

## Part 1 : *Learning Poetry in a Prose Flattened World*

*We think much less than what we know;  
We know much less than what we love;  
We love much less than what there is;  
And to this precise extent  
We are much less than what we are.<sup>1</sup>*

These are times of unparalleled opportunity: times of great unrest and great risk. These are times of great insecurity where “love is now mingled with grief” (Galadriel in “The Fellowship of the Ring” by Peter Jackson.)

The legacy of Constantine and of the Enlightenment gave us a church of the center, a church allied with the dominant forms of economic, intellectual, cultural and social life. This dominant text was marked by compromise.<sup>2</sup> The church made claims to certainty, but also had to accept responsibility for certitudes in support of the empire. We ended with compromise, and rationalization of the Gospel that was “worldly wisdom,” devoid of life and power. Walter Brueggemann comments that

“We all have a hunger for certitude, and the problem is that the Gospel is not about certitude, it's about fidelity... fidelity is a relational category and certitude is a flat, mechanical category. So we have to acknowledge our thirst for certitude and then recognize that if you had all the certitudes in the world it would not make the quality of your life any better because what we must have is fidelity.”<sup>3</sup>

In this postmodern transition we are increasingly suspicious of the scripting of reality that has been transmitted to us by a church immersed in culture. We are becoming aware that the most faithful expressions of kingdom life are not at the center, but at the margins of society, and that power subverts faithfulness.

We shouldn't be surprised; it has always been so. When the scholastics were busy making dogmatic formulations, the monastics (represented by Bernard of Clairvaux) were declaring that love was the only path to knowledge. As the late medieval period witnessed the full marriage of the State/Church, Peter Waldo, the Lollards, Wycliffe, Francis and Claire, and others arose, largely as lay movements (i.e. without the stamp of approval of the Church/State): the Waldensians, the Lollards, the Brothers of the Common Life and others.

When Luther stopped short of certain reforms, the radical reformers kept moving. As the “emergent” church of their day, the Anabaptists arose on the margins, stepping outside the Constantinian/Christendom web; they relied on many of the insights of the previously mentioned groups, especially the Brothers of the Common Life. By then the Enlightenment was on the rise as the Religious Society of Friends came on the scene in Great Britain.

---

<sup>1</sup> R.D. Laing, *The Politics of Experience* (London: Penguin Books, 1967)

<sup>2</sup> See the discussion in Walter Brueggemann, *Cadences of Home* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997) 24-30 and also Stuart Murray, *Church After Christendom*, (London: Paternoster Press, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> Walter Brueggemann. Source Unknown.

From the Anabaptists we learn that God's kingdom is opposed to the powers of the world. In *Resident Aliens*, Hauerwas and Willimon state, "We are not suggesting that all Christians from 313 to 1963 have been unfaithful...Moreover, we are aware that from 313 to 1963 many Christians have found ways to dissent from the coercive measures necessary to ensure social order in the name of Christ. What we are saying is that in the twilight of that world, we have an opportunity to discover what has and always is the case – that the church, as those called out by God, embodies a social alternative that the world cannot on its own terms know (pg 17ff)." <sup>4</sup>

### From the Center to the Margins

*What if the highest destination  
of any human life  
Was not a place that you could reach if  
you had to climb  
Wasn't up above like heaven  
So no need to fly at all  
What if to reach the highest place  
you had to fall.* <sup>5</sup>

As ministry decentralizes.. moves to homes, malls, pubs.. the internet.. fractal networks and reduced structure... and as we move away from positions and roles and titles to functional leadership, we are learning to lead from the margins.

Greater numbers of people are providing leadership today because they are leading from unusual places. They often lack resources and formal training, but are willing to risk responding to the call of God in their lives. They often lack the legitimation of established structures and well-funded organizations, but they have the approval of God.

While this movement to the margins is outwardly a shift in position, it is also a shift in the locus of authority. The choice to abandon worldly status is clearly articulated by Mark Strom in "Reframing Paul," as a call to a new social reality:

Academic, congregational and denominational life functions along clear lines of rank, status and honour. We *preach* that the gospel has ended elitism, but we rarely allow the implications to go beyond *ideas*. Paul, however, *actually* stepped down in the world.

Paul urged leaders to imitate his personal example of how the message of Jesus inverted status... He refused to show favoritism towards individuals or *ekklesiai*. The gospel offered him rights, but he refused them. Christ was *not* a means to a career. Yet the agendas and processes of maintaining and reforming evangelical life and thought remain the domain of professional scholars and clergy. Their ministry *is* their career.

Dying and rising with Christ *meant* status reversal. In Paul's case, he deliberately stepped down in the world. We must not romanticize this choice. He felt the shame of it amongst his peers and potential patrons, yet held it as the mark of his sincerity. <sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Stanley Grenz. *Beyond Foundationalism*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000)

<sup>5</sup> Peter Mayer, "Fall." From the CD "Million Year Mind," 2003.

<sup>6</sup> Mark Strom, *Reframing Our Conversation with Paul* (Deerfield, IL: IVP, 2000)

Where once leadership was seen to come from the front, from appointed persons in defined roles, from paid professionals, and from the few to the many, now leadership often comes from the one walking beside us. Instead of the Wizard, it is Dorothy who has wisdom. Instead of Aragorn or Gandalf, it is Frodo whose obedience may be the fulcrum for change.

The implication is a relocation of authority and the disentanglement of leadership from authority. We won't attempt a definition of leadership; rather I invite you to come along on a partnership in discovery. We are searching for wisdom from the margins.

"Fresh expressions of the church will come from the margins of society, where they will radically reshape both our understanding of the church and the gospel"<sup>7</sup>

As we live out new ways of leading faithful communities,

- Instead of leading from over, we lead from among.
- Instead of leading from certainty, we lead by exploration, cooperation and faith.
- Instead of leading from power, we lead in emptiness depending on Jesus
- Instead of leading from a plan, we lead with attention
- Instead of leading as managers, we lead as mystics and poets, "speaking poetry in a prose flattened world" and articulating a common future
- Instead of leading compulsively, we lead with inner freedom
- Instead of leading from the center, we lead from the margins.

## Part 2: Refilling Stone Jars

Chris Erdman retells the story of the wedding at Cana in his article "Refilling Stone Jars." Chris notes that the party is over for the church in our day... we are out of wine. In Cana the hosts themselves may never have found out; but those on the fringes knew and as a result witnessed a miracle.

Those hosting the party thought they were in charge—hosts can be denominational executives, the General Assembly, Synods, Presbyteries, and Sessions; hosts can be power players in the congregation; hosts can be pastors; hosts can be dominant cultures. The point is, regardless of who the hosts are, they may be so busy with their "hosting" of the party and with their anxiety over its premature ending, and so angry over the loss of their privileged position of power, that they miss a holy transaction.

This is good news for preachers like me. It lashed me to the mast, and stopped my ears against the siren voices. I'm told that hosts—the big important people with much to do— don't know where the new wine comes from (v. 9). I'm told that all this grace is transacted quietly, out-of-the-way, hidden from the main attraction of the day. Neither hosts nor guests are privy to the work of Jesus and his servants— those little preachers like me who carry the Word week in and week out.

