



# the Gospel and Our Culture

a network for encouraging the encounter in north america

### In This Issue

*This delayed, combined edition of the GOCN newsletter offers a collection of voices speaking from and about churches that lie at very different places in the ecclesial landscape.*

*Susan Beaumont shares some of her inner journey when the mainline Protestant church of her rearing met the newer, larger, Seeker church of her seminary program internship. She concludes that there are lessons to be "learned and offered" on both sides (page 1). Ed Searcy (page 3) reflects on the revolutionizing impact of grasping that "the mission is God's" in his United Church of Canada congregation. Doug Pagitt, a leader in the "emergent" conversations across the continent, displays something of the way spiritual formation happens in the Solomon's Porch community where his pastoral presence plays out (page 9). And Wayne Holst gives us (on page 11) a glimpse inside a recent book by Mary Jo Leddy growing out of her life among refugees in the Romero House community in Toronto.*

*The vantage points are quite varied, but these reflections beg for conversation at their points of intersection. They're offered with the hope that your circles of conversation will be animated by them!*

—the Editor

## LESSONS LEARNED AND OFFERED

### Reflections upon an internship in a seeker-oriented church

**Susan Beaumont  
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Some time ago, I had the incredible privilege of completing a nine-month internship at a large, seeker-oriented church with a conservative evangelical theology. A group of thirty-some committed followers and a professional staff of

four (several of them volunteers) found-

ed the church eleven years before. The church had come to accommodate between 5,000-6,000 people at its weekend services, continuing to grow at the rate of 800-1,000 new attendees each year and is committed to the planting of new churches. Although originally started by an evangelical denomination, the church is now non-denominational. The congregation is patterned after the

Willow Creek Seeker Church model. By almost any measure of success, this is an effective church. It has grown at an incredible rate, it is financially solvent, and it is helping other churches reproduce its success. It has introduced the Gospel of Jesus Christ to thousands of people who previously thought the Gospel irrelevant in their lives.

Hundreds of people provide personal

testimony of how their lives have been trans-

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formed and how they continue to grow more deeply in their relationship with Jesus Christ, because of their affiliation with this church. It is vitally involved in mission, outreach, and service, both in its large metropolitan setting and throughout the world (especially in India and Africa.)

I made the decision to work at this seeker church with the blessings

of my own denomination (American Baptist). It was my desire to experience life and ministry within the context of a new paradigm church, a church whose primary challenges relate to keeping up with growth and expansion, a church with a decidedly contemporary approach to doing ministry. The experience has been enlightening, invigorating, frustrating and challenging all at the same time. I have found the people and the ministry genuine, warm and receptive. They have been open to teaching me, and being taught by me, in almost every arena of ministry.

The differences in theological perspective between the conservative evangelical mindset and my own personal theology have offered challenging and, at times, frustrating barriers in my internship experience. I thought that being aware of the theological difference up front was sufficient to side-step any problems that might arise. I was wrong. Although my viewpoints on ministry, leadership and organizational development were warmly embraced, my theology was not. Ultimately, my theological perspective was sidelined and dismissed. This was at times challenging and painfully growth producing. These learnings were as important, if not more important, than the lessons in doing ministry that I went in search of.

I would not presume to name or explain the factors that have contributed to the success of this seeker church. I am sure there are others who could do that far more effectively than I. However, I believe I am uniquely positioned to provide an analysis of its strengths and weaknesses from the perspective of the mainline Protestant experience. Specifically, I would like to share my perceptions of the lessons that this church has to offer the mainline Protestant church. The freshness of its approach can inform our more traditional approach in many important ways. Of course, the synthesis of my experience would not be complete unless I also

offered lessons that this seeker church might learn from the accumulated experience of the mainline Protestant tradition.

### **Ten Lessons a Seeker Church Can Teach the Mainline Protestant Church**

1. *Excellence is an attribute of God. Excellence in worship honors God.*

In the mainline church we often excuse shoddy worship by placing a higher value on participation. We say that God honors the participation of all in worship more than a sense of professionalism in worship. At its core I believe this statement is true. God doesn't receive worship offered professionally any more genuinely than God accepts worship offered by amateurs. However, oftentimes we accept poor standards of worship that result from shoddy planning and coordination, and convince ourselves that substandard is okay because it's not supposed to be professional.

At this seeker church the level of planning, rehearsal and evaluation that goes into worship is impressive. Excellence is pursued relentlessly.

Those in leadership are not afraid to deliver hard and honest critiques of worship components. Those who lead worship are accustomed to being critiqued in this manner and, for the most part, have learned not to take critiques personally. The result is a worship experience that large volumes of people are attracted to. The result is a worship experience that honors God.

2. *Never assume that people understand how/why God is relevant in their lives.*

The Conservative Evangelical and the Mainline Protestant viewpoints are united in their understanding that the Gospel is relevant today. However, this seeker church never assumes that people understand why Christ is relevant. Mainline Protestants make many assumptions about relevance that I am only beginning to notice since the time of my internship.

