

Congregational Vitality through Christian Practice

A sermon by Ben von Ullrich, based on the writings of Diana Butler Bass: *The Practicing Congregation and Christianity for the Rest of Us* and lectures given in Feb & June 2006 at the Center for Spiritual Development at Trinity Episcopal Cathedral, Portland, OR.

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Contemporary Reading: John H. Thomas, General Minister and President
Reflections on the State of the United Church of Christ for the Council of Conference Ministers
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Dan Aleshire of the Association of Theological Schools was quoted recently by Alice Hunt of Chicago Theological Seminary: "The Mainline," he said, "has lost out because it keeps trying to be what it remembers it was." You would think we might have gotten past this by now. A string of books beginning with theologian Douglas John Hall through Dick Hamm's more recent *Recreating the Church* has hammered home the lesson that whatever form of Christendom we may have once inhabited, it is now gone, gone, gone!

Aleshire's charge is neatly double-barreled, reminding us not only of the danger of seeking to recover the past, but also of trying to recover a past that never really existed, or if it existed at all, did so for only a very few short post-war years. Poet Donald Hall puts it well: "Nostalgia without history is a decorative fraud." We know this, but like snakes needing to molt, we hang on to dead skin for fear there will be nothing to replace it.

I believe that the United Church of Christ is in various stages of "getting it" about the radical changes in our cultural location, the related weakening of our ecclesial structures, and the attending missional imperatives this implies. To some degree the differing capacity to "get it" may be generational. Many of us in this room prepared for ministry at precisely the moment the old foundations began to crumble. But we entered a church that still looked sturdy and healthy above grade. Consider – or perhaps better, remember – our surprise, then, when eroding foundations began to give evidence of their weakness in tottering steeples. We've spent more than three decades struggling with denial, bewilderment, grief, and anger over this. The past is seductive, even if it is Egypt, and it's not surprising that folk experiencing the uncertain journey through the wilderness should become an unruly people! If this is true for leaders, it is certainly true for our members who have struggled mightily and we must say faithfully to keep old institutions going. Some places it works longer than others, which only adds to the confusion and the conflict. I'm certain that this reality is, in large measure, what underlies the passion over our disagreements in the national setting governance debates.

The good news is that I believe a critical mass of leaders and followers in the United Church of Christ is now reaching the point of no longer trying to be what they remember we were. **New leaders are emerging here in the Council and throughout the church who never knew "the good old days."** The crisis of viability and sustainability which grips many of our conferences (as well as Lutheran synods, Presbyterian presbyteries, and Disciples regions, to name just a few) is grim for leaders to deal with, but strips away any remaining illusions about the "decorative fraud." This is both spiritually and structurally instructive. On the one hand, it presses us to contemplate once again the truth of what our Reformed ancestors told us about the source of "our only comfort in life and in death." On the other hand, it makes letting go of cherished structures, if not easy, at least imaginable. I once said to a group of pastors of small rural churches something that I believe is true, even though I recognize it is terribly hard to hear: **"Our responsibility is not to keep the old institutions going the way they've always gone; our task is to determine what God wants to have happen in this place and then go about figuring out what resources we have to help make that happen."** That is not to suggest that we pretend institutions don't matter. They do. But if they are to live, they must grow and be reformed, and occasionally give themselves up and not merely strive to be artifacts of a glorious past or, more likely, a flawed memory.

So here I am again. And as you can probably guess, I have been to more of those lectures where I learn something profound and have to run back here and share it with you. Yes, it's true. But it gets worse--this time I have brought the lectures back on CD and will be playing them every Sunday night this month, so you can learn what I did. And, best of all--the lecturer herself is coming to Portland in 3 weeks and I am planning a field trip! Yes, a weekend in Portland, come see me for details, we can even organize a hunting party for Walter John since he has seen fit to ignore my emails!!

These new revelations are on the subject of Revitalization of Protestant Mainline Churches through Intentional Christian Practice, based on research and writings of American Church Historian & Professor Diana Butler Bass. Through lectures and several books on the subject, she is challenging the common conception that mainline Protestant churches are in decline across the country, that only conservative fundamentalist or evangelical churches grow. Through studies and research, she has found that churches that engage in intentional christian practice find new vitality. Our Protestant church (which includes what is called the Mainline: Presbyterian, Episcopal, Evangelical Lutheran, United Methodist, Disciples/Christian Church, and our Congregational/UCC, those, as Butler Bass says, "with the old church buildings"), is undergoing a great change from its recent past, some say the greatest shift since the mid-19th century in America, others say worldwide it may be a new reformation not unlike that of the 16th century.