There is gospel here. It hints at the Incarnation itself: an infant, born to an unwed mother, far from the busyness and self-importance of the hosts, the Palace politicians and Temple priests. I like to think that the Christians who early listened to this story liked it very much... Hearing it, they recognized that the wonderful thing taking place in and through Jesus Christ happened with hardly a ripple in the vast ocean of the Roman Empire. Water was becoming wine, God was on the move, a new day was dawning, God's converting power was making old things new, and neither the High

---

<sup>7</sup> Craig Van Gelder. "Response to The Haze of Christendom," Online <http://www.allelon.org>, May, 2004

Priest in Jerusalem nor Caesar in Rome were in on it. But they were, these little Christians, most of them poor and insignificant. The little preachers “who had drawn the water *knew*,” . . . *they knew!*<sup>8</sup>

As we find ourselves excluded from the center of cultural life, we need to pay attention to the divine drama that occurs around us in everyday, ordinary, incarnational ways. Our faith will be more about conversations and less about events, more about smallness and less about big buildings, more about ordinary people living kingdom lives, and less about charismatic leaders and their sweeping visions. As we find God in the ordinary stuff of life, we can learn to pay attention to small miracles. Life on the fringes can be vital and dramatic life if we reshape our perspective.

### From Christendom to Post-Christendom

"One of the most important lessons from history is that the renewal of church always comes from fringes, and we mean ALWAYS. And it is the movements of mission that in turn create movements of renewal... It is this radical openness to, and engagement with, the margins that so often brings that needed inrush of new thinking, acting and feeling to Jesus' people.

"It is so often the culture of the church brought about through various social forces that suppresses and marginalizes people who are different.. if you are inclined to doubt this observation, consider our real tradition as a missionary people stems from the life and work of Jesus who was himself a marginalized person and who hung out with marginalized people..."<sup>9</sup>

For eight summers I worked as a fishing guide in the tidal waters of British Columbia. These waters are renowned for their powerful currents.. quiet waters between small islands are transformed into mighty rivers in a matter of hours, with speeds up to ten knots.

One of the products of this dynamic flow of water is the back-eddy. Back-eddies gather small creatures that are food for large fish. We frequented the back-eddies in search of one of the world's great sport fish.. the silvery salmon.

As we sat in our small boats day after day, we would watch larger ships moving by in the mainstream. Little did they know that with their lines streaming out behind them, riding high as they moved along at ten to twelve knots, they were unlikely to catch anything. We fishing guides knew that the sport fish we sought loved to frequent the margins of the back eddies, where the powerful main current trapped the shrimp and herring on which they loved to feed. We sank our lines deep in the current with heavy weights in a style called “mooching.” We held our boats steady against the whirling currents and kept our lines hanging straight down.

We often felt envious of the comfortable cruisers as they sailed on by, tourists waving from sun-drenched decks, usually with cocktails in hand. It looked so comfortable and easy.. the three or four large fishing poles played out their lines, streaming in great lengths in their wake.

We sometimes felt we were going nowhere. Our small boats moved in small circles as we mooched along the edge of the rapids. But we caught lots of fish, and often large fish.

---

<sup>8</sup> Chris Eerdman. “Refilling Stone Jars.” GOCN Newsletter, Vol.13, Nos. 3&4, September/December, 2001.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003) 194.

We could have allowed ourselves to be defined by the main stream. We could have allowed our small boats to imitate the larger ships. We too could have had lines streaming out behind us, *pina-coladas* in hand.. but we had more serious work to do. We were there to fish.

*This morning outside I stood  
And saw a little red-winged bird  
Shining like a burning bush  
Singing like a scripture verse  
It made me want to bow my head.  
and I remember when church let out -  
how things have changed since then,  
everything is holy now.<sup>10</sup>*

It's tough not to be defined by the main stream. The big money is tied up in big ships. But we learned that though the large boats were impressive and seemed to be going somewhere, they were really only useful for tourists. The serious fishermen knew this, and they hired us in our small boats to fight the currents for the fish they sought.

In the Christendom era the church was at the center, and Christian leaders were usually heard as important voices in the culture. Now, however, we are increasingly on the fringes and our story is heard as just one more possible description of reality. Stuart Murray describes this transition as one from the center to the margins, from majority to minority, from settlers to sojourners, from privilege to plurality, from maintenance to mission and from institution to movement. Our opportunity is to rediscover the dynamic of our faith as a missional movement.<sup>11</sup>

### Part 3: When Big Becomes Small

Never ordained, I have stood with the greater mass of God's people, granting a perspective that those in the hierarchy rarely achieve. The methods used to separate one class of believer from another are legion: clothing, education, salary, offices, parking stalls, secretaries and titles. Sometimes they are more subtle: who has access to the microphone in the meetings?

While Paul calls for us to honor those who labor among us, the kind of honor we have accorded to the clerical role has reinforced a privileged professional class which has largely lost touch with the foundation of community. This in turn has reinforced abstraction, idealism and elitism, leading to the abuse of power. Mark Strom writes,

Paul ... deliberately stepped down in the world. We must not romanticize this choice. He felt the shame of it amongst his peers and potential patrons... Moreover, it played a critical role in the interplay of his life and thought. Tentmaking was critical, even central, to his life and message...

Evangelicalism will not shake its abstraction, idealism and elitism until theologians and clergy are prepared to step down in their worlds... Evangelicalism has its *own* ranks, careers, financial security, marks of prestige, and rewards. Within that world, professional ministry *is* rank and status.

---

<sup>10</sup> Peter Mayer, "Holy Now," From the CD "Million Year Mind," 2003.

<sup>11</sup> Stuart Murray. *Post-Christendom: Church and Mission in a Strange New World*. London: Authentic Media, 2004.

Ministry as profession feeds the pride that separates the seminary and the pulpit from the congregation. It makes Paul abstract.<sup>12</sup>

Rather than seeking to join a profession we need to seek ways to live out the gospel wherever we find ourselves. For two years we met as a church in our home. When we left behind the traditional center (the functions of word and worship and formal structures of participation) the center changed to the people themselves. We all became players, and the whole world was our stage.

At that time we invited a young couple to our home who were struggling in their relationship. Tina's father was an elder in her church, but he was extremely demanding at home. Tina felt she could never be good enough. For a time she tried to please her parents, but eventually she lost hope and gave up. Her sense of self was seriously damaged. She began to believe that she wasn't acceptable to God either.

After we had been together for a few hours, Tina came into our kitchen where my wife was retrieving some clean cutlery. To my wife's surprise, as Tina received some clean forks in her hand she commented on the love she felt in our home. She didn't have to ask if we were Christians, and we didn't have to proclaim it.. she already knew the answer. There was a different feeling among our small group of friends.

Why is it so hard to attain this same experience in western churches?

First, significant relationships tend to decline as an organization grows in size. It becomes more and more difficult to connect personally as organizations increase in size and complexity, and thus community itself becomes a rare commodity. Yet the church is first a community, and only incidentally a congregation. When we fail to be a community, we are not truly a church.

Second, bureaucracy increases as organizations expand, and efficiency and management become the chief concerns.

