kindness, you'll say "thanks be to God." When you hear the news of a distant disaster or pull over for a passing ambulance, you'll pray "Lord, have mercy." Life becomes liturgy—a daily, prayerful practice of loving and serving God and neighbor.

Over time, put some teeth in your prayer (apologies to Daniel). Pray as you would in a lions' den, as though your life depended on it (Psalm 116:4). (I have a friend who says the daily office saved her life.)

Pray boldly for the peace and welfare of your community (Jeremiah 29:7). (I have another friend whose congregation started holding daily prayer services each morning, and is now known around town as "the church that prays for us.") Pray for small things, like daily bread, and big things—that God's will be done on earth as in heaven—alike. Trust that God will accomplish them far more abundantly "than all we can ask or imagine" (Ephesians 3:20).

Do you remember what saved Daniel from the lions' den? Prayer again—not Daniel's prayer, but the intercession of King Darius, who had been tricked into sacrificing his adept advisor. When he reluctantly sealed Daniel's fate,

Darius prayed, "May your God, whom you faithfully serve, deliver you!" (Daniel 6:16). Then Darius retired to his royal chambers for a night of fasting and anxious vigil.

The next morning, when Daniel emerged unscathed from the pit, Darius delivered a call to worship to all the peoples of the world: "I make a decree, that in all my royal dominion people should tremble and fear before the God of Daniel:

> For the Lord is the living God,
> enduring forever,
> whose kingdom shall never be destroyed,
> and whose dominion has no end;
> who delivers and rescues,
> working signs and wonders in heaven and on earth;
> for this God has saved Daniel
> from the power of the lions" *(see Daniel 6:26-27)*.

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Get Over the Fear of Public Speaking and Testify

By Lillian Daniel

"You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house." —Matthew 5:14-15

My college Spanish instructor's theory seemed to have merit for me: "In the pressure of the moment, in the pressure of having someone look at you and speak to you in another language, you freeze."

I was a struggling undergrad trying to get by with a passing grade in a language I couldn't for the life of me speak or understand.

She continued, "In the moment when you are asked a question, your mind, which does actually contain the words, suddenly goes blank, and you become so flustered that you are rendered speechless."

This is exactly what happens when you ask a mainline Protestant to tell you what they believe about God, Jesus, or the Holy Spirit.

Suddenly, in that moment, we who have found our public voices, we who stand in Christian traditions that value teaching, prophetic speech, and intellect, suddenly we forget it all and sit there mute. Unable to talk about our faith.

Strange, isn't it?

It seems like we can talk about everything else. The same mainline church members who pass resolutions on gay marriage and propose solutions to conflict in the Middle East and take on healthcare reform suddenly shrink in silence on the subject of their faith—and here's the irony—lest they offend someone.

"What do you believe about God?"

"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, our honorable impulses toward inclusivity have turned us into spiritual illiterates, who, being out of practice, have forgotten how to speak the simple words of our faith. We who love to talk have a fear of speaking publicly on the one topic we should be most excited about: our experience of the living God.

And so I challenge you: how comfortable are you and your parishioners discussing your faith and your experience of God with another person?

The stories are there, to be sure. You can find God's story in fellowship halls where the tables are old and stained with the sticky red punch of generations of church suppers, to the grand sanctuaries with glorious art, to the church

gathered under a leaking roof with a crackling sound system. People are being formed and shaped by the gospel, to go out and be the light of the world.

When Diana Butler-Bass, author and historian, came to the congregation I served in New Haven, Connecticut, she witnessed members giving our testimonies and talking about our experience of God. We were doing on a micro level what Diana did for mainline churches on a national level through her book, *Christianity for the Rest of Us*.

We were overcoming our fear of public speaking for the sake of the gospel. Or to put it another way, as Matthew's Gospel does, we were getting our light out from under the bushel.

