

Build and Sustain Faith Communities by Feeding the Hungry

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You might wonder why anyone would be crazy enough to address the subject of building and sustaining faith communities these days. Based on the sad statistics, it might be easier to talk about techniques for “holding on for dear life” rather than “building” communities. I suppose one of the reasons I was asked to address this topic today was because 25 years ago I helped start and build a healthy, progressive faith community that is still going strong three years after I my retirement. Frankly, just the fact that this liberal UCC church was birthed and survived was a bit of an anomaly in the eighties and nineties. The additional fact that this church grew to well over three hundred active participants made me somewhat of a celebrity in our denomination. So I presume that was one of the reasons that the planning committee wanted me to speak on this subject today.

However what no one told you, since I seldom mention this on my resume, was that while I was working 60-80 hours a week to build and sustain this mid-size church that had three building programs, multiple staff changes, and huge turnover due in large part to the transient nature of the general population...what no one told you was that during the same time I struggled to help grow this midsize church, seven other conservative ministers started new churches within twenty miles that grew into mega churches with at least 2,000 members each. Four of them purport to have more than 5,000 members and the largest one is the famous Saddleback Community church with a reported 20,000 official members and another 25,000 “seekers” that attend weekly. Now what is going on here? So this is the reason I want to be here today. I want to spend time with a group of people who were willing to rethink everything about how we create progressive faith communities these days.

Before I get too far into my comments I want to be upfront with you. Although I head up an organization that is committed to helping congregations find ways to enter into the 21st century, theologically, spiritually and socially, by providing worship materials, sermon suggestions, reading lists, book reviews, original articles, and the opportunity for churches to market themselves on our extremely active website, I wonder if we are simply rearranging the chairs on the deck of the Titanic and still arguing over what music we want the band to play. I am not certain what the future of the church really is, at least as we know it, regardless of how we might change the worship format, become more open and affirming, more liberal, more pluralistic, or even more entertaining. The one thing we know for certain is that we are in the midst of changing times, and if we

continue to do things the way we have always done them we can only expect the same sad results.

Phyllis Tickle, someone who I believe has her finger on the pulse of church these days, stated in an interview last year that “*every 500 years the church has a giant rummage sale. Christianity is in the midst of a new Reformation that will radically remake the faith.*” Tickle has gone on to say that she is not certain what Christianity is going to look like in the next 50 years or how many churches will be left by the end of the century. She presumes that it will be a very different landscape.

I would agree with the assessment for mainline churches in the U.S. at least. We are losing members and closing churches in every major denomination. If the Catholic Church didn't keep sending us some of their best and brightest, our church rolls would be falling faster than they are now. Our denominational executives are now hiring church growth experts and marketing managers to try and stem the losses but no one seems to have come up with any substantive ideas. It is clearly a changing and confusing world.

First, let me address what I believe is our primary challenge.

Finding the Purpose

About twelve years ago, James Collins and Jerry Porras, two highly respected professors from Stanford University Graduate School of Business wrote a book called **Built to Last**. The book was based on a six year study they conducted on exceptional and long-lasting major corporations as compared with other companies that were not so exceptional and either faltered or failed. They wanted to know if they could identify any common characteristics in these exceptional companies. They discovered that these special companies all had three things in common. But the most important thing that they found was that these organizations, from the secretary to the CEO, everyone understood the fundamental reason for the organization's existence. Each and every one of the participants could articulate the organization's *purpose* for existence. The companies that failed had one thing in common. They lacked a clear understanding of their inherent purpose.

I suspect today's liberal church is more like the failed companies in the Collins/Porras study than anything else. And, I believe if there is to be any hope for building and sustaining faith communities, we must confess that we no longer know what the *purpose* of the church is supposed to be. If you think large corporations have nothing to do with the church, you should know that James Collins has gone on to become a well paid consultant to some of the largest mega churches in the country.

Do you think we know why we do what we do? Do your own experiment sometime. Gather a group of your clergy colleagues or lay leaders over a cup of coffee or glass of wine and ask the question, “What do you think the primary *purpose* of church is today?” I have done this dozens of times and the results are always the same...a lot of confusion and lack of clarity. I have found that most people revert to old and tired language that has held no meaning for them or for most people in their churches for years. At best they provide a tepid list of activities that might occur during a month at their church. Certainly these words seldom have meaning for those hungry seekers who are searching positive spiritual experience.