Christian organizations are created to serve the original divinely given vision of their founder(s). But in the process of building an organization to fulfill that vision, interest groups are formed which, over time, become more concerned with preserving and building up the organization itself than with helping it to serve its original purpose... They have interests such as their own salaries, careers or status, and they use the organization ... as a means to reach their own goals.<sup>13</sup>

Cultural forces push us away from participation and toward professionalism, effectively separating the ordinary people of God from ministry and creating a special class of Christian (clergy). Where such distinctions exist we show that we have not heard Jesus' own teaching on leadership, or Paul's teaching on the nature of the body. Sandra Cronk, a Quaker elder, writes that,

There are problems with the kind of structure which compartmentalizes life into private and professional spheres. This kind of division tends to make ministry a task. It prevents a full relationship with another human being in which redemption can happen.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> Mark Strom, Op Cit.

<sup>13</sup> Leadership Network, Leadership Letter, #29, Summer, 2001.

<sup>14</sup> Sandra Cronk. "Discovering and Nurturing Ministers." In *Festival Quarterly*, Winter/Spring 1989.

Third, large groups organize for safety, not vulnerability. But when “we are weak we are strong,” and it is impossible to build community without vulnerability. “Unless a seed falls into the ground and dies...” When we are strong we tend to remain isolated individuals, without connection points to others, thus denying the mystery of the Cross and the reality that Jesus life is made known in our collective weakness. It is at the point of connection that Jesus is made known (Eph 4).

Gordon Cosby argues for smallness for maximum effect, and that size actually inhibits effectiveness. It works against a community of people being truly counter-cultural, having depth, breaking addictions to the culture, and truly witnessing to the gospel. “Large numbers,” he says, “tend almost inevitably toward depersonalization and institutionalism, toward a lessening of commitment. So we resist the temptation to power through numbers.”<sup>15</sup>

Hampered by large groups, we are accustomed to giving weight to the words of only a few, to those with education, status, and titles. How do we make the shift to attend to wisdom? Peter Senge writes,

In the knowledge era, we will finally have to surrender the myth of leaders as isolated heroes commanding their organizations from on high. Top-down directives, even when they are implemented, reinforce an environment of fear, distrust, and internal competitiveness that reduces collaboration and cooperation. They foster compliance instead of commitment, yet only genuine commitment can bring about the courage, imagination, patience, and perseverance necessary in a knowledge-creating organization. For those reasons, leadership in the future will be distributed among diverse individuals and teams who share responsibility for creating the organization's future.  
<sup>16</sup>

While “team” language is very popular, a team is not the same as a community.<sup>17</sup> When five-fold gifting is functioning in a community environment, it can be very difficult to tell who is leading. Leaders may be invisible, encouraging, empowering, and equipping as they work alongside others sharing similar tasks.

There are two types of ministry environment. In one environment a team or teams are formed to assist leaders to develop and implement their vision (purpose). In the second environment a community is formed around a shared sense of passion (belonging). In the team environment success is understood as empowering the group to reach agreed goals. In the community environment success is understood as empowering individuals to belong and to reach their creative potential.

In the team environment roles tend to be set in concrete and leaders are indispensable. In the community environment leaders may be invisible, and leadership roles and functions are often shared. At different times in the life of the community, depending on need and context and the empowerment of the Spirit, various ones take the lead depending on their competencies, deferring to the voice of the Lord. The key qualities in this context are those of Dorothy rather than the Wizard<sup>18</sup>: humility and discernment.

When you are on the margins, small is the new big.

---

<sup>15</sup> Gordon Cosby. Interview with Jeff Bailey in *Cutting Edge Magazine*, Fall, 2001. Online <http://www.vineyardusa.org>

<sup>16</sup> Peter Senge. *The Fifth Discipline*. New York: Doubleday, 1994.

<sup>17</sup> Joseph Myers. *The Search to Belong*. El Cajon, C: EmergentYS, 2003.

<sup>18</sup> Brian McLaren. “Dorothy on Leadership,” (Rev. Magazine, Nov/Dec 2000)

## Part 4: Holding Space

The leadership style that once dominated our culture is becoming passé. Instead of the Lone Ranger, we have Frodo: the Clint Eastwoods and Sylvester Stallones are replaced by ordinary men. Frodo and Aragorn (*The Lord of the Rings*) and Neo (the Matrix) are self-questioning types who rely on those around them for strength, clarity and purpose. Indeed, while they have a sense of the need and a willingness to sacrifice themselves, they may not even know the first step on the journey.

*"I will carry the Ring to Mordor.. though I do not know the way."* <sup>19</sup>

This is a far cry from the self-assured presentation of the John Maxwells and Rick Warrens of the world. It is equally distant from the Greek heroic journey (see James Houston's recent work, *"The Mentored Life"*<sup>20</sup>.) Indeed, the contrast we are seeing is sharper the further we travel along the road from modernity to post-modernity.

A new kind of leadership is rising within the emerging church. Leadership is no longer about power, confidence, knowledge, or position. Jen Lemen commented online about a kind of leadership that feels more like friendship.

"I wonder if the point of the post-whatever-pastor is simply about holding space. Not space so you can examine me and try to be just like me as your leader, but space so that you can think about who you need to become, about who you are already in relationship to this alternate reality we call the kingdom.

"The leader just shows you how not to be too afraid while you do that, how to relax a little, how to plunge ahead into chaos lighthearted and pull yourself out of the fire unscathed. A leader shows you by living beside you what it means to be terrified yet faithful, doubtful yet full of hope. The point isn't the fine example or the tour guided activities, it's the transparency that tells you that you can love god and somehow not be destroyed, that you can go to the brink of despair and be pulled back by the sages at the margins--children, strangers and bums. and that the leader herself is really you, just in a different place.

"I think those of us who are the most compelled to lead are more often than not the ones most desperate for a change, the ones convinced that things must get better lest our souls die. We are certain that hope abounds just around the bend. We are sure to the point of poor judgment that good things can happen and will, if we don't give up. If we're lucky, we're not too smart and rarely recognized for much beyond our zeal. Others see our foolishness and follow along anyway, hoping against hope that we are right. that the kingdom is real and not a dream, locked far, far away in the deepest parts of our hearts, never to see the light of day." <sup>21</sup>

Wow.. that sounds very much like Paul:

*For God has chosen the foolish things of the world  
To put to shame the things that are wise.  
And God has chosen the weak things of the world  
To put to shame the things which are mighty (1 Cor. 1 v.27).*

---

<sup>19</sup> Frodo in Peter Jackson's "The Fellowship of the Ring." New Line Cinema, 2001.

<sup>20</sup> James Houston. *The Mentored Life*. NavPress, 2002.

<sup>21</sup> Jen Lemen, May, 2004. Online <http://www.jenlemen.com>

Most of Jesus activity was on the margins among marginalized people. The poor have much to teach us because they have nothing to protect. If we use marginalization as an opportunity to serve the poor, they will find their voices, and we will learn simplicity and rediscover the power in weakness. This is the downward mobility Jesus chose.

While the cult of leadership is stronger than it has ever been, it's nothing new. Paul warned us against self-promoting prophets and apostles. He warned us against following men because of their popularity or position or their certainty that they had the truth. I recall the prayer of Thomas More: "God grant that I should always pursue the truth; and protect me from those who have found it."

Jen calls us to the importance of "holding space." In doing so, she points to the single most important condition for emergence: emptiness. Peter Mayer's song is profound:

Fall, like a drunkard on your face  
Like a parachuter jumping from a plane  
Fall, like an astronaut from space  
Or an acrobat making a mistake

And what if the sages  
Talking about realms out of reach  
Would memorize the pages of gravity.  
What if getting to the highest place is  
Like learning what you know  
Or like going to where you are now  
Like coming home...