And this is actually a common thread I see in mainline churches experiencing renewal and vitality—church members and pastors have learned to testify to their faith. They've learned to tell the story of how they experience God's grace in their Christian community of faith, and to share that story with enthusiasm.

Twenty years after my college Spanish ordeal, now living across the country in Chicago, I found myself at a community college in a class terrifyingly entitled "Introduction to Conversational Spanish."

At the final class of the semester, we who had begun so nervously now listened to one another's presentations.

Our little class seemed remarkable not for its lack of finesse, but the fullness of its witness. It soon became obvious that almost everyone who was struggling to conjugate verbs was there because of a church; some congregation had called these people to look outward, to look outside themselves.

No more fear of public speaking. The Holy Spirit had propelled fearful adults to get to the point where they could speak to the class in a new tongue.

Underneath it all, it could only be faith that got us in the door that first day.

"Como te llama, otra vez?" I heard my teacher ask.

And now, because the God of second chances and new life keeps working on me, I could respond to this most basic question. What's my name, again? "Me llamo Lillian."

Lillian Daniel is senior minister of First Congregational Church, UCC, of Glen Ellyn, and author of Tell It Like It Is: Reclaiming the Practice of Testimony. *Her newest book,* This Odd and Wondrous Calling: The Public and Private Lives of Two Ministers, *co-authored by Martin B. Copenhaver, is a humorous and honest look at the ministry. Her next book,* When Spiritual But Not Religious is Not Enough: Finding God in Surprising Places, Even the Church *will be published in January 2013.*

Make Room for Doubt

By Peter Rollins

To believe is easy. You can fill stadiums with people wanting to believe, either to solidify what they already think or to grasp hold of something because they feel cast adrift and lost at sea.

To doubt, to interrogate your fear, to really question what you believe, that's far more difficult. It's difficult because we want to protect ourselves from doubt and unknowing. Indeed, when we encounter somebody who is different from us, our first experience is often to see them as monstrous, as having beliefs and practices that are alien and strange and historical and contingent.

When we encounter them we either want to consume them—make them part of our social body—or we want to vomit them and get rid of them. Or perhaps we want to have some sort of interfaith dialogue where we can talk about where we agree.

In each of these experiences we seek to minimize our encounter with the other. We seek to domesticate them.

In the first, I'm right and they're wrong, and I want to make them into a version of me.

In the second, I'm right and they're wrong, and I want to get rid of them. In the third, we're both right.

But in the genuine encounter with the other, we start to see ourselves through *their* eyes, and instead of seeing their beliefs as monstrous, we start to see our beliefs as monstrous. We see our beliefs as contingent, and historical, and alien, not just to them but to ourselves.

It is in this experience, when our beliefs begin to fracture and fall apart and our political, religious, and cultural narratives begin to fracture, that we know what it is to experience a type of crucifixion.

For the cross was a symbol of curse. The person was killed outside the city. They weren't part of the political structure. They were no longer part of the cultural system. They were no longer protected by the religious leaders. They were the complete outsider. They were crucified naked and alone.

When we experience the loss of our beliefs, when we experience the breakdown of our narratives, it's not there where we lose God—it's there where we stand side by side with Christ.

So make room for doubt—in worship, in preaching, in prayer, in your life—because in making room for doubt you make room for the crucified Christ.

Originally posted March 27, 2012, at http://peterrollins.net/?p=3611. Watch an accompanying video at http://vimeo.com/39267362.

Peter Rollins is a widely sought after writer, lecturer, storyteller and public speaker. He is also the founder of ikon, a collective that has gained an international reputation for blending live music, visual imagery, soundscapes, theatre, ritual and reflection to create what they call "transformance art." He has degrees in Scholastic philosophy (BA Hons), Political theory (MA), and Poststructural criticism (Ph.D.). Peter is the author of the much talked about How (Not) to Speak of God. *His most recent work is entitled* The Idolatry of God. *He was born in Belfast but currently resides in Greenwich, Conn.*

Do Less, Sit More, and Take Up the Easy Yoke

By Kate Blanchard

Had you asked me 10 years ago about renewing the church, I might have given you a different answer. But at the moment I am a 40-something working wife and mother with a type-A lifestyle. My job is people-intensive as well as intellectually and emotionally demanding. Church, for the most part, seems to offer more of the same busy-ness that I have elsewhere in my life.