In the Seeker orientation, language is monitored closely to make certain that Christian phrases and terms are not used unless they are also fully explained. But the emphasis on

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# MISSION OR MISSION

*Edwin Searcy  
University Hill Congregation  
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It is surprising what happens when the meaning of one word in your vocabulary changes. In my case, that word is “mission”. For most of my life mission has referred to a journey with a purpose, undertaken by an individual or a group. As a teen I watched every mission to the moon with fascination. Growing up in the United Church I learned that the Mission and Service Fund was our calling to “live love”. As a minister I worked hard with congregations to craft mission statements that gave direction to our objectives and goals. Mission had to do with us, with what we needed to do, because – as we said to ourselves – “God has no other hands but ours”.

But I am undergoing a conversion in my life because of a conversion in my understanding of the word “mission”. It started with the deep sense of fatigue and anxiety that I sensed in the church and beyond. Our instinctive reaction to this sinking feeling is to solve the problem by working harder, by doing more, by getting our mission statements right. Yet the more pressure that we feel to get it right, the more burdensome our life together seems. Somehow the deep joy and vitality and energy that should mark an inspired Christian community slips away, like mercury, between our fingers.

Two dates in my journey of repentance – of turning – stand out. In 1995 the congregation at University Hill called me to join with them. It was a congregation that had boomed and then busted – almost – but was beyond its crisis of survival and prepared to talk about mission. My skills in leading suburban congregations no longer fit. So, in 1998, I went back to school and took the congregation with me. We spent four years together on a shared journey through the Doctor of Ministry degree at Columbia Theological Seminary. It was there that we glimpsed the huge change that one word can make in our life.

We heard again, as if for the first time, the ancient news of the “missio Dei” – the mission of God. It seems such a small shift in emphasis, but it is huge. Shifting the locus of mission off of the church and onto the God who is met in Jesus Christ has been, for us, good news of immense joy. We no longer worry about crafting a mission statement, nor do we speak about “the mission of the church”. Instead, we focus our attention and our lives on what God is up to in the world and in the church and in our bodies and souls. Of course, coming to

believe that God is actually up to things is the key issue for all people formed by modernity. There are powerful forces at work in the world and the church, seeking to deny the inspiration of deep hope that is the gift of the Holy Spirit. These forces leave in their wake an insipid despair that can trust only in what humans can achieve – as if God had no other hands but ours.

This focus on God’s mission here, among us, is the hallmark of those who speak about becoming a “missional church”. No longer is mission something that we do. It is not project oriented, nor is it other oriented. It is focused on the changes God intends in our life together so that our distinctive ways are a sign of God’s activity in the world. We do not have the luxury of choosing the nature of the mission. Our mission statement as a church is a given. Jesus calls us to a life of discipleship, to live as citizens of the Kingdom of God even as we also hold Canadian

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passports.

This dual-citizenship is the stuff of our life together. It drives the agenda of our Board meetings (now structured each month by the five ancient marks of the church – kerygma, liturgia, koinonia, diakonia and didache). In worship, gathered around the Font and Table, we learn again not to think of this community as our property (as in “Welcome to our church”). Instead, we are recovering the ancient language of Christian hospitality. Frequent celebrations of the Eucharist teach us that Christ is met as both host and stranger here. This is Christ’s church, not ours. These worship practices have led to the daring witness of newfound voices that testify to the radical hospitality of Christ. To my wonder, our move to focus single-mindedly on the hospitality of God in Christ has resulted in a number of families in the congregation making major household decisions to make room for others.

In turning away from a focus on our mission, and in turning towards the good news of God’s mission, an unmistakable vitality is coursing through the veins of the congregation. There is a quality of joy and of longing, of faith and of impatience that is palpable. In the midst of it all I find myself, nearly a quarter century after ordination, on a journey of conversion. And I find that I am not alone in the congregation or in the conference. And I thank God for this time and place and calling. ■

### ***Lessons Learned and Offered, continued***

relevancy goes much deeper than this. Every sermon title, class title, brochure heading, message outline is designed to capture the awareness of people living in a culture that no longer embraces Christianity. The starting point is always the present reality. Only after the complexities of the present reality are explored do teachers/leaders introduce Christ as a better alternative.

#### *3. Clarity of vision is critical to the success of ministry.*

The seeker church is driven by vision. In spite of the vast numbers of people involved together in ministry it is not uncommon to hear the same catch phrases repeated over and over, describing the values, vision and mission of the church. These values are emphasized repeatedly from the stage at weekend services and in every learning experience that is offered.

I believe it is the power of the vision and the ability of people to articulate it clearly that allows for the tremendous growth of the church. The church pastors do not have to single handedly solve every problem and/or take the initiative for every new ministry because the simple vision of the church is so reproducible that people are able to catch it quickly, sincerely, and begin to operate within the parameters of the vision almost immediately.