"Fall" by Peter Mayer, from the CD "Million Year Mind"

The way forward is the way down. The way to lead is to serve. In the traditional church it's mostly backwards, and however much we use the right language, it doesn't take a genius to see that it's mostly spin. Few Christian organizations incarnate these values.

None of this means that we do not need strong leaders. But the strength we need is not the power of the celebrity or hero, or the certainty of the fanatic. In 1981 Richard Quebedeaux wrote that,

Because the very foundations of American society, including the family, are crumbling, we MUST seek and find strong leaders. But we need a new kind of leader - beyond the celebrity, beyond the pragmatist - to show us the way to the abundant life, the good life that God originally intended for his children and still longs for us to have.

No medium or method of conveying the Christian gospel can meet people's basic needs for recognition, involvement, worthiness, growth, and indeed salvation itself without the loving give and take of person-to-person interaction over a long period of time. This is what community really means, and this is exactly where popular religion and its leaders are not successful.

In a secular society, in a world where homelessness is the norm, the only way religion can really be "successful" is to provide a home for the homeless -- a family that includes not just my kind of people, but God's kind of people, who love him with everything they have, and who love their neighbor as much

as they love themselves. The church does need to become God's ideal family, both in word and in deed.<sup>22</sup>

## Part 5: the Power in Mystery

*We wake, if ever we wake at all, to mystery. Annie Dillard*

There is a danger in certainty, and a danger in definition -- we can think we have attained to something because we can describe it. Our motivation for intellectual activity is often control. We want to ensure SUCCESS before we even take the first steps forward. We aren't really fond of faith. Margaret Wheatley notes that,

"We often tend to limit our explorations of what's possible by surrounding ourselves with large amounts of information that tell us nothing new. These measures lock us into learning about a predetermined world. They keep us distracted from questioning our experience in a way that could create greater possibilities.

"There is an important humility associated with trying to direct our activities by setting goals or measures. Every act of observation loses more information than it gains. Whatever we decide to notice blinds us to other possibilities. In directing our attention to certain things, we lose awareness of everything else."<sup>23</sup>

The intangibles grip my heart. It's the intangibles in the dance of word and Spirit, and things that defy description that empower the journey. We are going to a city we have not seen, but we pray, "Thy Kingdom come on earth, as it is in heaven."

Leonard Cohen sang,

*You can add up the parts  
But you won't have the sum  
You can strike up the march  
There is no drum  
Every heart  
To love will come  
But like a refugee.. Anthem, 1992*

Whoever leaves something behind is on a journey of discovery to unknown places. Because the journey is a spiritual journey, only the naked can go there.

"People cannot discover new lands until they have the courage to lose sight of the shore."  
Andre Gide

I and my family have faced at least three major transitions in the past ten years. Each time we have to embrace a new level of insecurity; each time we are forced to learn a new level of dependence on the Lord.

---

<sup>22</sup> Richard Quebedeaux. *By What Authority: the Rise of Personality Cults in American Christianity* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1982) 177-183.

<sup>23</sup> Margaret Wheatley. *A Simpler Way* (San Francisco: Barret-Koehler Publications, 1996)

It isn't easy embracing insecurity. It isn't easy leaving our comfort zones, our titles, or our previous understandings behind. Because the goal is a living community we know that it is a place where there are no professionals, only amateurs.. "amati" is Latin for "lover" and professionals are hirelings who arrive with the baggage of identity and status and the need to prove "the bottom line."

This is why it will be unlikely for a denomination to make the transition, though there is hope for individual communities. For the denomination there is always too much to protect, and too much at stake. There are too many established modes and means, and too many with titles and power unwilling to forsake them.

In one "Jesus" movie there is a scene near the end where Jesus appears to His disciples in the upper room. Together they kneel in love and awe as He smiles at them. They are united in worship and in love. There are no "apostles" or "leaders" .. together they are lovers and servants, and in His presence they are all on the same level.

Community and mission are both about love and emptiness of our own agendas. Only those who "forsake all" for the sake of love can reach a city not built with hands.

It is the unknown that defines our existence. We are constantly seeking not just for answers to our questions, but for new questions. We are explorers..<sup>24</sup>

Fritjof Capra writes<sup>25</sup> that there are two dynamics in living organisms: design and emergence. In design we bring our understanding and our goals to the process of building. But in emergence, we bring our emptiness. Like the woman with the empty pots, we invite God to fill the space. Only the empty, the poor, the naked and the disenfranchised can really see clearly, because they have no vested interest and nothing left to lose. This is why Jesus says that we must become as children in order to enter the Kingdom of God, and why it is so hard "for a rich man to enter the kingdom."

Recently as I waited for my wife to return from shopping I was thinking about transitions and learning. I turned on CBC radio, and overheard an interview with a scientist who was talking about Watson and Crick, the two researchers who in 1953 uncovered the mystery of DNA. What struck me about the discussion were two things:

- 1) at the DNA level structure is function. DNA functions by replicating itself.
- 2) both harmony (community) and irreverence (playfulness) are necessary for new paradigms to emerge, because those who are within the system (at authority levels) usually have too much at stake to embrace sweeping change. This means that new paradigms are only discovered/embraced by those on the edge, those who are not afraid to challenge the established wisdom, those willing to ask hard questions and those with nothing to lose.<sup>26</sup>

Jen Leman called us to think about holding space. The physicists who are researching quantum dynamics and who are working with the very smallest particles encountered a mystery regarding the power in matter. No one knows where it comes from. This caused one scientist to theorize that, "Perhaps the power is in the blank spaces."

---

<sup>24</sup> Deep Space Nine, CBS Studios Inc. "Deep Space Nine"

<sup>25</sup> Fritjof Capra, *The Hidden Connections* (Random House, NY: Anchor Books, 2002)

<sup>26</sup> From PBS.org, "DNA's 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary" Margaret Warner interviews Eric Lander.

Some of the dynamics at the heart of body life are difficult to define, and impossible to engineer. As Bruce Cockburn put it,

*Those who know don't have the words to tell,  
Those with the words don't know too well..<sup>27</sup>*

Blank spaces are what we lose when we organize. Blank spaces are those elements of community that are not part of design. In fact, community *itself* is a mystery. You can plan it, organize it and pray for it and still not get it. It requires something spontaneous and unreachable by human effort and thought alone. It requires weakness more than strength, and we aren't very good at weakness. It requires a very personal kind of surrender, and we aren't very good at trusting God. Margaret Wheatley comments in "A Simpler Way,"

"There is a simpler way to organize human endeavor. It requires a new way of being in the world. It requires being in the world without fear. Being in the world with play and creativity. Seeking after what's possible. Being willing to learn and to be surprised.

"This simpler way to organize human endeavor requires a belief that the world is inherently orderly. Life seeks organization. It does not require us to organize it."<sup>28</sup>

## Part 6: Mystics, Poets and Dreamers

Christopher Alexander is an architect who advocates building in process and not from a plan. He argues that this is the ancient way, and that the modern and mechanistic approach demonstrates our lack of spirituality.