In past lives I embraced church busy-ness: taught Sunday school, volunteered with the youth group, did CROP walks, helped lead a young adults' group, sat on a congregational governing board, sang in a choir, and visited the sick. Intellectually I think such activity is good, and yet I can rarely bring myself to do it anymore.

As far as I can tell, the church has been shaped by the "type-A" among us—the ambitious, the energetic, the over-achievers, the extraverts, the multi-taskers. People who like to socialize, take charge, and keep things moving have created churches in their own image. Churches regarded as healthy and effective are those with lots of action—people, services, missions, programs, and money—not unlike our standards for healthy companies, healthy colleges, or healthy nations.

Perhaps not surprisingly, people who prefer to go alone into their rooms and pray, read, or meditate have been less effective in getting large groups of Christians to follow their lead. The church is not a place for those who want relief from their already busy lives, who need dedicated time simply to sit in God's presence. Sitters may exist at the margins of most congregations, but rarely are they the driving force.

Sitting is what I crave most right now. More specifically, I crave sitting in a *community* that enables me to slow down and pay attention; that gives me time to consider the audacious commands I don't hear anywhere else, like love my enemies or sell my possessions; that reminds me to think of myself in terms of birds or lilies or branches of a vine; that makes real Jesus' claim that, "My yoke is easy, my burden is light" (Matthew 11:30); that invites me, in short, to *be someone* rather than to *do something*.

Why should Quakers be the only Christians to embrace stillness for more than 30 seconds at a time? Even among *sola gratia* Protestant camps, *doing* takes precedence over *being*. The implicit (and sometimes explicit) message I get from most of the Christians I know is that simply being is not enough. A Christian must always be doing the right things, not only at home and at work but also at church, where she must participate in every fundraiser, potluck supper, Bible study, committee, and Christmas pageant that comes along.

There is, it must be said, a gendered aspect to this issue. Churches still run on the assumption of a nuclear family in which a husband earns money and a wife can work for the church without pay. Women are also notoriously good at internalizing guilt (think Mary and Martha in Luke 10). Today's good Christian woman bears a striking resemblance to the ideal wife of Proverbs 31, who "gets up while it is still dark; she provides food for her family… She sets about her work vigorously; her arms are strong for her tasks… She opens her arms to the poor and extends her hands to the needy… Her husband is respected at the city gate… She watches over the affairs of her household and does not eat the bread of idleness." She never stops, and therein lays her value. The church, in my experience, encourages us all—women and men—to be like busy Martha, despite Jesus' praise of her unproductive sister.

What would it take to make time for Christians simply to *be*? How much busy-work could be discarded if people were willing to depart from "the way we've always done it"? Keep fake flowers (or no flowers) on the altar, for example, to save both money and effort; or call for spontaneous volunteers from the pews to be greeters, help collect offerings, or serve communion. Time not spent coordinating such efforts in advance is time we could spend learning to be.

Consider dividing up labor among local congregations. Why should every church in town host its own food pantry, vacation Bible school, or mission trip? Ecumenical efforts would not only save energy but would also build community.

What I wish for most, though, is a chance simply to sit silently in community—not like at a movie or a lecture, but in actual silence. Knowing the presence of God is difficult; it takes work to be still, but it is light work, a welcome burden. If we can't learn this at church, wherever will we learn it?

Kate Blanchard is associate professor of religious studies at Alma College in Alma, Mich. She is the author of The Protestant Ethic or the Spirit of Capitalism: Christians, Freedom, and Free Markets.