#### *4. God provides abundantly when we adopt an attitude of abundance.*

People at the seeker church expect abundance and make decisions within the parameters of abundant thinking. The basic expectation is this; where God provides a vision, God also provides the resources and the leadership. People are not irresponsible with their resources but they are not afraid to step out in faith and trust that God will provide where nothing currently exists. And their history has proved them correct in this assumption.

Many mainline Protestant churches suffer from scarcity mentality. The declining attendance and involvement in our churches over the past 20 years have taught us to approach new ministries and decisions with considerable caution and skepticism. We don't want to allocate resources unless we know we will experience success. We fund experience, not expectation. Often our expectations of success/failure are driven by an understanding of what worked/failed in the past, and not by a vision of what might unfold in our future. It is almost as if we have forgotten how to trust the Holy Spirit to do a new thing in our midst.

#### *5. Effective ministry is growth oriented and always reproduces itself.*

In my experience of traditional church, we start new areas of ministry tentatively, and figure out afterwards how we will train others to do what we have begun. We are thrilled and surprised if someone happens to capture the vision and reproduce a ministry that we have started. We look to the number of people *currently* available to define growth potential. We seldom begin with an expectation of sustained growth. As a result we often find ourselves reinventing the wheel to introduce new programs, classes, etc., that are only offered once and then retired.

At this seeker church, ministries are never undertaken unless a plan is in place to provide for reproducibility and unlimited growth. No program is launched without a simultaneous discussion of how it will be offered again and again in different settings and with different leaders as demand grows. In fact, one-time events that don't create a demand for reproduction are generally considered failures.

#### *6. The power of prayer is real.*

Nothing happens at this church without the power of prayer surrounding it, infusing it and supporting it. A corresponding prayer team supports every ministry team of the church. Every major event of the church is prayed for by a group of people as the event is being held. In team meetings every member of the team is expected to lead prayer, and, in my experience, everyone does. Praying

publicly is not the domain of church leadership; responsibility to lead prayer belongs to everyone. Prayer styles are conversational and easy, which means that most everyone feels comfortable praying out loud. Most meetings begin or end with extended prayer times that are informal in nature and involve everyone in the room praying for everyone else. Planned formal devotionals are a rare occurrence.

In mainline Protestant life, prayers tend to be more formal and stilted. Because the language of our prayer is more formal, most people don't feel comfortable leading prayer. The Pastor is usually expected to be the prayer leader. Others pray along quietly. Prayer is a personal event and we are not disciplined about insuring that every aspect of church life is bathed in prayer.

#### *7. Doing ministry in the name of God is a gift and a privilege, not an entitlement.*

This church did not exist thirteen years ago and the leadership of the church is careful not to assume that the church will be here thirteen years from now. They know that their opportunity to do ministry in this time and in this place is a gift from God. Leaders work hard to maintain a sense of edge and newness in everything they do. The greatest fear is

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If a mainline church dies, it will be because it failed to take a risk needed to survive.

that people will fall into a sense of ordinariness and complacency about the incredible privilege of serving God. Therefore, leaders are forever challenging themselves and one another to push the edges and keep things fresh. They are willing to take risks, knowing that any given risk might be the one that pushes them over the brink and brings about downfall.

Most of the time I am convinced that the mainline Protestant church would rather die from complacency than fail at a new initiative. In this sense the mainline church and this church are polar opposites. If this church fails, it will be because it took a risk it could not afford to take. If a mainline church dies it will be because it failed to take a risk needed to survive.

8. *Evangelism is urgent.*

Mainline Protestant churches believe that evangelism is a central feature of their earthly mission. However, most of the time, members of our churches act as if we have eternity to spread the mission and we assume that most people we encounter have already had plenty of exposure to the Christian message. We do not want to risk alienating people by sharing the message of Jesus Christ with someone who might be ‘put off’ by our efforts. We would rather err on the side of letting someone walk away without knowing Christ than push our viewpoint in a manner they might find offensive.

At this seeker church, evangelism carries a sense of urgency unlike anything that I have encountered in our churches. The message is clear; if someone goes to bed tonight without knowing Jesus Christ, then we have missed an opportunity to bring the light of God’s saving grace into his or her life. Shame on us every time this happens! Granted, this sense of urgency is very much a part of conservative evangelical theology that focuses considerable attention on approaching end times, and the ensuing sense of urgency that end time thinking creates. However, theology aside, we have much to learn from the way in which responsibility for evangelism resides with every individual in the church. All church events are thought of primarily as evangelistic events—opportunities for people of the church to invite unchurched friends and neighbors. Consequently, every event of the church is structured to feel safe and inviting to new people

9. *Numbers count.*

In small church life we often justify our size by claiming that God is not concerned with numbers. What is important is not the quantity of people who attend our congregational events. What matters is the impact of that experience in the life of even one person. We believe that smallness is good because it contributes to a family feeling. However, our intense focus on creating an intimate family of faith often ends

up excluding newcomers because they can’t assimilate into our tight friendship circles.