Alexander relates that one of the fundamental problems in architecture arises when the building is going up and the designer must make simple choices. For example, should this column be 5" or 6" in diameter? He talked about how the designer's own ego could get in the way of constructing the right building. The question he would finally ask is: "which choice is a greater gift to God?" He continued,

"You can build a building that everyone says is wonderful.. a success.. but does that make it wonderful or a success? No... You can build a building that no one says is wonderful or a success.. but can it be wonderful and a success...? Yes.."<sup>29</sup>

When we reduce truth to formulas or success to size, we are far along the road of idolatry and the worship of technique. We have sold out to the evil Empire, and forgotten that we are strangers and aliens here. Walter Brueggemann has continued to remind us that we are in fact living in times that parallel the exile. In "Finally Comes the Poet," he calls us to a new kind of speech to square off against the reductionism of the age. "To address the issue of truth greatly reduced requires us to be poets who speak against the prose world... Poetic speech is the only proclamation worth doing in a situation of reductionism.... This offer requires special care for words, because the baptized community awaits speech in order to be a faithful people."<sup>30</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup> Bruce Cockburn, "Burden of the Angel Beast," True North Records, 1994.

<sup>28</sup> Margaret Wheatley. *A Simpler Way* ( San Francisco: Barrett-Koehler Publications, 1996)

<sup>29</sup> Interview on CBC Radio, IDEAS. Fall, 2002. Online <http://www.cbc.ca/ideas>

<sup>30</sup> Walter Brueggemann. *Finally Comes the Poet* (Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 1989)

Around the time of Constantine the church which had lived in the heart of its people passed control to managers, most of whom were lackeys of the Empire. It became dangerous to talk about beauty or write poetry after this time, because Beauty and Poetry can inspire dreams of a different world. The rulers of the age knew what the poets had long understood: the pen is mightier than the sword, and a simple idea can inspire revolution.

*All people dream, but not equally.  
Those who dream by night,  
in the dusty recesses of their minds,  
wake in the day to find that it was vanity.  
But the dreamers of the day are dangerous,  
for they may act their dreams with open eyes  
to make it possible.*<sup>31</sup>

Since that time the mainstream of Christendom has been dominated by managers, while the mystics have been marginalized.

When I meet a Buddhist monk, I meet a holy man. When I meet a Christian pastor, I meet a manager.. *A Chinese Businessman traveling in America*

Occasionally, mystics become managers, giving in to the temptations of power. At other times managers arise who are also mystics. Some of these dreamers are marginalized, but some leave their mark on the church by bringing renewal to an old wineskin, or by founding new movements (like Menno Simons, Zinzendorf, Wesley or Wimber). Others are marginalized and embrace it, caring for those around them, and transforming their own small corners of society with the love and grace of Jesus. Some of these marginalized dreamers find themselves with followers, and in turn birth movements of renewal that recover lost components of the gospel, like St. Francis and his brothers.

"Poets make available a future that does not exist as yet; they are eschatologically oriented. From this environment, a missional imagination emerges."<sup>32</sup> In the past disenfranchised poets and priests had little option but to remain on the margins, voices speaking in the silence, alone and without influence. But times have changed...

With the prominence of the Internet, websites like Ginkworld and the Ooze, networks like ALLELON, a multiplicity of forums, and magazines like Reality, Relevant, and Next Wave – we have virtual watering holes where once was desert. Conversations spring up like mushrooms.. and conversations are the fabric of community life. Dreamers and marginalized leaders meet and encourage one another. New ways of being are imagined and performed. Many of these dreamers are involved in innovative efforts that are impacting their neighbors with the gospel, and their combined voices are more than a chorus calling for change: by their example they inspire it.

"If we dream alone, it remains merely a dream. If many dream together, then it is the beginning of a new reality..."<sup>33</sup>

"It is this capacity to articulate a preferred future based on a common moral vision that allows people to dream again..."<sup>34</sup>

---

<sup>31</sup> T.E. Lawrence. *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (New York: Doubleday/Anchor Books, 1991)

<sup>32</sup> Alan Roxburgh, *The Sky is Falling* (Eagle, ID: ACI Publishing, 2006) 167.

<sup>33</sup> Elisabeth Fiorenza, quoted by Rosemary Neave in "Reimagining the Church," Women's Resource Center, NZ. Study Report Leave, 1996.

One of the core tasks of leadership is to help the community to dream again. In order to dream together we must be connected. Fritjof Capra, quoting Margaret Wheatley, remarks that, "Facilitating emergence means first building up and nurturing networks of communication in order to "connect the system to more of itself." <sup>35</sup> The power of new media to facilitate feedback loops contributes to emergence. Just as a new media empowered the first reformation, new media are empowering a second reformation.

### The Need of Mentors

We desperately need a new kind of Christian... one who is self-authorizing and looks to Jesus and not to human authority as she moves forward as an apprentice, obedient to a heavenly vision. Too many gifted people are waiting for permission from leaders who have a vested interest in things staying as they are. They won't give it. We need to model and teach that, "His anointing teaches you all things.. as you abide in Him" (1 John 2:27)

At the same time, we need mentors. The role of mentors is to point searchers to God, and encourage their dependence on Him. The role of mentors is to show by example how to walk forward without certainty, but with faith and hope and love. The role of mentors is to lift others up, to serve without consideration of recognition or reward. If we can model this kind of service, we will help to birth a new kind of leader by our example.

Alan Roxburgh argues that the communities we need will be led by an Abbot or Abbess.

"The Abbot's role is to guard the ethos. He/she is continually asking: 'Are we living the story? Are we keeping the ethos?' Abbots live the ethos among others and in so doing are saying; 'This is what we do as members of the Order; it may also be what you want to do.' Therefore, the Abbot's role is deeply relational and interpretive, continually inviting others into exploration not program.

"Today we have lots of Apostle figures but few Abbots." <sup>36</sup>

Lasting change will spring up within communities that exist for something larger than themselves. Leaders must empower that change so that the margins become our new center.

### Part VII: Beyond Purpose Driven – Essence and Ethos

In the introduction to Heidegger's "Discourse on Thinking" John Anderson writes,

"How do we attend to our purpose while holding the humility that we do not create it? Once we catch a glimmer of what it might be, how do we avoid taking over as creator? It gets even more complicated. How do we avoid getting ego-seduced by the specific manifestation of our gifts? Is it possible to live in the humility of knowing that our purpose, as clearly as we self-define it, is but "a husk of meaning"? The task is really to become superb listeners. Heidegger wrote that waiting, listening, was the most profound way to serve God." <sup>37</sup>

---

<sup>34</sup> Frost, Michael and Hirsch, Alan. Op Cit. 188

<sup>35</sup> Fritjof Capra, Op Cit. 122

<sup>36</sup> Alan Roxburgh, Online <http://odyssey.blogs.com> May, 2006.

<sup>37</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Discourse on Thinking*. Translated by John Anderson and E. Hans Freund (New York: Harper and Row, 1966)

In times of rapid change, waiting, listening is the most profound way to serve God. When the going gets tough, the tough look for ways to act. Leaders, in particular, feel the tension. Everyone around us clamors for answers and for action, and the temptation is to lay out a new plan, grab the tiller, organize, and push ahead. The modern image of the leader as decisive man or woman of action remains a powerful symbol.

The deeper call is to wait; the harder path is to become a listening people. We need the wisdom of St. Exupery..

*If you want to build a ship, don't drum up the men to gather wood, divide the work, and give orders. Instead, teach them to yearn for the vast and endless sea.*

How will we find a new way forward apart from leaving old ways behind, even those ways of being in the world that were so natural to us when change was predictable?

