

St. Mark's Chapel Book Study Group

The St. Mark's Book Study Group was discontinued as of January, 2011 with the possibility of starting up again at some future time. The group, whose membership varied from two to six people, studied a number of books over a two year period. These books included *The Meaning of Jesus* by Marcus J. Borg and N. T. Wright, *Christianity for the Rest of Us* by Diana Butler Bass, *What Paul Really Said* by N. T. Wright, *Fingerprints of God: The Search for the Science of Spirituality* by Barbara Bradley Hagerty, *The Last Week: A Day-by-Day Account of Jesus's Final week in Jerusalem* by Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan, and *Everything Must Change (When The World's Biggest Problems and Jesus' Good News Collide)* by Brian D. McLaren. All the authors except N. T. Wright and Barbara Bradley Hagerty have been speakers at January Adventure, which focuses on Emerging Christianity, held the weekend of the third Sunday of every January on St. Simons Island, Ga. More information about this conference can be found on this website under Conferences.

Summary of a recent book studied that has particular relevance for St. Mark's

Christianity for the Rest of Us, How the Neighborhood Church is Transforming the Faith is particularly relevant to the growth of St. Mark's Chapel as it is a study of what makes emerging churches (emerging from the decline of mainline denominations) vibrant and effective. Below is a short summary of the book with that which seems most relevant to St Mark's. But this book is rich in stories and suggestions and worth a read by anyone interested in seeing St Mark's meet people's various spiritual needs. Most of the below is quoted directly from the book.

— Barbara Pinkerton, June 2009.

Part 1: What Happened to the Neighborhood Church?

Bass's study includes 50 churches with a membership from 35 to 2500 and includes six denominations throughout the United States and research into what makes vital congregations vital. Her background includes involvement in both mainline and fundamentalist traditions. She is now a member of a renewed DC Episcopal Church. "Emerging" Christianity is of a 'new paradigm' – faith that is adapting to changes in a pluralist, post Christian world, Transformational Christianity. Bass herself has found a meaningful way of life through ancient traditions, social justice, spiritual practices and emotional worship.

Churches in her study exhibited Christian authenticity, expressed a coherent faith and offered members ways of living with passion and purpose. They exuded a renewed sense of mission and identity, often having emerged from dire circumstances of decline, crisis, threatened closure or spiritual ennui. The congregations embraced no evangelistic strategy, no programmatic style of church growth. Rather, they were their own best selves, creative and traditional, risk taking and grounded, confident and humble, open and orthodox. They were often in tension with local fundamentalist Christians or surprisingly their own denominations. And sometimes both.

Their paths of renewal varied, but Bass discerned a similar pattern across these very different communities. Mainline renewal is as one Lutheran pastor said, "You preach the Gospel, offer hospitality, pay attention to worship and people's spiritual lives. Frankly you take Christianity seriously as a way of life."

The congregations have found new vitality through an intentional and transformative engagement with Christian tradition as embodied in faith practices. Typically, they have rediscovered the riches of the Christian past and practice simple, but profound, things like discernment, hospitality, testimony, contemplation and justice. They reach back to ancient wisdom and reach out through a life sustained by Christian devotional and moral practices. They know the Biblical story and their own story. They focus more on God's grace in the world than on the eternal state of their souls.

People are building upon tradition, faithfulness, and wisdom to offer a distinct alternative to a Christianity based on personal salvation and moral certainty.

Emerging Christianity is about change – about changing from being spiritual tourists to pilgrims – about transforming ourselves, our congregations and our communities. We are going there; to a change of heart that revolutionizes one's whole life. Many of these churches found that their faith and mission was deepened by the practice of prayer, testimony and doing justice.

New Village Church is the name for this new church phenomena. A New Village Church is spiritually mobile, a pilgrim community on a journey together.

Trinity Episcopal Church in Santa Barbara turned itself around through prayerful discernment, offering radical hospitality, developing new patterns of leadership and experimenting with innovative worship. There are many examples of how churches became vital, transformational churches.

By weaving personal spiritual quests with more traditional forms of religious life in community, mainline churches can be renewed. ...Vital Christianity is ...about being responsive to people's spiritual longings and experiences, and drawing from tradition and history to help make sense of it all. A congregation grows when it draws its worldview and practices from scripture, engaging the Bible, as Marcus Borg so memorably says, "seriously but not literally." Mainline churches decline when they neglect scripture and prayer, discernment and hospitality, contemplation and justice. ...Old mainline churches recover faith through an emerging set of practices of passionate Christianity, in communities that are both spiritual and religious.

What do spiritual and religious communities look like? On Bass's journey, three interrelated characteristics forming a trinity of vitality came into focus – giving shape to the new village church: tradition, practice and wisdom.

Tradition, Not traditionalism

Tradition is understood as a fluid, dynamic and critical process while traditionalism is authoritarian and exclusive.

In one church, the congregation is an intentional mix of spirituality and tradition, of ecstasy and order as the yin and yang of Christian life. One pastor described tradition as recovering the practices of the early church and offering them in a way that the contemporary or emerging church can use and find meaning in.