You see, for over fifteen hundred years, everyone in the church knew why the church was in business. The church had the exclusive keys to the kingdom. The church sold the only tickets to salvation. The church was the only broker for that “life after death” atonement pass. Most mainline churches gave up that lofty presumption decades ago. Since then, I believe most of our churches have been a bit muddled about what they are doing except to be “a really neat church.” The results have often been a tepid Christology, a dead theology, and a lack of the mystical and spiritual. We complain about fewer and fewer joining us for the communion meal, but fail to notice that we are serving a low nutritional meal.

We now have two full generations of young adults who have grown up with the opportunity to make choices-choices about which TV programs they will watch, which kind of computers they want, what clothes they will wear, which sports they will play, and even what schools they will attend. They have grown with lots of discretionary time and money. But in the US approximately 60% all young adults between the ages of 18-25 have never been in a church, a synagogue or a temple. They have learned how to make utilitarian decisions. If you can not give them a good reason for spending their time and money with your congregation, they will by nature and training do something else with both. So...can we clearly articulate a reason that someone would want to come to our faith community? What is our purpose for being in business?

C. Kirk Hadaway, a former executive with the United Church of Christ, now with the Episcopalians, wrote an excellent and insightful book, **Behold I Do A New Thing**, a few years ago. He begins his book with the question, “*What is the business of the church?*” He then goes on to answer his own question. “*The purpose of the church is to transform people - to bring down their self-constructed walls, dissolve their delusions and help them see God.*”

I would suggest that this is a good starting point. If we cannot tell someone that our way, our church, our community, the Christian path affords them the opportunity to make a positive change, transformation even, in their lives, then

what do we have to offer them? If we cannot tell them that we have a way for them to see things and hear things differently, then why should they do it? If we cannot show them they may experience something in our community that will change them positively, what do we have to offer? I suppose the important question is: “Do you believe you have something to offer them in your faith community?”

In spite of Sam Harris’ belief that we are living in the era of the End of Faith, the title of his book, all indications are that there is still a demand for much of what we do and what we could do. Let’s take a closer look at that demand.

Signs of the Hunger

While we are boarding up our churches, it appears that there is still a growing hunger for some form of spiritual expression in community. Books on spirituality, of all different persuasions and types, is still one of the top selling categories in the nation. Literally millions and millions of books on eastern religions, meditation, channeling, and combined spiritual practices continue to be sold every year in our country. Names like Gary Zuckav, Joan Borysenko, Michel Beckwith, Joy Brugh all promoting an alternative spiritual synthesis have become better known and have sold more books than most of our finest Christian theologians. Gary Zukav’s books alone have sold in excess of 5,000,000 copies world wide and have been translated into 16 languages.

I find the phenomenon of the vast number of small groups that are forming all over our country even more interesting. In large part, these folks self-organize to study, to meditate, and to talk about their understanding of spirituality. They are seeking ways to lead more ethical, meaningful, purposeful, and abundant lives. In the process, they are to creating spiritually intimate communities without buildings, preachers and bishops, and without creeds or formal belief systems. At this point, it is happening without organization or structure. And, I hope we can leave that way.

Wade Clarke Roof, sociologist and well-known commentator on religious trends in the United States wrote in his book **Spiritual Market Place** (1999), that unlike the past “*popular religious culture is more diffused, less contained by formal religious structures.*”

This phenomenon has not gone unnoticed by other scholars. Nearly ten years ago the former minister, David Elkins, wrote a book titled **Beyond Religion**. The stated goal of his book was to weave together “*alternative paths for building a spiritual life outside the walls of traditional religion.*” He referred to the “millions of Americans who have left traditional religion” and are now finding

other ways to satisfy their spiritual hunger in order to find their soul. Since Elkins' book, there have been several other studies published tracking this shift.