How will we learn to lead unless we first learn to follow? If there is new vision, it is first birthed in the heart of God. We must hear more deeply, and see more clearly.

*Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.* Richard Rohr writes that,

"We have nothing to attain or even learn. We do, however, need to unlearn some things...

To allow that unlearning, we have to accept what is often difficult, particularly for people in what appears to be a successful culture. We have to accept that we share a mass cultural trance, a hypnotic trance. We're all sleepwalkers. We human beings do not naturally see. We have to be taught how to see." <sup>38</sup>

How do we maintain our focus on God and His kingdom? How do we direct attention away from our false egos and puny self, even our distorted desire to be saviors for the world? In Judaism, there is a distinct activity called *kavanah*. It is cultivated in order to maximize the inwardness of our actions. It means to *pay attention*, to direct the mind and heart in order to maximize the levels of intentionality of our actions. This applies to actions/deeds as it does to the study of Scripture and to prayer but goes beyond these activities themselves to the notion of attentiveness to God Himself. It is not primarily an awareness of being commanded by God, but *an awareness of the God who commands*. Martin Buber writes, "He who does a good deed with complete *kavanah*, that is, completes an act in such a way that his whole existence is gathered in it and directed in it towards God, he works on the redemption of the world, on its conquest for God." <sup>39</sup>

We can't think our way to a new world. Knowledge seeks certainty and eschews faith. Knowledge seeks control, when we need more dependence. Rethinking the problem tends to result only in tweaking the system. The very foundation has to shift, and our patterns of living must change as we move from rationality to *relation*.

---

<sup>38</sup> Richard Rohr, *Hope Against Darkness* (St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2001) 61.

<sup>39</sup> Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *Op Cit.* 130.

Simone Weil defined culture as “that which forms attention.” *The questions we ask are not neutral, but form our attention.* Our questions shape our lenses, and determine what information we regard, and what we *discard*. Perhaps marginality will allow us to leave behind questions of leadership for questions of culture, and questions of identity. Who are we as the people of God? Whose are we? Instead of worrying about church health and church growth, we need to ask another question: *how do we form a culture whose ears are attuned to the Spirit?* In a time when more and more voices demand our attention, in an age of burgeoning information and decreasing wisdom, where there is less time to reflect and increasing complexity with which to wrestle, we need more than ever to be a people who hear the voice of the Shepherd.

In a seminar at the Church of the Savior some years ago, Gordon Cosby said that “vision is the destroyer of essence.” How we express ourselves in the world is first a manifestation of who we are and who we are becoming. Authentic communities of faith naturally express their relatedness to Christ in their every action in the world. Margaret Wheatley writes that,

“Whenever we're trying to change a deeply structured belief system, everything in life is called into question-our relationships with loved ones, children, and colleagues; our relationships with authority and major institutions. Those who have led their organizations into new ways of organizing often say that the most important change was what occurred in themselves. Nothing would have changed in their organizations if they hadn't changed.. ”<sup>40</sup>

## Part VIII: Empire and Oppression

Moving from the center to the margins means moving counter-culturally, in a direction in conflict with the values of society. Modern society on the whole is about getting ahead, about using more and more resources and collecting things so that I can be happy. At the service of these values is a scientific worldview and certain ways to measure and control reality. Our culture is formed around “the economics of affluence, the politics of oppression, and a religion of immanence,” as Walter Brueggemann has put it.<sup>41</sup>

The Empire determines for us what is the good life. This includes how we measure success, productivity, and efficiency. All of these things are at the service of “progress.” But if the Empire determines these things, then who is Lord? NT Wright helps to understand the conflict.

Someone illustrated the difference between a cultural reading of the Gospel and the Gospel Jesus preached like this: “God loves you and has a difficult plan for your life.” Wright says that Jesus was not telling us a new way to get to heaven, He was teaching that heaven had come down to earth in His embodied presence.

Wright illustrates the present reality of the kingdom – not merely a personal reality but political, economic, the whole enchilada - and the connection to Jesus' words on repentance with a reference from the Roman historian Josephus. Josephus talks about going to a brigand who was involved in revolutionary activity, and Josephus told the brigand he needed to quit pursuing his own way of bringing about revolution and follow Josephus' way. The

---

<sup>40</sup> Margaret Wheatley in “Goodbye Command and Control,” in *Leader to Leader*, July, 1997.

<sup>41</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2000) 30.

Greek words sound very familiar: Josephus tells him, "repent and believe in me." The words are exactly the same as Jesus' words in the gospel.

From this, Wright suggests that we usually think of repentance as a means of going to heaven when we die, or as an individualistic turning away from particular sins. It's true that repentance and following Jesus include going to heaven, but Wright suggests that Jesus first century hearers heard "repent and believe in me," in a different way than we hear it today. They heard it in political terms, and in corporate/communal terms, as an outright claim to allegiance, and with reference to the here and now. When Paul says that "Jesus is Lord," then Caesar is not. And Jesus came preaching "good news to the poor, and liberation to captives."

If Caesar is not Lord, then Caesar's gospel.. his version of the good news .. affluence, progress, consumption, and militarism.. isn't good news at all, but is ideology at the service of Empirical ends. Perhaps the addictive and obsessive lifestyle advertised in popular culture won't lead to happiness at all, even if it does lead to corporate profits. Perhaps bigger isn't better. Perhaps faster won't get us where we want to go. Perhaps "more" and "faster" is only destroying our planet and multiplying third world sweat shops. Perhaps all the measures of church health are only measuring human effort ad serving human pride, and not measuring anything like the growth of the kingdom of God.

The church, then, is that little group of people in Christ who want to be faithful on the Way. That Way is one of compassion and justice, and translating justice into the structures of society. Gordon Cosby

In the popular western gospel sin means a personal stain, usually around activities like gambling, smoking, drinking, promiscuity, pornography and the like. Sin rarely asks how our behavior is destroying God's good world and contributing to oppressive structures. But what if the most basic sins involved lust, pride, and greed.. serving one's own interests above the interests of humanity, raping the earth for corporate profit, and militarism? How do we detox from addiction to the promises of the Empire (peace and safety for us.. poverty and destruction for everyone else) so that we can embrace the promises of God?

At issue is not just personal freedom, but God's freedom. A truly free God is essential if marginal people are to have any appeal against the oppressors of the day. If God is at the service of the Empire, he isn't transcendent or free and the present order is all there is.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, we then have religion and not revelation.

Thank God, He is not at the service of the Empire. Jesus IS Lord. Gordon Cosby remarks that sin is "the inability to transcend ourselves and to live for others." He continues,

"What the Bible really means by sin is that we are addicted to the values of the world, the systems of the world. Jesus said that if we stay with the world's systems, the way the world views life, it leads to death. The realm of God which Jesus embodies and which he describes in the Beatitudes is the way that he says leads to life. We are so addicted to the culture that we don't even know it. We don't even know that we need detoxification. We don't know that we need an intensive recovery program!

"We are addicted to things that money and power can buy. We spend more on entertainment and pet care and toiletries than on the needs of children barely existing

---

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. 23.

in poverty; we strive after positions that seem important in our jobs and our churches, whether or not God is calling us to them; we long to be noticed and honored, superficially if necessary. We forget that Jesus, 'though he was in the form of God, did not consider equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself.' Our culture promotes a constant filling up, but our disciplines will draw us toward greater emptiness, so that we can be better prepared for obedience and, ultimately, for finding our place in God's plan—finding true relevance."<sup>43</sup>

Cosby says that when we see the culture as it really is, with its illusory promises of success and power, and when we begin to care for the needs of the oppressed, we will learn what it is to love in the way Jesus loves.. He loves us in spite of our continual failures.