Contemplate God and Recognize the Creative Source

By Jeffrey Small

How do we think of God?

Do we picture God as a supreme designer who built the intricate laws of nature as a watchmaker assembles a fine timepiece? Do we see God as a grand chess master who has an elaborate plan for the figures on his cosmic chessboard? Do we imagine the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, where the outstretched hand of Michelangelo's God reaches toward Adam?

Many popular images of God resemble a Zeus-like figure, but one who lives outside the physical universe in "heaven" rather than on Olympus. When we think about it, this God seems a lot like us, only much more powerful. He has emotions: he can be a "jealous God"; he can be an "angry God" or a "loving God." We may address him as Father or Lord. We even use the personal (and masculine) pronoun "He" in referring to God, but we capitalize it to show that "He" is greater than we are.

This anthropomorphic view of God is one of the reasons behind the rise of atheism in the Western world and the spiritual apathy of young people today. Sigmund Freud characterized such a God as nothing more than a "projected father figure." Biologist Richard Dawkins points out the incompatibility of this God with science. In our postmodern age, reason and science underlie every aspect of our daily lives. Where is the room in our world for God to act?

This God also opens "Himself" up to the critique of being an incompetent watchmaker and a cruel chess master. The world we live in is a messy, imperfect place, ripe with tragedy, sickness, and injustice. A God that chooses when to tinker in the workings of the universe and when to leave things as they are begs the question: *Why didn't God make things right the first time around?*

Finally, this God is simply too small. A God that is only an intelligent super-being living in an extra-dimensional heaven becomes just one more thing in the universe. In other words, this God is finite.

Find the creative source

So how can we conceive of and talk about God in a way that is honest to our twenty-first century intellects while satisfying to our hearts?

For starters, we might think about God as the infinite creative source of existence. "Creative source" does not mean that God creates existence by waving a magic wand from afar, but rather that all of existence—matter, energy, the physical laws that govern the universe, even our consciousness—comes out of God.

This "coming from" God is not isolated to one particular time in history, whether 6,000 years ago according to biblical literalists or 13.7 billion years ago according to the Big Bang Theory. God creates continually. God gives us life and gives existence its very structure. This power is infinite and indescribable because it lies behind all that is. God is not to be found "out there" but deep within existence.

This conception of God is not new but is derived from Paul Tillich, the twentieth century Christian theologian who wrote that God is not so much a supernatural being as God is "the ground of all being." Existence is finite, individualized, and unique, yet underlying existence is a connection to an infinite ground.

Alfred North Whitehead, the founder of process theology, similarly understood God as the essence of the creative process of the universe. Whitehead's God does not observe us from heaven, occasionally intervening for good measure. God is always immanent within the universe as its creative power.

Essential to the creative power that God bestows on the universe is the ability of its constituent parts (including us) to self-create. The scientific laws that govern the universe—the randomness and uncertainty inherent in both quantum mechanics and evolution, for example—are not contrary to God but are crucial elements of the divine creative process. Tragedy, evil, and pain are unfortunate but necessary byproducts of this creative freedom; yet, even within our deepest suffering, God is always present with us.

This new understanding of God provides a powerful direction for how we experience God. What we lose from the illusory comfort of believing in a supernatural father figure who may or may not intervene on our behalf, we more than make up for with a new realization: We can touch and experience a God who is the ground of our being at a much more intimate level, because God is the spark of light—that Holy Spirit—within each of us. This view of God also leads to a more embracing view of morality because we share this power of being with our fellow humans in true brotherhood and sisterhood. We share it with the natural world as well.