From the seeker church perspective, if evangelism is urgent, then numbers count. Community can be created through the creation of small groups within the larger congregational context, but every group is expected to grow and reproduce. We are not good stewards of our Christian heritage if we are not continually bringing new people to Christ. And if we are continually bringing new people to Christ we ought to be experiencing continual growth. Numbers are not the only measure that can be applied to evaluate success (the depth of the conversion experience is equally relevant). However, if we are not growing in numbers then we are not effectively spreading the Gospel message and not fulfilling our mission as Christians. Numerical growth cannot be discounted.

At the core of the human experience is the need to stand in awe before God, in worship and in praise.

10. *Christianity is radical; radical commitment is required.*

One of the favored stories in this seeker church is the level of radical sacrifice made by founding members of the congregation. Founding staff members laid everything on the line, personally, financially and professionally to make it work. Founding church members made radical contributions of time and money to see the church through its formation stages. Members retell these stories to remind themselves of the importance of radical commitment in their faith lives today. They urge one another away from a sense of complacency by retelling the stories of sacrifice and early obstacles that were only overcome through persistence and faith in the vision of the church.

Many members in the mainline tradition were born and grew up within their traditions. It is much harder for us to embrace a radical sense of commitment because congregations like mine have been around over 160 years and there is a sense that the church will always be around. For many, the commitment to the faith is more cultural than spiritual and we have lost the radical edge that one finds in a new church like the one in which I interned.

**Nine Lessons the Mainline Protestant Church Can Teach a Seeker Church**

1. *Even seekers need to worship.*

At the core of the human experience is the need to stand in awe before God, in worship and in praise. I believe that Seekers have this need, although they may not recognize it as such. Even Seekers experience the overwhelming majesty of creation and the powerful force for good that at times asserts itself within the universe. I believe it is the

responsibility of a seeker church to teach its followers (even at a very basic level) about the importance of corporate worship. The failure to do so is irresponsible spiritual leadership.

In my experience of it, this particular seeker church does not foster an environment of corporate worship. Weekend services, which are seeker-oriented, are so performance driven that those in attendance are never invited into a place of reverence before God. Supposedly, such moments are too threatening for the visiting seeker. The church has offered a midweek worship experience on Wednesday evenings twice each month. However, outside of the opening praise music portion of these services, there is little corporate worship that occurs. From my experience, God feels remarkably absent in the observance of communion and in guided prayer experience. There is little sense of the sacred.

This is an area in which I think the seeker church stands to learn a good deal from the mainline Protestant church. After six months of my internship, I felt the need to begin augmenting my own worship experiences with a more traditional form of worship because I felt such a strong void in this area. The mainline churches have many rich traditions, which create a flow to worship and moments of the awareness of God's presence.

I fear that the seeker church model threw the baby out with the bath water in the attempt to create a worship style that feels relevant in today's culture.

### *2. Excellence and professionalism are not one and the same.*

The seeker church of my internship does not seem to make a distinction between excellence and professionalism. The assumption is that in a church of this size, excellence and professionalism is one and the same thing. This assumption severely limits the number of people who can participate in wor-

ship or ministry leadership. The amateur artist who feels called by God to utilize his/her musical gifts in service to God has little place in this congregation.

The emphasis on professionalism detracts from the spirituality of the church. When I watch weekend services I see artists performing, I don't see believers offering the gift of their performance to God. The professional approach seems to leave little room for the movement of the Spirit.

In my experience the mainline Protestant church has a better grasp on the distinction between these two principles. In traditional church we appreciate that worship is an offering of time and talents, presented genuinely and with a spirit of excellence (i.e. incorporating preparation, practice, and true humility). We have experienced the

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awesome blessing of the Holy Spirit's arrivals in response to amateur talent, offered in a spirit of worship.

### *3. Evangelism alone is not enough.*

There are six major traditions at the core of Christian practice. These expressions of spirituality have been recognized and honored across two thousand years of Christian experience. The practices include the contemplative tradition (a prayer-filled life), the holiness tradition (the virtuous life), the charismatic tradition (the spirit-empowered life), the social justice tradition (the compassionate life), the evangelical tradition (the word-centered life), and

the incarnational tradition (the sacramental life).

Congregations assume a character depending on how they blend these traditions. Within the mainline church I have witnessed genuine attempts to balance and honor all of the traditions, striving to produce a well-balanced approach to faith. The church of my internship places an extraordinary emphasis on the evangelical tradition, almost to the exclusion of the other traditions. Its people are very distrustful of anything that grows out of the incarnational or charismatic traditions. Social justice is embraced by a few within the congregation, but is not emphasized as a value by the leadership of the church. In short, the congregation lives and dies by evangelism. As a result the church has become an evangelistic powerhouse, growing by leaps and bounds and planting a plethora of new churches. The downside of this phenomenon is a spirituality that is stilted and one-dimensional.