Breaking free of the Empire (what Brueggemann calls the "royal consciousness") and its demands for allegiance means that we can finally be free for the kingdom. Instead of enthroning the present we can imagine a world of true justice and freedom. We can imagine "dangerous departures" (Isa.52:11-12)<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, by removing affluence and progress from the throne we can imagine new beginnings. People of faith can start things that no one else can, because they are not making a calculation of success.. they merely follow in faithfulness, and leave the results to God.

In July, 2006 Andy Crouch interviewed Bishop David Zac Niringiye for Christianity Today Magazine. He asked, "What could equip us to be more countercultural, living in a nation that is very much at the center of power?"

"We need to begin to read the Bible differently. Americans have been preoccupied with the end of the Gospel of Matthew, the Great Commission: "Go and make." I call them go-and-make missionaries. These are the go-and-fix-it people. The go-and-make people are those who act like it's all in our power, and all we have to do is "finish the task." They love that passage! But when read from the center of power, that passage simply reinforces the illusion that it's about us, that we are in charge.

"I would like to suggest a new favorite passage, the Great Invitation. It's what we find if we read from the beginning of the Gospels rather than the end. Jesus says, "Come, follow me. I will make you fishers of men." Not "Go and make," but "I will make you." It's all about Jesus. And do you know the last words of Jesus to Peter, in John 21? "Follow me." The last words of Simon Peter's encounter are the same as the first words..."<sup>45</sup>

## Part IX: Phase Transitions

I opened this series of reflections with a list that went something like this...

As we live out new ways of leading faithful communities,

- Instead of leading from over, we lead from among.

---

<sup>43</sup> Gordon Cosby, "The Journey Inward, Outward and Forward." Jeff Bailey in *Cutting Edge Magazine*, Fall, 2001. Vol.5. No.3

<sup>44</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Cadences of Home* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997) 132.

<sup>45</sup> Andy Crouch, "Experiencing Life at the Margins." Christianity Today. July 2006, Vol. 50, No. 7, Page

- Instead of leading from certainty, we lead by exploration, cooperation and faith.
- Instead of leading from power, we lead in emptiness depending on Jesus
- Instead of leading from a plan, we lead with attention
- Instead of leading as managers, we lead as mystics and poets, "speaking poetry in a prose flattened world" and articulating a common future
- Instead of leading compulsively, we lead with inner freedom
- *Instead of leading from the center, we lead from the margins.*

One of the less explicit components of this conversation has been the movement from local to non-local, and from center to dispersed. "Portfolio career" refers to making a living from a variety of jobs rather than working for a single employer. Ian Mobsby of Epicentre coined the term "portfolio church" (called by some "quantum" church) to describe how many Christians assemble their spiritual lives from a variety of church sources rather than committing to a single one.<sup>46</sup>

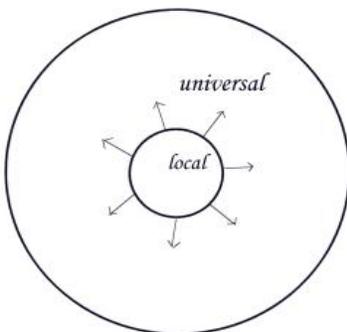
It would be simplistic to consider this development only another manifestation of consumer culture. Rather, it reflects the mobile and dispersed patterns of 21<sup>st</sup> century, networked and connected, life. It accurately captures how many of us behave with regard to the church. We don't have allegiance to just one, and we don't only connect locally. Our spiritual lives reflect the dispersed (sometimes fragmented) motif of our lives.

Once upon a time, a geographical parish was a real community, within which people were born, lived, married, had children, worked and died, sometimes without ever traveling outside it. Ancient history. We move in a series of networks, enabled by our technologies of transport and communication. The younger you are, and the less financially constricted, the more this is likely to represent your experience.

The internet is not the originator of this phenomenon, *but it makes explicit what is happening and facilitates it on a far wider scale than ever before.* As Thomas Friedman recently wrote, "The World is Flat."<sup>47</sup>

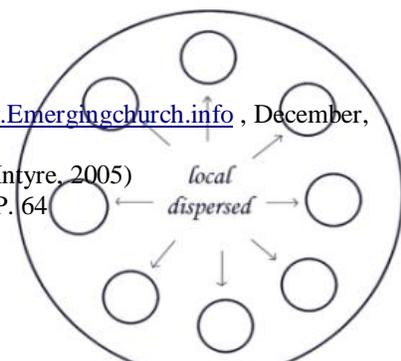
Marginality... leaves the church free, if it is faithful, to cherish its absurdity; establishment just makes it fall in love all over again with the irrelevant respectability of the world's wisdom and power."<sup>48</sup>

Portfolio church contradicts the modern conception of church, in which believers commit to a local, identifiable expression and through that expression connect to the broader Church.



The institutional church understands "local" but doesn't yet understand networks or non-local community. So it views non-local expressions of community through the lens of modernity, with the visible church at the center. Of course, this facilitates modern pursuits like big buildings, planning and control!

This is one reason we hear repeated calls from clergy in established churches to connect .. and to give... locally. For them, the



<sup>46</sup> Simon Hall. REVIVE, "Doughnut Churches." Online <http://www.Emergingchurch.info>, December, 2003.

<sup>47</sup> Thomas Friedman, *The World is Flat* (New York: Douglas and McIntyre, 2005)

<sup>48</sup> Robert F. Capon. *The Astonished Heart*. Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1996. P. 64

death of the local congregation means the end of the church as we know it. Of course, they are right. The deeper question is, "Does it matter?" While large gatherings of believers lend a certain visibility to our faith, "bigger is better" has been found wanting.<sup>49</sup>

The call to Christians to be "local" sounds to postmodern ears like nostalgia for a society that doesn't exist on earth anymore. We can't go backwards (with the hopeful exception of new kinds of intentional communities and expressions of sustainable living). Meanwhile the kinds of community *that we are actually experiencing* goes unrecognized and un-resourced.

This dispersed style of community, with a variety of local, often spontaneous, sometimes temporary, outside-the-walls and informal but connected expressions, is a relatively new phenomenon. Churches are springing up in offices, banks, Laundromats, coffee-shops, pubs and bars, bowling alleys, a variety of clubs, and health-care offices. Sometimes they meet as friendship groups, the ones that will last also have a missional, serving expression. Leadership is more difficult to identify and is often shared. While events occur as a visible expression, they often shift in format and venue and may not occur on a regular schedule.<sup>50</sup> For this reason the experience feels decentralized, with no identifiable center, and the term "doughnut church" was coined by Simon Hall.<sup>51</sup>

Moving from one paradigm to the other is disconcerting. It feels like loss, and not gain. It is unpredictable and messy. Those in traditional settings accuse those outside of having "left the church." Those outside traditional settings accuse those inside of compromise.