Jeffrey Small is the author of the mystical suspense novel, The Breath of God *and the academic text* God as the Ground of Being: Tillich and Buddhism in Dialogue. *A Huffington Post religion columnist and speaker on the topic of how we think about religion in a scientific, multi-faith world, Small is a graduate of Yale University and Harvard Law School and holds a Master's in the Study of Religions from Oxford University. Visit www.JeffreySmall.com for more information.*

Practice the 'Artist's Way' to Cultivate Spirituality

By Joy L. McDonald Coltvet

On YouTube last night, I watched a documentary about Georgia O'Keeffe, one of my all-time favorite painters. Here are some choice quotes from that great American artist:

- "I thought it was becoming too easy, so I thought I'd better make it another color."
- "I tried to paint what I saw. I thought someone could tell me how to paint landscapes but I never found that person. I had to just settle down and try."
- "They could tell me how to paint their landscape, but they couldn't tell me how to paint mine."
- "You look over there and think it's almost painted for you, until you try."[1]

It struck me how in this particular moment in churches, when many things are harder than we wish they were, we need this kind of courageous, artistic spirit. We might call it innovation or facing the challenges with paintbrushes in hand, ready to try new color and form. Or as O'Keeffe put it, it may simply be time to "settle down and try" to learn what we don't already know.

I come from the kind of Christians who worship weekly, pray daily, read their Bibles and live with those storied verses flowing through their hearts, minds, and days. However, it's never easy, maybe especially for church leaders, to structure our lives for regular times of encounter with God. This is where I think artists have something to teach those of us who live as if we're always very busy.

Those who teach and do the work of ministry can learn much from artists. Artists know that it takes discipline and structure to be freed to unleash their God-given creativity. It also takes time. It takes space to wander, look, attend. It requires sometimes being alone. Robert Wuthnow writes, "The practice of art thus becomes a model for understanding spiritual discipline as well."[2] One does not simply pick up a paintbrush, throw a pot, or sit down to the piano and immediately pour out great art.

Artists can share this wisdom with church leaders who don't feel free to take time to cultivate their own creative pursuits, or their own spiritual lives. To paraphrase Wuthnow, spirituality, like art, takes training, practice, and cultivating one's creativity.

In congregations, we have placed a huge emphasis on those spiritual practices that we do together, such as showing up for worship and a myriad of church activities. However, artists know that they need time to cultivate their craft alone as well as together. If we depend on the church to meet all our spiritual needs, we may be limiting God's expansive vision for us. God wants to be involved in our daily journey; God wants to have space in our life to help us cultivate life-giving habits and practice our faith from day to day.

Spiritual practices in and flowing out from church contexts are always somewhat paradoxical. We are simultaneously sinners and saints. We are free, yet called by God to a path. We are broken, yet beloved by God even in our brokenness.

So I propose that as congregations, we create together an artists' way—a commitment to pattern our days in a way that is, paradoxically, about releasing our need to control everything. We commit ourselves to this pattern in order to be more free. As church leaders, we need to allow time for rest and play. In church traditions somewhat obsessed by doing, I hope we can shift the focus to include times for simply being.

As a result, we might become not only more active but also more contemplative. Wuthnow offers this paradoxical insight: "Artists reveal clearly that any practice, whether spiritual or artistic, requires a balance of dedication and

creativity. The secret is internalizing the rules so well that it becomes possible to move beyond them. They improvise, believing themselves to be capable—indeed, regarding themselves as having a mandate—to create. They are the visionaries who challenge received opinions, the disciplined seekers who reveal the way of the artist."[3]

Would reimagining our congregations as artists' communities help us to do ministry in a new way? Life is too challenging to go it alone. Instead, we need a pattern of life that recognizes the Holy Spirit's transforming work throughout our whole being. We need to give space and time to listen for God even in our brokenness, to know more deeply how beloved we are to God, and to be more capable of love (the verb) because of glimpsing the Spirit in and through our days.

I believe that for new church leaders today in a world of vast choices, the invitation to an artist's discipline, a creative patterning of life, is a gift. It provides church leaders what many hoped for all along—an opportunity to grow in love with God.

