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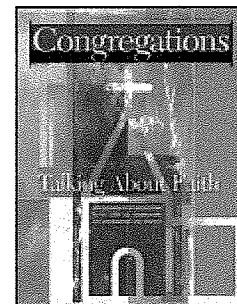
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CONGREGATIONS

Fall 2005

Becoming God's Church

A New Congregation Finds its Place in God's Unfolding Story



"This stuff is way too churchy!" the marketing director proclaimed as my wife and I sat down to discuss how to tell the community that a new congregation was being formed in Naples, Florida. "Too churchy!" she advised as we presented our concepts for a brochure that would be mailed to every household in a 20-mile radius. We had consulted the marketing director at the recommendation of the Florida Conference of the United Methodist Church, which thought a marketing company would be helpful in developing a plan for launching a new congregation. Cornerstone United Methodist Church was about to be born and the marketing director was to help midwife that process. But upon consulting with her we discovered that she thought our ideas were way off base.

After looking at our humble brochure, she suggested removing any language that might offend or distract people from considering Cornerstone. "Do not use the word 'church.' Instead, try 'community' or 'family,'" she advised. "Take out any reference to Jesus Christ; you know we don't want anyone to be turned off." In an instant the marketing world was taking hold of the story that would let everyone know about Cornerstone. With some new suggestions and formatting, our marketing director was developing a story that would accommodate the masses. It was deception, and every bad image of the marketing world began to flood our minds. Why hide behind fancy language that appeals to everyone? Why use images of perfect people in the brochure, which was supposed to be about the celebration of diversity through Jesus Christ?

To follow the advice of the marketing director would be to participate in consumer deception. This was the beginning of a participation in the narrative of the church, which was not to be manipulated and distorted. The church is a people called to worship, celebrate, and invite everyone to participate in the grace of God. So we told the marketing director to develop the brochure with the language we had prepared, the language she had told us would not work. Within this context Cornerstone began to share its story, and that story is beyond human control. Together, my wife and I decided that honesty about God's call and work was far more important than selling the church like some consumer commodity.

This story of marketing the church is crucial for understanding what and who Cornerstone was to become. In the first few months of the church's organization, a launch team was developed to help discern how we could become God's church together. During meetings, the launch team would pray, study, and discuss what it meant to participate in the work of God as the church. They drew heavily upon the book of Acts, and the text that seemed to jump off the page was Acts 2:42-43: "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone..."¹. The early Christian community was helping to form and inform the team about the good work of worship. This work was to be a participation in the story that transcends time and culture. It is God's story and a privilege to be a part of it.

The core elements of the early worshipping community celebrated those things that were a means of grace. The center of this celebration was worship. Worship shared more about the church's identity than any marketing strategy or brochure. Participating in worship and practicing those things that transcend time had to be our center as well, so

that is where we began—with worship. God had laid out, through these practices that transcend time and culture, a model for worship that is beyond human agendas. Initially, many on the launch team thought this sounded a lot like the same old story. “Why do we want to just reinvent the wheel that is leading the church to its death?” My response to their questions was one of affirmation and it caught many of them by surprise: “Yes, it is the same story, but it is never old!” While many of the practices discussed had been celebrated throughout the years, it was not those “core elements” that were getting old but rather the human traditions that surrounded them that stifled the breath of the Holy Spirit. It was in committing to God’s tremendous gifts that led the church to a place of creative and imaginative freedom.

If the church is serious about its full and humble participation in God’s story, then the church really does have something to offer! If this is all about God, and not about establishing human social clubs and institutions, then it opens the door for the serious work of inviting everyone to worship. As vessels for the work of the Lord, the practices that transcend time form the church into a community that is hospitable to all who come. If this is the focus, then worship itself becomes the invitation, and, in gathering, the church gives flesh to those gifted practices.