What is happening is our churches are shifting from a conventional position in culture, to an intentional path of purposeful belonging & practice. Gone are the days when everyone went to church because that is what all communities did, when being part of a church was as common as going to school. Churchgoing was an accident of sorts--something one did by virtue of being born in a particular family. About the mid-1960s, through the 70s, everything started to change. The civil rights movement swept the nation. Women started breaking out of traditional roles. Gay people came out of the closet. The nuclear family where everyone stayed in their culture-mandated boxes broke down. Graduates of Yale Divinity School went around pronouncing that God was Dead. The Vietnam War drove a great wedge between the church of our dominant culture, and those against the war, following Jesus' Way of Peace. A great many people left the mainline church precisely because of its lack of response to the war. **In those days church was about the comfort of the familiar, not the challenge of the foreign.**

To me, a child of that time, it seemed the response to the changes involved people seeking a deeper meaning from their humanity, **looking outside the traditional core of the American cultural and religious ethos for spiritual depth.** Conventional attendance to a church where everyone did things "because that's how it has always been" became unconvincing. This was perhaps because for much of the 1st half of the 20th century the church *adopted* the cultural conventions of the day, instead of *challenging* them. Since the church had become part of the culture, it was left behind as the people rebelled from the worn-out conventions of that culture. By the time my generation came to life in the 70s, there was not much church left.

So many churches did decline. In the years hence many churches dwindled and some closed their doors. The rise in the 80s and 90s of fundamentalism and its easy answers of stoic traditionalism instead of nurturing of inclusiveness filled the void for many. But as Butler Bass has found, many many Protestant Mainline churches in recent years have been thriving, by discerning why they exist as communities, attracting those who **intentionally** want to be a part of a **mission to give** rather than **get**, churches where there is an intentional, unique purpose that involves DOING Christianity, rather than merely BELIEVING in it. They have discovered wonderful things that tie them together in community, such as praying, caring for one another, offering hospitality to strangers: to be faithful rather than fundamentalist.

Incidentally none of these past trends I describe are meant to single out Kirkland Congregational Church in particular. I personally do not believe our church as a community institution is in decline, but I do think it is in transition. Some of you may believe otherwise. What I mean to do here is lay out what is happening in churches just like us all across the country, and let you contemplate and decide what applies and what doesn't. The timing is purposeful: we are in a period of discernment as we define ourselves in order to call a new pastor for the next era of our mission here in Kirkland. What I describe here is meant to broaden our look forward, to help churn up more ideas about where we have been, where we are, and where we are going, so I and my colleagues on the search committee can be sure to pick the best settled pastor who reflects the qualities we need in our spiritual leader.

It is wonderfully poignant that the leader of our denomination would highlight just these topics only this past month in his address to the Conferences of the UCC, and that our own Conference Minister would do the same here, only last Sunday. What is happening here is no isolated phenomenon. Indeed, I think our church is already on the practicing path.

Furthermore, I wish to say that conventional Christianity of the 50s and 60s was not inherently bad. Most of you grew up in it, and I would say you all turned out rather well, as did millions of mainliners around the country. "Churches [of say the 1950s] were vibrant, successful, growing congregations that met the needs of people at a **particular moment** in American history. Because of their very success, however, they lost the capacity to imagine church being different than how they experienced it and, essentially, froze tradition in its tracks." I am not up here to say bad things about the past, and how this new trend is inherently "better." "Indeed, in every generation of christian history, faithful congregations have selected and reshaped tradition, developing patterns that **reflect transcendent realities in ways that speak to the surrounding culture.**"

What we're doing is thus nothing new: we have said many times we are all on a journey together, but what many may not realize is this is a journey to maintain our mission and relevance in the lives of our community. As the UCC poster in the hallway says, "our faith is 2000 years old, our thinking is not." That sentiment is why this place has the life it has, and I want to encourage everyone to sustain and expand that life. Last week our Conference Minister Mike Denton warned of the danger of nostalgia, that **we are not Amish**, we do not name a point in time when we stop, and **end all renewal**. We must be open to the spirit, to leave a legacy. That is a powerful word, **LEGACY**, I hope on the minds of many. I prefer it to nostalgia, for **nostalgia is the enemy of hope**. Hope for the future builds on a legacy that maintains the life and love of God that emanates of this place.