James Herrick in his book The Making of the New Spirituality (2003) tracks this shift from its roots and suggests that this new spirituality is the wave of the future. Herrick examines contemporary books, speeches, music, movies, plays, interviews, and websites among other things and demonstrates what he refers to as the dismantling of the old view of spirituality and religion and creating a brand new one that is both "*eclectic and diffuse.*"

UK scholars, Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead in their book, The Spiritual Revolution-why religion is giving way to spirituality, provide some hard data about how and why this change is going on. While most of their research was done in Great Britain, their conclusions, I believe, speak volumes to the rest of us. Like others, they concluded that spiritualities which engage the depths of personal experience are attracting more adherents than religions that require conformity to a higher truth or ancient beliefs.

What all of these authors have found in common is an apparent hunger for spirituality of some nature which churches in large part are not feeding. The folks who do show up in our churches, hungry for a spiritual experience, usually leave without even having heard the spiritual dinner bell. They come searching for authentic community, and we give them committees; they come looking for a path, and we give them a metaphoric jungle; they come looking for peace, and we offer them church conflict; and they come looking transformation, and we give them tradition.

I recently returned from Maui in the Hawaiian Islands with my family. While there, my youngest daughter and her husband invited me to go to one of their favorite beaches where a large group of people gather every Sunday evening before sunset. I was surprised by the number of people, several hundred and by the diversity in age and color. There was a large group of people rhythmically beating drums together. You could hear them from a long distance seemingly inviting us to join them. People of all sizes and shapes were dancing in the sand, playing games, and talking. As the sun began to settle into the water the drums got quieter and everyone, as if instructed, grew quiet and together we all watched the sun settle into the water. Then everyone left. As we walked back to our car my 30 year old daughter turned to me and said: "Dad that is the kind of church I wish I could find at home. Maybe that is the spiritual church of the future you are always talking about."

So how do we feed this hunger that seems to be growing as our churches seem to be slowing? I spent the next several days pondering her statement wondering what was there that was so attractive.

Defining Spirituality

I suppose the first thing that a faith community of the future will have to do is to define what is meant by spirituality in that community. It is becoming more and more common to hear, “I am not religious, but I am spiritual.” I have discovered that when you ask someone what they mean by spiritual all kinds of things come out. It is not easy to define this word. After all, we are talking about *ruwach*, *pneuma*, breath, wind, air, and something non-material. The author of the Gospel of John recognized this challenge when he offered an explanation of the meaning *spirit* and attributed the words to Jesus: “*The Spirit is like the wind. We can hear the sound of it but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.*”

While one can find literally dozens of definitions of spirituality, there are common denominators. The most common understanding of *spirituality* is an experience of some strong connection—a connection to something greater than oneself (beyond ego) and connection to the “Other” and others. What is important for the faith community of the future is to begin to find language to comfortably talk about spirituality. After all, people are already talking about it outside our churches. It will become the task of the future faith communities to define and to continue to refine what that community means by the word spirituality.

Develop vital, interactive, and pluralistic celebrations of life

More important than talking about spiritualities, faith communities of the future will need to create ways to “experience” spirituality. They will need to create spiritual practices which engage the depths of personal experience, rather than religious expressions that require conformity to a higher truth or ancient beliefs. In these faith communities of the future, every participant will know and understand that spiritual experience is the purpose and at the center of everything that they do—that is, to find ways to *experience* the absolute connectedness that transcends all life. It will mean finding ways to experience the “thin places,” as Marcus Borg calls those holy moments. It will mean touching or experiencing the Wholeness of All Life.

Certainly there will be regular celebrations of life (formerly called worship services), but they will be participatory, expressive, and infused with art. They will include periods of intentional silence and will be full of opportunities to sing, dance, drum, and/or chant. The day of 20 minute sermons, stand up/sit down rituals, dead hymns and language that no longer fits our understanding of God or Christ died decades ago. Ancient religious metaphors are both confusing and can be counter-productive. New ones will need to be created and

incorporated into the life of the community. We will no longer be comfortable staring at the back of someone's head while listening to the educated minister drone on about what God wants us to do based on his or hers interpretation of ancient biblical laws of God.

These celebrations may reclaim ancient church rituals, but utilize non-Christian rituals as well. They will be pluralistic, freely drawing from both the teachings as well as the rituals of other traditions. They will be full of practices that engage the depths of personal experience through intentional silence, active participation, rhythms, and afford ample opportunities for spontaneous joy.

