Cultivating Missional Learning Communities

Dwight Zscheile
Capitola, California
Religious Adherence, Santa Cruz County, CA

- Unclaimed: 85%
- Catholic: 7%
- Mainline: 2%
- Evangelical: 4%
- Other: 2%

Year 2009
Source: Social Explorer
Inhabiting a Predominant Story

- You are what you earn/achieve
- It’s all up to us
- We’re on our own to create meaning, identity, purpose
- Community must be constructed but is unreliable
- Forgiveness?
Turning Point: Encountering Christ Outside ‘Church’

- Lived witness: ‘little Christ’
- “I am the resurrection and the life... Do you believe this?”
- An alternative story
- They came to me
- Discovering Christian community
Life in a New Apostolic Age

- Mission field is everywhere but primarily our backyards
- Ongoing disestablishment of church from cultural privilege in American life
- Erosion of Christian faith, identity, practice, esp. among younger generations
- Who are we?
- What does it mean to be church?
Establishment Assumptions

- People know what church is, where to find it
- People come to us already Christian, we make them members
- Everyone must learn established customs/language (vs. embracing Reformation principle of vernacular translation)
Mission as Benefactors

- Giving out of excess from place of privilege
- Luke 22:24-27: “A dispute also arose among them as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest. But he said to them, “The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.”
Disestablishment Underway

- Disintegration of cultural Christianity in U.S.
  - Co-option by therapeutic individualism
- Loss of coherence
- Weakened spiritual vitality
  - Only 15% of ELCA congregations rated “high spiritual vitality” by own members

Source: 2010 Faith Communities Today Study, Hartford Seminary
What Do U.S. Christians Know?

- Atheists/agnostics know more about religion than believers
- Only 16% of Christians know that Protestants teach salvation by faith alone (only 14% of white mainline Protestants)
- Less than half (46%) of Christians know Martin Luther inspired the Reformation

Source: Pew U.S. Religious Knowledge Survey, September 2010
A Colonized Christianity?

- **Moralistic Therapeutic Deism**
  - A God exists who created, orders world
  - God wants people to be good, nice, fair, as taught by Bible and most religions
  - Central goal of life is to be happy, feel good about oneself
  - God doesn’t need to be involved except when needed to resolve a problem
  - Good people go to heaven when they die

Spiritual Tinkering

• “The single word that best describes young adults’ approach to religion and spirituality—indeed life—is tinkering.”
• Church shopping and church hopping
• Searching for answers to existential questions in venues beyond local congregation, expressing spiritual interests through art, music and devotional reading

Spirituality in Late-Modern Life

- Work
- Play/Leisure
- Faith/Spirituality
- Family
- Volunteering
Managerial Responses

- Strategic control through marketing to religious consumers
  - ‘Luring them back’ (assumes they were once there)
  - Reduces church to vendor of religious goods/services
  - Assumes capacity to control environment
  - Fickle commitment
  - Younger generations increasingly resistant
Turning Church Inside Out

- Our future (if we have one) lies with those outside doors
- Established ways of doing church work for diminishing populations
- Asking deeper questions:
  - *What does it mean to be a Christian community in our culture today?*
  - *Who are we?*
  - *Where is God in all this?*
Promise of Disestablishment

- Life in a new apostolic age
- Rise in people seeking to be ‘religious and spiritual’
- Opportunity to rediscover our identity as People of the Way of Jesus (Acts)
- Central challenge is *cultivating Christian community* (within existing congregations and with new populations/generations)
Letter to the Exiles (Jeremiah 29)

Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.
Discussion Questions

• What establishment assumptions do you see shaping your congregation’s life and ministry?

• What signs do you notice in your congregation and surrounding community of the cultural shift to a post-establishment world?
Part II: Participating in God’s Life and Love for the World
How God Comes to Us in Christ

- God participates fully in human life to reconcile us to participation in God’s communal life
- Word made flesh
- Relying upon hospitality of others
- Judgment and promise
- Reciprocity
- Dying outside gates
God’s Reign of Mercy and Justice

- Already/not yet
- Healing, mercy, forgiveness, reconciliation, justice
- Surprising, hidden, inverts world’s orderings
- Our role
  - Not building, but ‘entering, inheriting, receiving’
  - Witnessing
  - Initiating into
The Community of Jesus and the Spirit

- People from every tribe/nation
- Animated by Spirit
- Called to represent new human community in Christ
- For sake of world
God’s Mission Has a Church

- God is a missionary God
- Our identity lies in our participation in God’s missional life
- “It is not the church that has a mission of salvation to fulfill in the world; it is the mission of the Son and the Spirit through the Father that includes the church, creating a church along the way.”
  – Jürgen Moltmann, The Church in the Power of the Spirit, p. 64
Seeking the World’s Hospitality

- From world/people as object (‘target’) of mission (either benevolence or conversion) ...
- ... to place where God meets us
- Going ‘without purse, bag, sandals’ (Luke 10)
- Discovering God in stranger
‘Plunging’

- Forming community with neighbors on their turf
- Striking up relationships
- Learning how to be in ministry with new populations, generations
- Going two by two
God’s Demonstration Plot

- Local church is where world looks to see, interpret the Gospel of Jesus
- Living demonstration of reconciled, restored community (in all its imperfections—*simul justus!* )
How the Early Church Grew

• Through ordinary people in daily spheres of influence
• Social networks
• “Gossiping the Gospel”
• Living as community of compassion
Living as People of the Way

“Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is within you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence.”