Diana Butler Bass surveyed 50 congregations across the country, from 35 to 3500 members, looking for what made churches that are supposed to be in decline, vital, thriving places of renewal and purpose. As she writes, "None of the churches was the largest in town, but they were solid, healthy churches, that exhibited christian authenticity, expressed a coherent faith, and offered members ways of living with passion and purpose. These congregations exhibited a renewed sense of identity and mission. Many of them had risen from dire circumstances of decline, crisis, threatened closure, or spiritual boredom. None of these followed a preplanned program of evangelistic growth. **Each found its own individual way to be its own best self. Innovative and traditional at the same time, risk-taking and grounded, confident and humble, open & orthodox**, resolving seeming paradoxes in the centre of community. She found that the path to vital congregations is that you take seriously the practice of a Christian life by rediscovering the riches of christian past, by practicing simple, but profound things, like discernment, hospitality, testimony, contemplation, peace, and justice. They were able to reach to ancient wisdom, connect to the wisdom of ancestors, and reach out through a life sustained by Christian devotional and moral practices. They knew the biblical story, and they knew their own story. They were mystery-centered congregations, focusing on the incarnate grace of God in the world. These were not perfect churches, but they were doing church in soul-refreshing ways. This Christianity is sweeping quietly across the country, between the extremes of secularism and fundamentalism, and it embraces all those who dream that the gospel can meaningfully transform our lives, our churches, and our communities."

Here is a little bit about practices and discernment:

If you could rename your church, what would you call it? 5 years ago I would have called it "12-step Community Meeting Hall" Now perhaps "Multichurch." Naming **what** we are is what this discernment process is all about. What is our mission? Why are we here? Why is this place, Kirkland Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, here in this community, in 2009? What is the legacy of the last 129 years of our history? How is that relevant to the next generation?

Discernment through Christian Practice is called Generative Christianity. It is based on the Great Commandment, that we love one another. It is about ending the dominant drive of our culture: the need to win. What if winning were replaced with Hospitality? Friendship? There is a reason our main regular rite is communion, a meal around a table with our God. Sharing a meal requires hospitality and

friendship. The central question is: **How does Jesus ask us to set God's table?**

This is the humble practice of faith to bring about transformation to ourselves and our community.

Generative because is it about being born. Birthing was the Greek verb commonly used by Paul to describe the new Way that Jesus ushered in. Giving birth is not an easy, painless thing, which is what is instructive about the word chosen. Brian McLaren says in his new book: "You cannot get an epidural shot to ease the pain of giving birth to character." But birthing is about new life, something miraculous, and wonderful.

Christian Practices are the things we do for the life of the world that meet fundamental human needs.

Marcus Borg says practices are about living of the Christian Way.

All congregations do Christian practice. But having an intentional purpose is key. People who practice without intention assume they know what they are doing, but often are just going through motions they or their church always has, for the sake of . Intentional purpose assumes NOTHING, but often does draw on tradition, a legacy, or a past deed. This is about DEPTH, not Growth; Deeper Roots, not Numbers. Practices have to increase the manifestation of the love of God, or the capacity of members to love. **There is no moral value to the size of a church.**

Just last Thursday I picked up a brand-new book by Brian McLaren, a leader of the evangelical side of this new practicing, post-modern Way of being Christian. I have read 4 of his books, and highly recommend them. In this latest one, *Finding our Way Again*, he starts a new series of books on Christian Practice, edited by the famous Phyllis Tickle, and including a new book by Diana Butler Bass, which came out only last week. He speaks of christian practice in how it helps build character, using these wonderful words:

In a wild world like ours, your character, left untended, will become a **stale room**, an obnoxious child, a vacant lot filled with thorns, weeds, broken bottles, raggedy grocery bags, and dog droppings. Your deepest channels will silt in, and you will feel yourself shallowing. You'll become a presence neither you nor others will enjoy, and you and they will spend more and more time and energy trying to be anywhere else.

Well tended, your character will be a fragrant garden, an artist's home, with walls and halls full of memories and beauty, a party with live music and good jokes and pleasant conversations in every corner. You'll be good and deep company for others and yourself

That's why, through the ages, people have tried to find ways to tend themselves, to do for their souls what exercise does for their bodies or study for their minds. Through these character exercises, they give birth to the person they are proud of becoming, the person they are happy to be, the one who is trying to be born in them every day-a hero, a best friend, a loving beloved and beloved lover.

The author is MCLAREN, Brian, you can get his books at the King County library, they are all excellent. It is just like an evangelical to stress the individual experience of spirituality, which I find to be a welcome new viewpoint to our usual community-based emphasis. We are all individuals, and having this focus is a useful one, if only for those who find the community difficult to weave themselves into. This is the exciting part of this generative movement, that many parts of the Protestant church are knitting their best together for the widest appeal.