### *4. We don't have to evaluate the condition of a soul to minister to that soul.*

An oft-repeated value at the church of my internship is 'having a heart for the lost.' This phrase speaks volumes about the assumptions that people make when they relate to others with a different faith perspective. When members are taught the basics of evangelism they are taught to evaluate where an individual is on a continuum between seeking and following. There is a clear line drawn down the middle of the page that marks the distinction between being lost and found, saved and unsaved. There is a visibly clear moment when an individual is believed to move from one side of the line to the other.

The problem that I have witnessed with this approach is the judgmental and exclusionary mindset that it creates in the eye of the evaluator. The label of lost and found at best creates a classification tool for the witness. At worst it excludes and alienates. I have encoun-

tered people in my own neighborhood who have turned away from the church of my internship because someone in the church labeled them ‘lost’ when they didn’t view themselves in that way.

The mainline Protestant church tends *not* to make use of such labels in its interaction with the world. We see the faith experience on the same continuum, perhaps, but we are not quick to label stages and conversion points. As a result, our evangelism efforts may appear fuzzier, but we more fully embrace growth in our relationship with God as a lifelong process. We recognize that conversion points are often identifiable only in retrospect and that one moment in that process is not necessarily more critical than another in the context of personal salvation.

The result of this difference in perspective is that the mainline church can be more open in its interaction with the world. The mainline Christian can share perspectives and sustain a dialogue longer, without alienating or excluding. The mainline Christian can minister to each and every soul that it encounters without feeling the need to evaluate the condition of that soul.

5. *High impact Christianity is not all about numbers.* Earlier I critiqued the mainline church for minimizing the importance of numerical growth when evaluating its own success. At this point I would like to counter that by offering a criticism of the seeker church’s obsession with numerical count as a primary evaluation tool. It was not uncommon to me to enter the office on Monday mornings and field a variety of voice messages that report on the success of the prior week according to attendance levels. Youth events are often judged according to how many young people ‘made a first-time commitment for Christ.’ I rarely hear follow-up conversations that attempt to identify whether the response of students was an emotional reaction to a good speaker or a real change in the faith lives of those present. Attendance and expansion are the primary measures of the success of the church. Leaders are inclined to reevaluate and even pull the plug on any ministry that is not generating growth. Alternate means of evaluating ministry success simply are not available.

If I were to apply this church’s measures of success to some of the powerful but small mainline churches I have visited, I would feel compelled to close the doors of those small churches. I would miss the incredible, life-transforming ministry that can happen in the context of a small group of believers who commit themselves to a cause. I am familiar with one small congregation that offers two worship experiences (one averaging 65 people, and another averaging 35.) This congregation is remarkable in its ability to work with those battling addiction and struggling to live life in recovery. There is life changing, powerful ministry that happens within this congregation.

6. *God created diversity. God honors diversity. We find God in the midst of diversity.*

An often-heard statement at the church of my internship is,

*The Gospel and Our Culture* 15:3.4

“The truth is narrow.” The implied conclusion to that statement is... “And we are THE ones who have it.” This understanding of a narrow truth produces a culture of uniformity in thought and behavior patterns that I do not witness in the mainline church.

Interestingly enough the church perceives itself as highly diverse and open to difference. Yet when I first began attending I often found myself wondering where this church found 5,000 people that were so much alike, and I wondered where they kept the people who were unattractive. There is very little racial, ethnic or theological difference among those in attendance or leadership. Few people over the age of 50 attend. The typical person is a white, upwardly mobile

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suburbanite Christian who dresses stylishly. People are attractive by this world’s standards. Family values are strongly emphasized and traditional roles for men and women are emphasized.

Personally, while there, I felt the sting of isolation that results from being ‘different’. I was not there with my husband or family. Many people seemed to find this strange. I was a woman with strong leadership capabilities, a focus on career, strong opinions and professional training in ministry. This also made me unique. I represented a theological viewpoint that was different from their mainstream thought. When I shared my viewpoints on faith they were generally met with silence or avoidance. People did not engage my difference to try and learn from it or understand the ‘truth’ that my viewpoints represented. In fact, they often seemed threatened by it. When it was discovered that I taught Scripture from a ‘different’ viewpoint I was asked to quit teaching (even though the principles I taught were well within the boundaries of orthodox Christian thinking). Theological difference is viewed as a threat that must be avoided so theological splits don’t emerge within the church. As a result differences are avoided and eliminated.

One of the things I most appreciate about my American Baptist background is the rich theological dialogue that is respected and encouraged among members. We do believe in absolute truth. The difference is that we understand God to be the keeper of that truth, not human beings. Therefore we are open to hearing and embracing a fairly wide spectrum of thought within our congregations. We understand that God created diversity, celebrates diversity and God is found in

diversity. We discover the truth of God in scripture, but we are careful to measure our interpretation of scripture against the viewpoints of others who think differently than we do. We believe that God most clearly reveals himself to us in the rich intersection of divergent thoughts and experiences. This does not make the truth relative. It simply acknowledges that our understanding is human and limited. God is not.