So Cornerstone invited everybody to come and worship. Many came, from all over Naples and even Fort Myers. They came to see what was going on, what God was doing in the midst of a new congregation. Worship had taken on new significance, and within this celebration those participating found new freedom. If this action is seriously about God, then the practices that appeared old gave new breath to creative imagination and freedom in worship. Traditions based on human agendas or a need for comfort (such as a particular dress code), which restricted the invitation for all to come and worship, were no longer in place. These old “gatekeepers” had fallen away. People came to worship in suits and ties, shorts and t-shirts. They were young and old, of different races, and from different socioeconomic classes. If this was all about worshipping God, then it was not limited by our human agendas but liberated for all to offer their human expression of praise and thanksgiving. The “core” elements transcend time and culture, but the work of the people comes from various forms of imaginative expression. As the congregation sang together, some would clap, raise their hands, and literally dance unto the Lord. Others would sit reflectively, but everyone was free to be present before the Lord without the pressure of congregational or denominational stereotypes. Together the community found that God’s formative story was being unleashed. “Come as you are” became Cornerstone’s invitation as we set our hearts toward becoming God’s church.

It was an early Sunday morning when I experienced a vivid image of the Kingdom breaking through at Cornerstone. As I walked through the cafeteria/sanctuary I saw a young man named Jimbo sitting with one of the oldest and most conservative participants of the church. They were having a deep conversation, and then they laughed together. There was Jimbo, sitting with hair down to his hips, tattoos all over his arms, in a t-shirt and blue jeans talking with an elderly gentleman in a suit and tie. They were really talking, sharing, and interested in each other. I thought to myself, “Where is the camera?” These two individuals were from very different places in life, but none of that mattered in this time and space. They had come to the church with the same purpose: to worship. The invitation was for all, and they were receiving each other in the unity of the Holy Spirit. They had gathered to receive from the Lord and in that moment they were willing to receive from each other. As everyone was invited to come and receive the Eucharist meal that day, they stood next to each other, hands cupped, bread and wine offered.

In the weeks and months that followed the initial launch of Cornerstone, music took on a whole new form. We began singing the historic hymns of the church but welcomed musical expressions from everyone. One morning I brought my guitar to church and shared a song I had written a few weeks earlier. The very next week a gentleman came up to me and asked if he could play his own guitar in church with me. By the end of the month there was a full-fledged rock band sharing songs in worship. The choir began to sing songs from various traditions, and soloists came forward offering contemporary music as well as some “high church” Latin chants. Cornerstone did not begin with the intention of offering one style of music over another but patiently and openly waited to see what gifts God would generate from the congregation itself. The imaginative space that was offered through participating in the narrative form of the church was taking on flesh. Participants were starting to understand that God initiates a whole diversity of gifts and people. When gathering, it was not to judge brothers or sisters based on our personal preferences but to celebrate

whatever those brothers and sisters bring to offer the Lord. It is in offering that the community begins to see the real beauty of worship. While music styles change with the times and other artistic means of expression give testimony to our place in time and culture, worship centered on the apostolic core gives the solid foundation upon which these human means of expression can find voice. "Let's celebrate it all" became our rallying cry as Cornerstone continued its journey toward becoming God's church.

"Becoming God's church" was the essence of what the congregation was learning together in those early years as Cornerstone participated in worship and practiced God's unfolding story. The practice formed by narrative was liberating the church to share and express itself in new and old ways. The "practices" were calling everyone to participate in worship. Cornerstone uses the phrase "becoming God's church" in all humility. This is not our church to control or manipulate; all belongs to God. "Becoming" indicates that all participants are on the journey of faith, and the practices that form the community have been made available for all throughout the ages. When the Body of Christ, the church, is about the business of "becoming," it removes the dross that clogs the free-flowing winds of celebration and transformation. "Becoming God's church" also helps in acknowledging all those who have gone before and have contributed to the growth and health of the church. Those from the "old school" have a voice in this new day as well. Their experiences and struggles contribute to who the church is today and call the church to move forward in faith.

It was at a co-ed softball game that the word "becoming" took on new life. The softball team was participating in a heated match with one of our sister churches down the road when a lady sat down on the bleachers to watch a bit of the mayhem that was taking place on the field. The children of the church were playing on the bleacher in front of her when I heard her ask one of them, "What church is this?" Seven-year-old Kyle turned to the lady and said, "Cornerstone United Methodist!" "Where is that church?" the lady asked. Kyle thought for a moment and then proclaimed, "They're out there on the field." The walls of the church building had fallen down to reveal the true church. It was the Body, the people, gathered to participate in the formative practices of faith. Not finished yet but out on the field playing the game, striving together with great patience and fellowship to bring home a run.