—1 Peter 3:15-16
St. James Episcopal Church, Great Barrington, MA

- Founded 1762 by SPG missionaries
- First full-time rector baptized over 2,000 people
- 1850s building
- Church of establishment
- Long, slow decline
Fall of the Wall (July 31, 2008)
Relying Upon Hospitality of World

- What is essential to being church together?
Gideon’s Garden
Discussion Questions

- When have you experienced God’s Spirit alive and moving within your congregation’s life? What about in the neighborhood or in your daily life? Share a story of this.

- Share a story of a time when you received or depended upon the hospitality of strangers. What did it feel like? What happened there?
Leading Missional Learning Communities

Dwight Zscheile
Where Are We?

• What if we’re in the biblical wilderness or exile?
• What if our primary challenge is to rediscover our identity as disciples in a strange new land?
• Disciple = learner
Leading Begins with Following

- Challenge of our own discipleship
- Distractions!
- Simplifying
- Time
Fostering Learning Communities

- Technical problems vs. adaptive challenges

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Technical Problems</th>
<th>Adaptive Challenges</th>
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<tr>
<td>Can by solved with existing knowledge</td>
<td>Require new learning</td>
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<tr>
<td>Experts can handle</td>
<td>Learning/innovation must come from the people</td>
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<td>Operating environment basically stable</td>
<td>Changing environment</td>
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<td>Can be dealt with on level of strategy/technique</td>
<td>Touch on underlying issues of identity and purpose</td>
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Source: Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky, *Leadership on the Line*
The Lord answered her, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.”

Practices: Dwelling in the Word

• “Where was your imagination caught?”
Practices: Dwelling in the World

• Think back to a time during the past week when you had an opportunity to share the peace
• What was God doing there? What might God like to do?
Discovering Our Callings

- Fostering corporate and personal discernment
- How are we called to participate in God’s mission in our time and place?
- Following the energy
Ongoing Discernment

• Re-envisioning Board
  ▫ Lead spiritual discernment team

• Adult Forum
  ▫ Cultivating communal conversation
Appreciative Inquiry

- Participatory visioning process based on identifying strengths through storytelling
- Taking what is best into the future
- Narrating who we are when we’re most alive, engaged
- Identifying themes
Interpretive Leadership

“We tend to forget, in this day of bureaucratic organization and non-directive therapy, that the first duty of a Christian leader is to provide a Christian perspective, an interpretive framework for people who want to live faithful lives.”

—Scott Cormode, Making Spiritual Sense
Leadership as Cultivation

“Rather than the leader having plans and strategies that the congregation will affirm and follow, cultivation describes the leader as the one who works the soil of the congregation so as to invite and constitute the environment for the people of God to discern what the Spirit is doing in, with, and among them as a community.”

Forming the Questions

“The role of leaders is not to be better role models or to drive change; their role is to create the structures and experiences that bring citizens together to identify and solve their own issues.... This begins by realizing that the questions are important, more important than the answers.”

—Peter Block, *Community: The Structure of Belonging* (Barrett-Koehler, 2009)
Risk and Experimentation

- Good mistakes and bad mistakes
- Legitimizing failure in name of innovation
- How Jesus formed his community of disciples
  - Process of relational apprenticeship
  - Opportunities to try things out
  - Mistakes without shaming
Exploring Assumptions

• “The key to dealing with complexity is to focus on having good conversations about assumptions.”
  —Vijay Govindarajan and Chris Trimble, *The Other Side of Innovation*

• Reordering congregational life around innovation, while providing enough stability that people will risk learning
The Learning Leader

- From professional expert provider of religious goods and services...
- ...to curator of community of practice and discovery
- Embracing what we don’t know
- Giving away what we do know
Cultivating a Posture of Wonder

• “When you consider the gifts God has given us and the needs of our world, what future do you imagine God is bringing forth in our midst?”

• Importance of play, imagination
  ▫ Art, Legos, menus, stories

• The outsider’s voice
Discussion Questions

• What are you currently doing in ministry that can be given away/shared? What does your community need specifically from you?

• Where might a new future be emerging within the life of your faith community? How can you recognize it?