#### 7. *No church stands alone.*

Recently, this seeker church left the denomination that founded it and became a stand-alone church. I have heard church leadership claim that the congregation is now large enough to operate as its own denomination. It can produce most of the functions internally that a denomination provides to smaller congregations that don't have adequate resources (i.e. curriculum development, mission outreach, leadership development, personnel placement, etc.)

Denominationalism within the mainline tradition certainly has its problems. Many predict the downfall of denominational life within the next 20-50 years of church history. I am among the first to point out the shortcomings of denominational judicatory systems. However, I find incredible value in the 'Associational Principle' that denominations provide. When congregations come together in denominational settings they encounter one another along all of their rough edges. They find comfort and strength in their similarities, but their differences chafe against one another and the process of working through those differences sharpens theology and practice..

I fear for the church that walks alone. How does such a church ensure that it stays true to the Christian experience? Who challenges its thinking and holds it accountable for its Christian witness?

#### 8. *Passion wears thin; the gospel does not.*

One of the delightful things about being at this seeker church was the power of the vision that drives the church. The vision energizes and adds excitement. However, one of the down sides of a church that lives by vision is that sometimes people rely on the excitement of the vision, more than they rely on the excitement of the Gospel.

I found this to be true especially among some of the younger leadership. As I interviewed people about their leadership needs they often responded, in one way or another, that they were looking for more vision and more passion from church leadership. It didn't seem to occur to them that what they needed was to walk more deeply with God; a deepening sense of spirituality could provide the energy and excitement that wore thin in the vision of human leadership.

#### 9. *Teaching is more than 'filling in the blanks'.*

As this particular seeker church has grown it has developed a singular teaching style that is used from the stage during weekend services and in every form of leadership workshop or bible study. Simply described, it is a style of conversational teaching that provides the listener/learner with an outline. Within the outline are missing blanks. The listener/learner fills in the blanks of the outline as the teacher speaks. All teaching experiences involve a teacher talking at an audience. The listener/learner is passive, except for the efforts required to fill in the blanks.

Frankly, I am surprised that a church as sophisticated as this one hasn't developed more sophisticated styles of teaching, styles that more clearly embrace the principles of adult learning. At the church of my internship, learning is usually auditory, only sometimes visual and almost never social or kinesthetic. People are rarely divided into smaller groups to engage the subject matter. Little creativity is used within group experiences to provide genuine encounters with the material being presented. The result is learning that is often boring and unmemorable. Even in smaller learning environments people are allowed to come together without encountering one another. There are many lost opportunities to present scripture in new and exciting ways. Even the weekend messages (although powerfully delivered messages) have a certain sameness about them that becomes repetitious over time.

One of the strengths I find within the mainline tradition is great depth in teaching approaches. In bible study we are adept at crafting learning opportunities to present scripture in new ways and to challenge the thinking of our audiences. Because we are accustomed to working with people who have spent their lives in the church, we are also more experienced at digging into scripture and finding fresh nuances in the gospel message.

**Conclusion:** I suppose I went to my internship with a two-fold purpose. First, I went to learn everything I could, within a nine-month period, about how this kind of church operates. But I wouldn't be honest if I didn't admit that I also came to try it on for size, to see if I could live and minister within this church setting. Ultimately I expected to wholeheartedly accept or reject it as a faith community, to move in and call it home or to reject it as an inferior model for doing church. At the end of my internship experience I found I could do neither.

I left the church more confused about my future than when I arrived. I became accustomed to its commitment to excellence, its passion, vision and energy. It will be hard to return to my own denomination where those attributes are

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# Reimagining Spiritual Formation: A Week in the Life of an Experimental Church

*Excerpts from the concluding chapter. Published by Zondervan and used with permission.*

**Doug Pagitt**  
**Solomon's Porch**  
**Minneapolis, Minnesota**

Well, that's a week at Solomon's Porch. At our Sunday night worship gathering you sank into one of our couches and learned how and why we make the worship interactive and holistic.

You came to yoga class on Monday night and encountered our respect for the physical dimensions of worship and life in Jesus.

It's not important to me whether someone is still singing our songs or using our couches 15 years from now (my hope is that they will sing their own songs and figure out their own seating). It's the spirit of exploring, of seeking, of risking that I hope will inspire future generations.

On Tuesday you joined us for the Bible discussion group that shapes our sermon and experienced how we share teaching authority in dialogue.

You experienced our hospitality at the Wednesday night dinner and heard how that is a part of Kingdom living.

On Thursday you came along to Bible study and saw how Solomon's Porch handles belief formation: like a tango of information and hope and experience and grace. On Friday you walked through a Way of the Cross to which Porchers young and old had contributed with their creativity. Perhaps you wonder as I do whether Jesus used so many metaphors for the Kingdom of God not because he couldn't find the right words, but because the Kingdom is like so many things and so many things are like the Kingdom.

On Saturday you mulled over service with our community, our neighbors, and the world and you saw how sweat and caring and even a plastic Snoopy bring us to a place of useful faith.