Back to Diana Butler Bass, she describes Episcopal congregations in West Tennessee, where they have "reengaged Christian tradition and practice in ways that provide meaning, **make demands on congregants**, and strengthen commitment to living as God's people in the world. In each of the more liberal-leaning congregations in West Tennessee, parishioners were expected to engage practices of hospitality, prayer, social justice, spiritual formation, healing, inclusion, and studying the Word. While still being politely Mainline about it, they nevertheless "demanded" certain things from their members--not in terms of doctrinal assent, but in terms of stewardship, spiritual growth, ministry, mission, and practice." They were on a journey of Theological Reflection, not about easy answers, more about asking the questions. They had a spiritual modesty about the mystery, the quest for Knowing. "When we think we know," they told her, "we lose our perspective on wisdom." They said **christian character calls for humility in the ways for understanding God, that we are to connect brain, heart and hands with wisdom.**

In the most conservative Presbytery in Western Pennsylvania, around Zelienople, there is Calvin Presbyterian, a church centered around Practice, not Purity. They are a God-centered, prayer-centered church, vs. a program- and belief-centered church. In the heart of red America, christian practices are more important than doctrine. They are empowered by God, to be **for** things, not against them, walking the walk of the people of the Bible, in radical living, as Jesus lived. This is about what people do, how they act; it is not about what they believe. Because of this vibrancy, they were the only church in their entire presbytery to grow every year during the study period, while all others in their area declined.

To bring this all back home:

For KCC, for us, some examples of the practices we do, our own unique legacy, the first is hosting TC4. Many people point to that as one of our crowning ministries.

Another is inviting other groups to share our building, which started as a good neighbour practice, but has become in my opinion a missional endeavour, one that has expanded our role into the community significantly. Remember, more 12-step groups meet here and have for a longer time, than anywhere else in Kirkland.

A very recent practice is the stewardship of the EarthKeepers group and the work it is doing. Now there is an impressive group, with many members and a strong will to DO for God and our community.

Emergency Feeding, KIN, KITH, Sibling House, fortunately there are many more practices that we engage in.

These practices shape our mission to give for God. Coming here is not about getting what you think you want or need from church, but **giving what you didn't know you had within you**, to be **filled** with love and peace **more than you knew you could be**. We talk a lot about the mystery of God in our lives. I have found in this place a great deal of surprise, even shock, at what God causes me and all of you to do, say, and live.

The most miraculous and wonderful thing about christian practice is that when done intentionally, it is **transformative**: it changes the people who practice, both individually and as a community. I know I am a completely different person than the guy who walked in those doors 3 years ago.

Last week Mike Denton observed that one of our church's unique strengths is to be present with people, all over the place, in the myriad of mission and outreach projects that we support. He urged us to give what we have, since if we don't **we become stale**. This concept is long known as stewardship, a very ancient practice we have adapted for use in today's world.

This is but a taste of what this transition here, and around us, is all about as I and others see it. I want to invite you to come back on Sunday nights at 7 for 90 minutes, the rest of the Sundays in Lent, to listen with me to CDs of the lectures on these topics that so inspired me. I want us to learn to discover what our church's practices are, what our purpose is for our community, and how we can grow through what we do now and want to do more of. If the evening time is not convenient, I would be happy to schedule one for a weekday morning if there is interest. I want to do this in the best traditions of Walter John's DVD series, for indeed it was his forward thinking and challenge for us to break out of the boxes of past beliefs that led me to this. But I am doing this with a look beyond where he led us, to even wider discipleship than just one gregarious pastor could bring. That is what I have been saying about taking our own tradition, and widening and deepening it.

Thanks be to God for all of you who have kept this place here and thriving, for those like me, and Amy, just joining you on our miraculous journey. Amen.

Some Christian Practices

Honoring the Body

Hospitality

Contemplative Prayer

Household Economics

Saying Yes and Saying No

Lectio Divina

Keeping Sabbath

Hourly Prayer
Testimony
Discernment
Pilgrimage
Peacemaking
Living as families
Liturgy
Shaping Diverse Communities
Forgiveness
Practicing the Presence of God
Dying Well
Friendship
Singing praise
Journaling God's actions in our lives
Reading Scripture

For individual reflection: Which practices currently shape your spiritual life? What practices do you think you do well, that you could teach or share with others? Which would you like to do better?

For congregational reflection: Which practices currently shape your communal life? Might God be calling you to engage some others?