Offer a Clear Path

Jesus was first and foremost a teacher of a way of living and a way of being that could lead one to the spiritual experience of what he called the Kingdom of God or what today we might refer to it as God's Realm. I suggest that we let him be that teacher again. His path was both internal as well as external. We have done a great job of deconstructing Jesus of the creeds from the Jesus of history over the last few decades, but we have done a very poor job of reconstructing a cogent understanding of what the historical Jesus was actually teaching. We have to ask why was he so compelling; what was he teaching that created such devoted disciples?

Without getting into the scholarly arguments about what is authentic or what is not authentic, it seems to me that we can map out some basic teachings that come directly or indirectly from Jesus and are intended as steps to an experience of the Realm of God. There seems to be no question that as far as the early disciples were concerned, living this way led to an experience of this Realm. It could therefore be understood that someone comes to this community like the "rich man" came to Jesus and asking, "How can I experience the Realm of God, Lord?"

These teachings are not necessarily complete or unique to Jesus. I suggest that we will treat these teachings not as "*oughts*" or laws that had to be followed in order to please a heavenly God, but rather as *opportunities* to experience the Realm of God. One of the most common sayings of Jesus was "go and do likewise." Although I am certain that he practiced a disciplined meditative life, he also was "doing" and "being." He was willing to put his life at risk on behalf of others. His lesson for progressives continues to be "go and do likewise" as part of the spiritual journey.

So what are some of the teachings we will be practicing with due diligence in these new faith communities? First, I believe, will be learning to *trust a universe* that will always provide what we need? Second, learning to *repent* when we do

something that brings harm to another or to ourselves; that is to take responsibilities for what we have done, make amends and change our actions in the future. Third, might be *forgiving* those who we feel have done harm to us and forgiving even our enemies. Forth, would be releasing our *judgment and prejudice* of others so that might be free of debilitating judgment of ourselves. Fifth, might be learning to *love with compassion* in a way that breaks down all barriers, all tribal boundaries, and all distinctions so that we might see every individual with divine eyes as brothers and sisters. Sixth, would be learning to live with a *generous heart* in this competitive world that honors what you have and what you control. Seventh, might be learning *to live without fear or anxiety*...fear of the future, fear of the past...learning to live in the “eternal now” as Paul Tillich referred to it. And finally, we might learn how to make *celebration* a compelling part of life. We have been given a path so that we might experience joy. I wonder sometimes, if the visitors to our churches wonder; “And where is the joy?”

The teachers of the future will know from their own experience that this path can be transforming and freeing and lead to an experience of oneness, wholeness, and the Divine because they live it. In other words, the “teachers of the way” will have to know not only the sheet music but will also need to practice it. Teachers of the future will no longer be standing up on high platforms, looking down on the masses, but will have to walk the talk with their spiritual partners, members of their communities. Teachers of the future will have to be accountable to their community just like everyone else.

Develop Community and Personal Ethics

While ethics may seem like a natural product of Jesus’ teaching, all too often we avoid being ethically accountable to our community and to ourselves. For lot of observers today Christian ethics is a sad joke. But, the idea that we are going to develop spiritual practices without attention to ethics is both a waste and is contrary to Jesus’ teachings. Unless our spiritual practices lead to a change in our behavior, they are in large part wasted. The faith communities of the future will make the creation of ethical behavior a central part of what they are as a community. These communities will study, discuss, create, and practice the path of Jesus. In short, ethical living will be a result of changes they make on the internally rather than an adherence to an ancient law or mandate.

Not only will changes include how we treat each other, treat the stranger even the enemy, but in community it will include how leadership is created and treated. These communities will be willing to tackle challenging issues such as sexual or political ethics without being dependent on outdated “laws” from a society that has little life experience so different than from our own. Instead they will depend on “ethics of the heart” as an outgrowth of their experience of the

Realm of God. They will create ethical codes out of their experience of the “Oneness of Life” and being fully human at the same time.

Building sacred small groups

I am certain that you are all aware of the often reported success of cell groups in mega-churches to a point of nausea. After a decade of telling mainline churches that we should all start cell group programs, one church growth guru, Lyle Schaller finally admitted that the cell group model does not work for liberal churches. The problem, he told us, was that our love for community is greater than our zeal to bring someone to Jesus. We apparently do not like to split our groups up once they get over twelve people.