Practice, not purity

Emphasizes acceptance instead of doctrinal purity and diversity rather than uniformity

Community formed around Christian practice rather than doctrinal purity

Wisdom not Certainty

No matter how much you study, we will never fully know God. It's a quest for wisdom rather than certainty. Wisdom refers to knowing God. Mainline pilgrims rest comfortably with ambiguity. The thing is not about definite answers but community. The moment we think we know, we've lost our perspective on wisdom. New village churches tend to attract people who are more interested in the questions and the mysteries of these things rather than the answers.

Part II Ten Signposts of Renewal

HOSPITALITY

A Christian Community is not a closed community but extends welcome and shelter to all regardless of class, status or respectability. Hospitality can be a scary thing.

DISCERNMENT

Next to hospitality, discernment was one of the most widely spread spiritual practices among the research churches. Discernment is "serious reflection on scripture, grounded in prayer and informed by experience. It is both deeply personal and entirely communal." A reflection oriented Bible study included ten people in one church who gathered to ask questions of the scripture text for the upcoming Sunday sermon. Questions were asked like "Where has God been in our lives this week? What is this reading saying to us in our lives? What would it have us do?"

HEALING

Throughout the scriptures harmony is a way of life practiced by a community with healing at its center. For mainline pilgrims, salvation entails several levels of learning: emotions and the psyche, physical wellness, human reconciliation, and cosmic restoration

CONTEMPLATION

When the church is no longer teaching the people to pray, we could almost say it will have lost its reason for existence. In the congregations that Bass visited, silence, meditation and contemplation were commonplace. Contemplation is not some arcane practice but is simply one's private experience of God through healthy habits of private devotion. Indeed the contemplative life is the connected life. To quote Thomas Merton, "if you want to have a spiritual life, you must unify your life."

TESTIMONY

Some churches practice testimony – having people talk about their experience of God – during services. In many ways testimony is the most democratic and empowering of all Christian

practices. The entire New Testament is a testimony – a record of experiences that early Christians had with God.

DIVERSITY

Difference in political views, social issues, musical tastes, etc. Some churches create programs, study groups and worship services to intentionally reflect the diversity in the midst of the congregation. Most tensions were between church's traditionally more liberal theological constituency and its vocal evangelical minority.

JUSTICE

Some churches see diversity as a way of justice – of practicing reconciliation that will address worldly wrongs. Some celebrate Martin Luther King's vision of diversity and justice as Biblical ideals, not political liberalism, as part of their spiritual journey. Justice is part of being a Christian, justice is spirituality. Theologian Walter Wink says doing justice is much more than supporting a particular political party or policy agenda. Doing justice goes beyond fixing unfair and oppressive structures. Doing justice means engaging the oppressive powers – “domination system” – transforming the “inner spirit: of all systems of injustice, violence and exclusion.

Christians by actively being the beloved community, enact justice through practices of hospitality, prayer, discernment, testimony and diversity. ---God's politics are those of authentic justice – not causes, power and control – and find their true source in power of servanthood rather than domination.

WORSHIP

Comments by various people in emerging churches: Awe and wonder is the foundation of worship. The object of worship is not to create anything. Rather the goal is to invite people into a sense of openness and attentiveness akin to sitting at the edge of a dock... you never know whether or not a bass will swim by, but if it does you want to be ready for it. Life and worship becomes intertwined. Some churches experiment with ancient (Ignatian spirituality for example) practices; others use traditional. Kind of music did not matter to vitality and ranged from traditional, jazz, folk, etc. or a combination.

REFLECTION

A discussion on the importance of theological reflection; for example, to take life experiences and learn to reflect on them theologically. Many churches in this study are deeply schooled in scripture. One church studied “hot button issues ethically and morally, the lives of theologians, scripture from soup to nuts. One whole year on the Book of Romans.” One church member said she thought of her church not as providing answers but of opening people to glimpses of truth. Another said his church taught him that “it was okay to question things and there is not always one right answer.” An extensive discussion on the differences between liberalism and liberality. Also reference to using The Way.

BEAUTY

In all congregations which Bass visited there was a growing emphasis on beauty, on knowing God through art, music and drama, on engaging more than just the mind.

One teenage boy on a discussion on whether the Virgin Birth was true: "I don't understand why everyone is so upset about this. I believe in the Virgin Birth. It is so beautiful that it has just got to be true – whether it happened or not."

Part III From Tourists to Pilgrims: Transforming Lives, Transforming Congregations, Transforming the World.

Churches had to deal with the marked differences in beliefs in their churches. One exception was a church in a very conservative, fundamentalist area. This church had primarily liberal members and found it liberating to be with people of like minds. The importance of tradition is stressed. Made us think of some of the things that St Mark's would like to keep as traditions such as taking communion from each other in a circle and occasional lay services.

One of the most significant things (Bass) observed is that these churchgoers believe that conversion is not something Christians do to other people – conversion is a continual process of discipleship of the individual and the Christian Community. Christian politics is a conversion toward God's reign of peace that starts with the self and naturally moves, in concentric circles, outward to the congregation and the world.