The Rev. Joy McDonald Coltvet is a pastor in St. Paul, Minn., who has served in parish, campus ministry, and seminary settings over eleven years of ordained ministry in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. In 2012 she completed her D.Min. at Catholic Theological Union with the thesis, "The Soul Artists' Year: Spiritual Formation for the First Call and Beyond."

Deepen Your Discipleship Each Day of the Week

By Dan Bredberg

Just about every church agrees that we should be helping people become devoted disciples of Jesus Christ, but most of us have little or no discipleship strategy in place. After some time of intentional prayer, reflection and research, our church decided to focus on two discipleship tools: men's and women's discipleship groups (groups of 2-4 people that meet weekly for prayer, Bible study, and accountability), and a weekly discipleship plan. Our discipleship groups are based on the Life Transformation Groups (LTG) model created by Neil Cole.

The idea that I would like to share with you is the weekly discipleship plan we created. It was designed to help people take personal responsibility for growing in faith by seeking to live out their faith 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

We were clear that the discipleship plan was not meant to be a list of burdens that fill up all our free time, but an intentional way to live out our faith, emphasizing different areas of discipleship each day. The key idea we want people to grasp is that faith is not just one component of life, reserved for one hour a week. Instead, faith involves everything we do, every second of our lives.

You'll notice that all of these activities/ideas can be done on your own in partnership with others and do not center on the church building. We thought it would help "jazz up" the discipleship plan if we used memorably titles for each day of the week. You are free to use and/or alter this plan any way you wish. We pray this discipleship plan can help your church find specific ways to *be* the church as you love God, love your neighbors, grow in faith, and follow Jesus.

Make a Difference Monday

Value: Blessed to be a blessing (Genesis 12:1-3).

We believe God has blessed us so that we can bless others. Look for simple ways to bless people and make a difference in their lives today (a phone call, a smile, a prayer, paying someone's bill, etc.)

Tuesdays with Jesus

Value: Dependence (Galatians 2:20).

We seek to become increasingly dependent upon Jesus so that it is no longer we who live, but Christ who lives in us. Set aside time today to be alone with Jesus in prayer, meditation and Bible study. How is Jesus leading you to trust in him? What is Jesus saying to you? What are you going to do about it?

Workout Wednesday

Value: Whole body health (1 Corinthians 6:19-20).

We value personal responsibility for staying fit physically, mentally, and spiritually. Stop by our new fitness center for a workout, or find your own ways to work on strengthening your body, mind and spirit (walking, biking, Sudoku, healthy eating, or devotional reading).

Theology Thursday

Value: Wisdom (Proverbs 24:3-4).

We believe you do not have to check your brain at the door to be a Christian. Join us at the Irish Tavern for conversation about God and life, or get together with friends and family to ask questions, be curious and use the mind God gave you to grow in wisdom and understanding.

Fun Friday

Value: Relationships, Fun (John 10:10).

God created us for relationship. God also invented fun. Put the two together and you're in for a great night; so go out and enjoy life! *Use Fridays to have fun and build relationships with others—especially those who do not know Christ. (Invite the neighbors over for dinner, attend a sporting event, or set up a play date with your children's friends).*

Service Saturday

Value: Service (Romans 12:1).

We seek to worship God with our whole lives, especially by using the gifts God has given us to serve others. Worship God today through acts of service to others. (Rake leaves, mow a neighbor's lawn, volunteer at a nursing home or homeless shelter, or find your own way to serve others and demonstrate God's love).

Sabbath Sunday

Value: Rest, Strengthening families (Exodus 20:8-12).

We desperately need a break, but rarely take one. We long for more family time, but rarely get it. Therefore... Commit to doing as little work as possible and use this day to rest, relax, renew your soul, worship God and spend quality time with family and friends. You will not regret it.

Dan Bredberg is pastor of mission and discipleship at Zion Lutheran Church in Waterville, Ohio.