Worship means much more than simply gathering on Sunday and "playing" church. It is in and through worship that disciples are formed in the image of Christ. Where that formation takes those who follow is back out into the world. If the church participates in those practices that transcend time and culture, it also equips the church to let God take the lead in everything it does. If the priority of gathering is God, it moves the church away from simply seeking its own kudos and opens the door for genuine dialogue and serious discernment. Does this work all the time? No. But it is in striving that the community grows, and it is in the struggle that the community finds direction, and it is in faith that the church seeks to bear good fruit.

In the second year of ministry at Cornerstone, the church council decided to seriously consider what it meant to be a missional church. There were already many opportunities being born inside the walls of the church for persons to plug in and serve, but what about giving toward ministry and mission outside of those walls? After much prayer and discernment Cornerstone decided to become a mission-giving church. Ten percent of all the gifts received every Sunday would go directly to mission. This proposal was met with some resistance. After all, Cornerstone was a new congregation and was barely making it on her own. The process took several months before all members of the church council agreed that this was the direction God was leading. So Cornerstone began giving 10 percent, off the top, to those serving and reaching out beyond the walls of the church. Where did this practice take its shape? At the Eucharist table, in which God's divine economy is shared with all who would receive it—a free gift of grace offered without price.

In its fourth year Cornerstone began reflecting on what it meant to be a full participant in the life of the church. It appeared that God was more interested in disciples than members, so the process of discerning what intentional formation might look like began. With the help of several leaders in the congregation, a 28-week Christian formation class was written. The class would be required of anyone desiring to "become" with us at Cornerstone. "Sojourners Class" was born and to date we have offered over 15 of these classes. With each class, participants are asked to give

public affirmation, enter into covenant relationships with God and each other, pray together, and be consecrated into a ministry of the church. This intentional formation process has discouraged some, frightened many, and blessed God's church. Where did this practice take shape? At the baptismal font as the church celebrates dying and rising with Christ. As people are initiated into the community of faith and welcomed on the journey. If worship is intentional, formative education should be taken just as seriously.

Just this year Cornerstone has embarked on a new adventure. Last summer Cornerstone had the privilege of having its first Haitian intern sent from Duke Divinity School. Louis came to serve and brought many Haitian families to church as a result of his presence. Louis went back to school to finish his last semester, but when spring came around, God had planted a vision of ministry that would present a whole new mindset for the church. Louis was appointed to launch a Creole service through Cornerstone. What is so different about this is that we are not seeking to start a Haitian church out of Cornerstone but to bring the Haitian culture and people to Cornerstone as one united body. First, in order for this opportunity to work, the church must be open to all God's people. Second, those involved in launching this new opportunity must be able to see beyond the cultural divisions that exist in our world today. Most denominations do very well at starting ethnic churches for ethnic people, but bringing the cultures together is often scary. Where did this opportunity take shape? In worship as the community was called to hospitality, welcome, and invitation. It is not about us or those we want to see in church. It is all about God and who God wants to see in the church! This requires a complete surrender of self as Cornerstone gathers to do the work of worship and participate in the narrative that moves those participating outside the box.

"This stuff is way too churchy!" Yes, it is! Praise be to God, who has offered the gifts and grace to be the church. In working together, Cornerstone is still becoming and participating in God's grand narrative, which brings the community beyond the limitations of self and sets those practicing the faith free to worship outside the box. During the nine years that Cornerstone has been in existence we have found that it is not slick marketing or homogenized targeting that makes a new congregation work but rather the genuine participation with God, through the practices that transcend time and culture: opening the doors for creative expression and welcoming hospitality.

Questions for Reflection

- Does your congregation consider itself "becoming" or "established?" In what ways would using the language of "becoming" facilitate decisions made at your church?
- Whom do you see when you look out over your congregation? Would God celebrate the diversity of the people and gifts represented there?
- What is the image the community has of your congregation?
- How are individuals seeking membership formed in your congregation? Is the work of formation intentional or accommodating?
- What are the primary practices that form and give your congregation its identity? Where are those practices celebrated?
- Is worship the central activity of your congregation? Does your worship lead others out into mission and ministry in the world?
- Does your congregation find worship itself to be a primary means of evangelism?
- What things stifle the breath of the Holy Spirit in your community? What practices or traditions based on human needs or agendas exist that stifle such breath?
- What are the stories in your congregation that give testimony to God's Kingdom breaking through?

NOTES

1. From the *New Revised Standard Version of the Bible* (NRSV).
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