However we can learn something from the success of those mega-church cell group communities. They demonstrate a hunger for authentic community - a non-judging group of people who are willing to share some of their most important ideas, dreams, fears and questions of life. There many ways to form small groups. They can be formed around books, hobbies, interests or service. Maybe the most important thing these small groups should be able to do is have honest conversations about their faith. In other words, if a church does not provide and nurture opportunities for people to have theological discourse that involves their practical life experiences, it has failed to meet its primary responsibility.

But in the future faith communities will be also be designed to offer some specific teachings of a way to live one’s life in a more fulfilling way, to have moments of silence and time for personal sharing. They will build mutual accountability. They will include conversations about ethical behavior and how to improve our own actions. This can include confessions about where we have fallen short of our expectations and our plans to change. Each participant will be encouraged to be accountable and to seek the divine in each other. All of this can lead to a new level of intimacy and an opportunity to know and be known at the deepest level. The result can be the experience of what Scott Peck called “authentic community” or what I would call transforming models of God’s realm.

Developing a Theology with Intellectual Integrity

It is time for us to let go of the God in the heavens who randomly answers our prayers. In his latest book, *Jesus for the Non-Religious*, Bishop Spong writes, “*I, for one, can no longer pretend that the supernatural theistic God of yesterday is still real, still waiting for an opportunity to intervene in human history in a miraculous way.*” (pg 67)

Today we have some wonderful scholars like Don Cuppitt, Lloyd Geering, Trevor Greenfield, Jack Spong and others who are giving us new models and language that will allow us to comfortably move into the mystery away from our ancient, superstitious language and images of that which we so casually call God.

Faith communities in the future will at least be clear about what they do not mean by God. Together these communities will find ways with integrity to describe a faith in the unknowable. The participants of these faith communities will grow more comfortable living with the mysteries of creation and will be quite satisfied with a dimly lit path that might lead to an experience of the holy.

Connect our Spirituality with the Earth

The faith communities of the future will connect their spiritual practices with love of the Earth. In these spiritual communities, car pools, recycling, use of hybrids and unscented laundry soap will not be enough. They will develop a strong connection with mother earth in their personal and well as their communal activities. These communities will look upon the care of the earth as part of their spiritual practice, experiencing awe of the beauty and the rhythms of nature through retreats, field trips and ecological awareness in their own areas. They will come to see Mother Earth as the awesome provider and will come to feel the same compassion for the earth as we all might have for any abused other creature.

Some day these faith communities may be able to recite from the United Nations Environmental Sabbath prayer. The last verse reads;

*We join with the earth and with each other,
We join together as many and diverse expressions
Of one loving Mystery: for the healing of the Earth and the renewal of all life.*

The love and respect for Earth will be played out in their lifestyles, their rituals at home and in community, their treatment of others and their interactions with their society. Their love of earth will result in direct social activism and positive ways of living in alternative ways.

Conclusion:

These are just some of characteristics that I am certain we will see in the churches or faith communities of the future. Why can I feel so certain that these things will happen? Because, you see they are already happening. The future is now. I have observed directly or indirectly all of these characteristics in some

very exciting churches across the country. I see it happening in many of these small groups that are forming out of their own volition.

So let me quickly review one more time these positive characteristics.

Finding the Purpose

Defining Spirituality

Develop vital, interactive and pluralistic celebrations of life

Offer a Clear Path to Grow

Develop Community and Personal Ethics

Building sacred small groups

Developing a Theology with Intellectual Integrity

Connecting Spirituality with the Earth

I believe this leads to some difficult questions for all of us; “How far are we willing to go?” “What must we hang on to?” “What are willing to risk?” These can be challenging and even scary times depending on how we approach the future. But I want to close with a quote from one of our new board members, Ian Lawton:

“Now that ancient systems of belief have been dismantled by the Enlightenment and the Jesus Seminar and more recently the New Atheists, the role of Progressive Christianity is to rebuild a religious expression that is open and honest, is consistent with science and new discovery, and has enough imagination to build a vision of a more peaceful and just world. It is a wonderful time. It is a time of liberation. It is time to be bold and creative.”