And now, as we cycle back to Sunday, I hope you've gotten a sense of Solomon's Porch as a community in which people who don't have all the answers take risks and make mistakes in the course of living into the call of Kingdom life together.

What we're about, as I said at the beginning, is moving beyond education as the primary form of spiritual formation. Not surprisingly, some people have pointed questions: they wonder whether what we're doing is a trendy reaction against the church that will experience its own backlash in time, or they want to know whether what we are doing is viable financially or in areas of church growth.

My answer? "I don't know, and it really doesn't matter that much to me."

I am increasingly convinced that what matters in our efforts is our willingness to experiment and try—to develop expressions of faith that are fully of our day and time, recognizing that our efforts will be adapted and changed in years to come. Our role is to do our part in our day and time. It's not important to me whether someone is still singing our songs or using our couches 15 years from now (my hope is that they will sing their own songs and figure out their own seating). It's the spirit of exploring, of seeking, of risking that I hope will inspire future generations. Our duty to those who follow is to leave a legacy of faith and not particular programs. While being led by the broader community of faith, including those who have come before us, we need to be people of the future—people whose ways of spiritual formation and life with God can flex and grow to meet the needs of our changing world. This adaptability is taken for granted in our means of communication, modes of transportation, medical

practices and even our wardrobe. How much more important it is in developing our faith!

People sometimes get tripped up on this idea of thinking ahead being fully engaged in our culture because it sounds like I'm suggesting that we let the culture shape the church, which raises the "slippery slope" flag for some. To rely solely on the past for our ideas about spiritual formation is simply not consistent with the call of the Kingdom of God. How so? Let me explain it like this.

My wife and I recently had a conversation about buying furniture for our home. We don't want to spend an excessive amount of money but more importantly we

Central to the forms of spiritual formation discussed in this book is the need for us—not only our Solomon's Porch community but the church as a whole—to become theological communities.

want products as good as the antiques we own. I mentioned to Shelley that I get tired of hearing people moaning that furniture makers don't make well-crafted furniture anymore. I simply don't think that's true. There is as much high-quality furniture today as ever—but now it seems too expensive, because we have more access to cheaper products than during previous times. We could work with a craftsman and purchase a rocker or an armoire that will last for generations, but it will cost us. It's hard to swallow the expense when we know we could buy a nice-enough knockoff version for a fraction of the price. So the struggle is not in finding good quality furniture, it's being willing to pay for it. I asked Shelley if we should be the kind of people who purchase high-quality goods that our grandchildren will revere, or are we going to be the kind who only live off the quality of generations gone by, and buy cheap stuff made during our time? A similar question confronts communities of faith. Will we do the hard and costly work of hand-crafting faith in our day, or will we be content living off the antiques of previous generations and fill in with cheap imitations of our own to "freshen up" the old stuff? Are we willing to become artisans of new expressions of faith so that our grandchildren will see as their legacy the quality that came before them, so they will be stirred thereby to craft newer, more beautiful, more meaningful expressions in their own day?

This book has been primarily about one community and the practices of spiritual formation in it. But the creativity required to live an imaginative, experimental faith is not limited to what we do during our worship gatherings or Wednesday night dinners. Central to the

forms of spiritual formation discussed in this book is the need for us—not only our Solomon's Porch community but the church as a whole—to become theological communities.

The work of theology must happen in full community. Of course it must include the ideas of those who have come before us, but to simply accept the work of our forebears in the faith as the end of the conversation is to outsource the real work of thinking, and that turns theology into a stagnant philosophy rather than an active pursuit of how we are to live God's story in our time. The communities that are best equipped for the task of spiritual formation in the post-industrial age are those who make the practice of theology an essential element of their lives together. This is in no way a call to be less theological, but for our communities to be more involved in the work of theology as a necessary part of the spiritual formation process. Wouldn't it be wonderful if the task of both the new convert to Christianity and the experienced Christian is understood as not only believing the things of Christianity, but as contextualizing, creating, articulating, and living the expressions of faith in their world?

This vision fits in with the way the Christian church has always modified its methods to live in new ways.

New Testament Christians lived it with the debate about how non-Jews would be called to live as followers of Jesus. The early Christians ultimately were called to a kind of spiritual formation that allowed Gentiles to fully follow Jesus in ways that were culturally appropriate to Gentiles. I am confident that we too will gradually move beyond the pre-industrialized approach of spiritual formation to one that better fits our own time.

Similarly, Abram was called by God into new lands and new ways of living. We are invited to live a faith like Abram's, and like him to be radically committed to an unknown future that does not rest in finding new ways to do the same old things but in finding new ways to do the new things of Jesus in our time. We can sustain that commitment only with the faith that God goes with us and the Holy Spirit serves as our teacher and guide.

And now, as a week ends and another begins, it's time to go forth. Our worship gathering ends each Sunday with a blessing we sing to one another as we prepare to take our faith out into the world. Let me leave with you one of the blessings; of the songs we use regularly, it's the only one that is not original with us. Perhaps you already know it.