Experimental groups seeking to engage the Christian faith in a postmodern context will often lack the resources, profile or success record of the Boomer congregations. By definition, they are new, untried, relatively disorganized and fearful of self-promotion. They reject the corporate model of their Boomer forebears, and thus do not appear, according to existing paradigms, to be significant. But don't be fooled. Somewhere in the genesis and genius of these diverse groups is hidden the future of Western Christianity. To dismiss them is to throw away the seeds of our survival.<sup>52</sup>

## Phase Transition

Water and ice are different states of the same elements. When water turns to ice, or when ice melts to become water it passes through a phase transition. Steam is neither water nor

---

<sup>49</sup> (see Part 3, or read the statistics gathered by Reggie McNeal in "The Present Future, or read Christian Schwarz survey of large churches, or check out any Barna survey for the lack of impact of North American churches on their neighborhoods).

<sup>50</sup> See Frost and Hirsch, "The Shaping of Things to Come" and also Jamieson, "In Search of Turangawaewae," in Reality Magazine, Issue 34. Jamieson remarks, "Many of those who attend these groups most definitely see them as 'church'. Not church like the institutional church they have left, nor like the house churches of previous decades, rather these are groups which provide a place for the nurturing of faith and involvement in God's world in an open and accepting community of people who are forming close relationships with each other. These groups are places where the group members feel they belong, places where they can stand in their faith and in the world, places where 'faith identities' are rebuilt and strengthened - places of Turangawaewae."

<sup>51</sup> One such group contains a disclaimer in their "order of worship".. Most churches have an order of worship where they tell you in advance everything you are to expect from the service. We're too cheap to print out a bunch of flimsy handouts to get trampled on the floor of our church and turned into paper airplanes, so this is what you get instead. **The disclaimer:** Order of worship is subject to change without notice. All rights reserved. Your mileage may vary. Subject to availability. Void where prohibited. Subject to restrictions. Contents under pressure. Some settling may occur in transport. We incur no responsibility for any spontaneous combustions that may occur during our worship time. No guarantees or warranties express or otherwise are made.

<sup>52</sup> Gerard Kelly, *Retrofuture: Rediscovering Our Roots, Recharting Our Routes* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1999)

ice. As the church is in transition, we in the water may not know how to regard the ice phase. Those skating along may not know what to do with water. Observers don't know whether to drink, or to skate. Others aren't sure if we should turn up the heat, or turn it down. Those of us fully in transition often feel guilty for not contributing to the "visible and local." Most people in this movement come from church backgrounds where numerical growth is considered important, so we may feel embarrassment at low numbers. But if groups are acting as nodes in a network then low numbers or attendees are not important. What is important is wider influence, impacting people who are affected by the life expressed through various channels. Simon comments that,

"The internet enables small marginal groups or even individuals to be resources on a level with large institutions. So "donut" is really about having small core groups of committed people producing something which is accessed by much wider networks of people who are not so committed (at least locally). Those of us who form the "cores" are part of the less-committed "portfolio" crowd in relation to other people's projects and doughnuts."<sup>53</sup>

Growth in this model proceeds by seeding other nodes rather than by making one node bigger. It proceeds by increasing the flows through the network – more traffic on the spiritual superhighway. Think of mushrooms: the ones that we see are just the fruiting bodies of a wide and tangled network of threads that are hidden underground. Growth is marked by more mushrooms – more nodes -- not bigger mushrooms.



Mushrooms spring up here and there, and the network that connects them remains hidden. You walk in the evening, and nothing can be seen. The next morning a half dozen mushrooms appear. They are mysterious, surprising and random ... if you don't know what's happening beneath the surface.

This conversation strikes fear into the old church. In the old world when the church was Catholic it was both local and non-local, visible and invisible. Before the Reformation splintered the church into competing elements, there was no worry about "local" versus "non-local." When life is lived on the margins we rely on decentered networks. Local and competing elements may feel threatened, while those who are working more in a resource or networked model can embrace the idea.

### From Hard Copy to Wi-Fi

A friend of mine compares the shift as moving from hard copy to Wi-Fi. The old generation used hard copy - the newspaper that was delivered daily or weekly. Content and distribution was fixed; sources were limited. But the rising generation uses Wi-Fi.. plug in anywhere, anytime. It is "pull" and not "push," the initiative is ours to connect where and when we want to, and we choose the sources and resources we want. It is difficult for the hard copy generation to understand the shift, and often difficult to support it.

What about quality of relationships? Won't we lose this? At one time local was a precondition for covenant and relationship, but is that still true? Are relationships less "real"

---

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

when non-local? Those who have little experience of wider networks fear that physical proximity is the only route to strong relationships. But strength grows from shared purpose and values, productivity, frequency of contact, and depth of interaction. Belonging can't be measured in numbers,<sup>54</sup> and is not always related to geography. In spite of the best efforts of leaders to manufacture community, it remains a gift. I talk to people weekly who complain about the shallowness of relationships in their local church, and to others who proclaim the depth of their non-local connections.<sup>55</sup>

"We need to watch the margins of our society - the inner cities and the rural areas where creative approaches are emerging, often born in despair. And so when desperation forces us to let go of the old ways, God can bring new life."<sup>56</sup>

Too many churches are weak resources, not giving enough to keep people connected. Strong resources get the traffic on the network. But a strong resource may not be big, or near, or the kind of thing one would expect. A strong resource is whatever is putting out. And the network will bring connections from far and near.<sup>57</sup> Markus Barth, commenting on Eph. 4 "that which every joint and ligament supplies," writes, "It is at the point of connection that Jesus is made known."

As I was completing this article a friend of mine phoned with a picture that had popped into his head while driving. He saw himself standing in front of a group of people with a glass of water. He asked them, what is important here.. the container, or the water? They echoed, "The water!" He asked them, what shape is the water? "The same as the glass." He took a crazy straw and sucked the water into the straw. "What shape is the water now? What is important here?"

The shape of our communities is less important than the life they contain and their impact on the world. We need expressions of community that take relationships seriously .. authentic and loving relationships shaped by the Spirit,<sup>58</sup> that create places of hospitality and safety for the lost and broken of the world. We need communities that value work as worship, and worship as work. If we love and serve people, we can grow communities that flow with living water. God will draw us together and hold us together as we learn to give our lives for one another and for the world.

---

<sup>54</sup> Joseph Myers. *The Search to Belong* (Grand Rapids, MI: EmergentYS: 2003) 80. Myers writes, "If we would concentrate on facilitating the environment instead of the result.. we might see healthy, spontaneous community emerge."

<sup>55</sup> In spite of this, Emmanuel Katongole warns, "Significant as it is, fictional contact can never be a surrogate for the hermeneutical necessity of actual contact with real people. This particularly needs to be stressed in the context of the technology- controlled world of cyberspace. In cyberspace, a lonely soul, the product of the modern market and liberal individualism, seeks engagement with the other, but without, however, the epistemological and moral challenge such a contact would normally have. No doubt, cyberspace may create certain feelings and thoughts, but only in a way which significantly detaches them from their 'normal' context in life." *Beyond Universal Reason* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2000) 186.

<sup>56</sup> Anne Wilkerson-Hayes. *New Ways of Being the Church*. GOCN Vol.13, No.2, June, 2001, 7.

<sup>57</sup> Simon Hall, Op Cit.

<sup>58</sup> See "Equipping God's People for Mission" in Darrel L. Guder, Ed. *Missional Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998). The discussion of bounded versus centered sets is very helpful. Beware of churches that use "covenant" language as a means of control rather than a means to belonging and empowerment.