Fill in the Blank to Assess Your Approach to the Bible

By Eric D. Barreto

Type "the Bible is like" into Google, and you will find a deluge of images to which the Bible is compared: a lion, a room in a house, a fully clothed person, Santa Claus, and sex, to name a few (let alone all the less-than-complimentary comparisons I found). In some ways, our perspectives on the Bible are no different than this list of hits. From the obscure to the ridiculous, the profound to the incomprehensible, we read the Bible with certain models, metaphors, or lenses.

My question is simple: Can we step back to examine our perception of the Bible and its function in our lives? That is, can we challenge ourselves to grow beyond simplistic metaphors of the Bible and thus discover the complexity of the biblical witness?

One way to do this is by inviting people into the following activity that invites us to examine our mental images of the Bible. The basic question is what metaphors enter our minds when we think about the Bible.

So invite participants to complete the sentence, "The Bible is like…" Initially, folks may not be quite sure how to address such an odd question. After all, the Bible is a book, but of course the point of the activity is to extend beyond surface-level images. Next allow plenty of time for everyone to consider their responses. In order to get as full a spectrum of opinions as possible, ask everyone to share their metaphor with the rest of the group. Then, as leader, help each of them explore the strengths and shortcomings of their responses. The latter should not be overtly critical but truly constructive.

The point in discussing each person's response is to demonstrate that no single image can encapsulate all possibilities or fully contain any person's perspective. Any image is only a snapshot of far more complex conceptions. These images are always suggestive not comprehensive.

Perhaps the best way to illustrate this technique is through an example. One particularly meaningful image introduced by one of my students was that the Bible is like a biological cell. For one, it is a living object, amenable to change, growth, and deterioration. The student further explained that the Bible, like a cell, has porous walls that permit a variety of subcellular entities to enter. It is not the task of the wall to regulate cellular traffic as it admits entities both harmful and salubrious. Once inside the cell, however, other molecular organisms either integrate the beneficial or consume the destructive.

This student argued that for her the Bible is quite similar. It admits a variety of interpretations and perspectives but will reject corrupting influences. After commending the student for her imaginative addition to the discussion, I asked other students for their feedback, particularly wondering aloud what gaps limited the full precision of the cellular metaphor.

For example, one could point out that the Bible itself cannot regulate traffic but that interpreters must do the difficult work themselves; the processes of biblical interpretation are neither natural nor automatic.

To this fascinating suggestion, I could add many others that my students have advocated: a gold mine, quicksand, a letter from God, a mirror, an instruction manual, a good friend, or even a Magic-8 ball. The challenge for us as leaders is to help people grapple, critique, and comprehend what aspects of the Bible's many functions their metaphors prioritize and which they gloss over.

Whether for good or ill, many of us have encountered the Bible as a prepackaged and thoroughly marketed commodity. Recent efforts to publish Bibles that emulate teen magazines suggest that the Bible can become a product

of marketing departments that predetermine how we approach it. In the case of these teen-magazine Bibles, the packaging already specifies for the consumer that the Bible is a veritable well of dating and makeup tips, a source for practical, everyday advice.

Or perhaps you have a memory of amateur efforts to discern God's will by throwing the Bible open and blindly putting your finger on a verse, hoping you didn't land somewhere in Numbers!

Part of our task as leaders in the church is to encourage all people to reassess—or even assess for the first time—how they actually approach the Bible.

Eric D. Barreto is assistant professor of New Testament at Luther Seminary in Saint Paul, Minn. Prior to joining Luther Seminary, he served in Atlanta as an adjunct professor at the Candler School of Theology and McAfee School of Theology.

Endnotes

Plan for Growth: Focus on Vision, Worship and Social Ministry (page 14)

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Avoid McDonaldization and Advocate Distinctive Discipleship (page 26)

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[1] Robert W. Jenson, "How the World Lost Its Story," *First Things* 36 (Oct 1993): 19-24, 19. Emphasis added. Online at http://www.firstthings.com/article/2008/09/002-how-the-world-lost-its-story-13.

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