And may you be blessed on your journey of Spirit-filled imaginative 21st century Christian faith and life.

#### *Irish Blessing*

*May the road rise up to meet you,  
May the wind be always at your back,  
May the sun shine warm upon your face,  
And the rains fall soft upon your fields.  
And until we meet again my friend  
Until we meet again  
May God hold you in the palm of His hand. ■*

# BOOK REVIEW

## RADICAL GRATITUDE

by Mary Jo Leddy. Orbis Books: Maryknoll, NY. 2002.

192 pages. Papercover. \$18.00 US. ISBN #1-57075-448-9.

Reviewed by: Wayne A. Holst, St. David's United Church, Calgary, Alberta

Mary Jo Leddy is a woman of integrity. She is a remarkable witness, in the way she lives her life, to what it means to be a person of *Radical Gratitude*, the title of her latest book.

Leddy teaches theology at Regis College and for the past twelve years she has worked with refugees in the Romero House community of Toronto.

This faithful dissident is an intriguing combination of persistent commitment to change with a concomitant acceptance of the way things are.

For decades she has been engaged in a vocation of fermentive reflection and action. Just over a quarter century ago Leddy became the founding editor of *Catholic New Times*, a left-leaning newspaper with an knack for unsettling the religious status quo. At the same time she remains a faithfully nurtured and nurturing Roman Catholic. That is the tradition within which she was born and raised and wherein she continues to find her spiritual home. For all the Church's flaws it is difficult for her to consider either leaving or retreating into a comfortable ecclesial enclave. It keeps me real, she says.

The root of radical is radix. One of its meanings is getting to the fundamentals of the matter. Gratitude, on the other hand, means a feeling of appreciation for a kindness or favour received. Leddy has some very profound insights to share here. She has made some basic discoveries about how it is possible to live in considerable chaos with a disciplined daily appreciation for life in all its gratuitous splendor. This awareness keeps her hopeful.

This is a book about ordinary grace, she writes at the beginning, which is here for the asking. For free. And it is because such ordinary grace can neither be bought nor sold that it is so promising in a time and a place defined by what has been called the triumph of American materialism.

*Radical Gratitude* is about living an alternative to a driven, consumed or consuming existence. It is about liberation in a culture that is supposed to be the most liberated in the world, that is given over to the pursuit of happiness and is, nonetheless, chronically dissatisfied. It is for people who seem to live in the most powerful culture in the world but nevertheless can feel quite powerless over many aspects of their lives.

This is not a book about the spirituality of gratitude in the trendiest sense of that term, she states, although it is an attempt to recover some of the ancient wisdom about

gratitude. Instead, it is an invitation to ponder gratitude as the most radical attitude to life.

After the beginnings, a chapter describes our perpetual dissatisfaction. Then three more wherein Leddy writes of basic convictions that underlie the possibility of liberating gratitude. Her second to the last deals with why we have not been created by God for getting, earning or being more. In conclusion, she outlines practical ways of developing the habit of gratitude.

Stories help to focus attention on revisioned truths the author wishes to share. One involves an African teenage resident at Romero House who looks out the back window and in broken English points to a garage and asks, Who lives there? Leddy responds that no one does. "It is a house for a car." This set her and the community thinking. Given a housing crisis in the city, they decided to turn the house for a car into a room for a person.

The book is filled with striking themes prompting reflection and re-evaluation. The material is ideal for sermons, talks, devotionals and studies.

We are sacrificing our young people to the idol of the market economy, Leddy says. We tell them that getting a job is far more important than finding their calling in life. Narratives of Jesus' mighty acts (such as the story of the miraculous multiplication of the loaves and fishes) are brought movingly to contemporary life as she describes how Joy Kogawa, a Canadian poet and writer, handed out cash to her audience and realized an overwhelming monetary return which was then used to support a special project. This gave Leddy a precious insight into how the original biblical event might have occurred and grew in the telling.

The author has concerns about how spirituality, even worship, is accommodating itself to the market mentality. She bemoans the fact that to the extent mainline religion is linked to perpetuating the themes of the dominant culture, it loses its power to influence that culture.

*Radical Gratitude* is not a game plan for revising the underlying values of modern life and restructuring the American economy. It is much more insidious than that. It speaks to the heart quietly and unobtrusively, but poignantly. Much of this can be shared in small groups. Before long, significant changes in the way the world works might actually occur. ■

*Continued from page 8*

sadly absent. At the same time I realize that this church couldn't be my church home because my theological perspectives are not embraced there and would never utilize my full set of spiritual gifts. I'm uncertain about where this leaves me.

Increasingly I find myself frustrated with those in the mainline that want me to condemn this church experience. I can't judge this ministry. It is an awesome ministry. Likewise, I am frustrated with those in this seeker church who are critical of the mainline church experience. There is incredible value in the tradition and experience of the mainline church that must not be ignored by youthful churches like this one. We have much to learn from one another. ■



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