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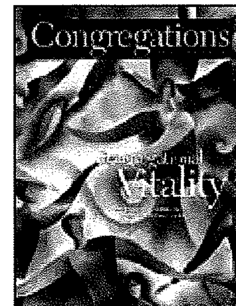

A Tale of Two Churches

DIANA BUTLER BASS CONSIDERS HOW WE CAN FOSTER VITALITY IN MAINLINE CONGREGATIONS

I graduated from college in 1981, not exactly a banner year for mainline Protestantism. More than a decade of numerical decline and internal conflict had taken a toll on old-line denominations as these once-unassailable churches found themselves dethroned as chapels of the American establishment. Evangelical Protestants grabbed Ronald Reagan's coattails—and headlines—when their preachers, folk like Jerry Falwell and Jim Bakker, rode a wave of populist discontent all the way to Washington. Not only did growing evangelical influence in national politics humiliate the mainline: evangelical churches were growing, too. Scottsdale Bible Church in Scottsdale, Arizona, the once-small fundamentalist church where I worshiped as a teenager, moved out of the building it shared with a Jewish congregation and moved into a sun-drenched structure that looked like a corporate headquarters. On Sunday mornings local police directed traffic jams caused by brand-new Cadillacs and Lincolns competing for space in the sprawling parking lot.

Perhaps I was a 21-year-old contrarian, but when Protestant evangelicals hit the big time, I decided to hit the spiritual road. During my senior year in college, I left fundamentalism and opted for mainline Protestantism. Mainline church was my parents' religion. They were Methodists, and as a child so was I. I did not, however, go home to United Methodism. Instead, with full knowledge that I was joining what my friends ridiculed as a "dying church," I became an Episcopalian during my senior year in college.

A Struggle to Survive

After graduation, I worked as a church receptionist while saving money for seminary. For six months, I answered phones at Glass and Garden Community Church, a congregation of the Reformed Church in America, while I attended St. Stephen's Episcopal Church—both in Scottsdale. I had not been part of a mainline congregation in a decade. But in spring 1982, I found myself—between work and worship—in two of them. Those churches presented me with a Dickensian tale of mainline Protestantism: "It was the best of times; it was the worst of times."

At Glass and Garden, times were pretty rough. The minister was an old-fashioned liberal who tried to make the gospel relevant by planting a drive-in church. In a radical departure from his Midwestern roots, Reverend Goulooze built a glass sanctuary, replete with both real and plastic plants, with a small stream running through the building. To attract Sunbelt immigrants, the decor minimized "offensive" Christian symbols. Worshipers could either sit in this oasis-like sanctuary or listen in their cars via the then high-tech sound system. Goulooze, a seminary classmate of Robert Schuller's, was a lovely man who thought that Norman Vincent Peale was the greatest theologian of the 20th century. This pastor's sermons generally consisted of feel-good pep talks. Worship focused on the sermon, framed by a few Victorian hymns accompanied on an electronic organ.

On Tuesday mornings, Pastor Goulooze would sometimes sit at my desk and wonder why no one was coming to church. After the initial novelty of a drive-in church wore off, people lost interest in Glass and Garden. Scottsdale Bible Church had built its fundamentalist cathedral less than two miles away, while this congregation struggled to survive. I longed to tell the pastor why, but I never did. Despite its hip packaging, Glass and Garden was the same

old mainline congregation—dependent on ethnic identity and generational loyalty for members, theologically sentimental and undemanding, and wed to enervated worship. Glass and Garden was dying because it offered so little. I may have worked there, but I could never have joined the congregation. A generation of people like me needed a reason to go to and *to be* the church.

A Vital Community

Every Sunday, I worshiped at St. Stephen's, a homey Episcopal parish, where things were better—much better. The people of St. Stephen's would not remember me; I quietly sojourned among them. I never talked to anyone—except briefly to the rector. They, however, witnessed to me about mainline vitality.

My first Sunday at St. Stephen's was a baptism—something I had not yet witnessed as a new Episcopalian. The denomination had recently revised its *Book of Common Prayer,* and its baptismal liturgy was considered central to God's vision for the church: the service proclaims, in robust theological language, the essentials of Christian identity and vocation.

"There is one Body and one Spirit," Father Bailey began. We responded, "There is one hope in God's call to us." I participated eagerly as I watched a child whom I would never know brought into God's family, and as we claimed the baptismal covenant on her behalf.

"Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?" asked the priest. "I will, with God's help," we all responded.

As I vowed to repent, proclaim the gospel, serve God's people, and work for justice and peace, I entered into baptism's theological mystery. This liturgy proclaimed that Christianity was a distinctive way of life and a journey into God—a way of life and a pilgrimage to which I had been bound before I could even speak.

While attending newcomer classes at St. Stephen's, I figured out that Father Bailey was, like Pastor Goulooze, theologically liberal. He did not approve of fundamentalism and biblical literalism. But his liberalism was not like any liberalism I understood. Not sentimental, he spoke of "Anglican tradition" as if it were a living thing. He prodded the congregation toward "wholeness" and "justice." His theology embodied a dynamic, healing vision of God. His spirituality was both grounded and open—reflecting the congregation as I experienced it. St. Stephen's was not a large church, but it was a vital one—a place where God was obviously present in community.

I would go to back to work at Glass and Garden on Monday, refreshed and reinvigorated. Then I would listen to Pastor Goulooze fret over attendance and stewardship. I asked myself: Why the difference between these two churches? What makes one so lively, while the other struggles to survive?

Questionable Statistics

The question of mainline vitality has become one of the guiding questions of my vocational life. As a scholar, teacher, and writer, as well as a congregant, seminary professor, and denominational leader, I deal with these concerns daily.

I have, of course, not been alone in my concerns. During these lean years, a kind of "decline industry" has developed around these questions. Books offer answers and quick fixes to grow. Organizations have been born, each claiming to know the reason for decline, each trying to rouse the rest of us to follow its church-growth plan. "Mainline decline" has become a tool for various interest groups in our denominations.

However, much of decline data is problematic. Statistics are outdated or have been disproved. Yes, mainline membership rolls have shrunk, congregations are struggling to survive, and a clergy shortage threatens. But the precipitous drops have slowed or stopped. In summer 2002, both the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America reported losses so small as to be statistically insignificant. A decade ago, the Episcopal Church hit a low of about 2.5 million and has maintained that number since. In addition, scholars have

become much more sophisticated about numbers. The decline of the 1960s and 1970s followed unprecedented increases in the 1950s—numbers that created a "false high" from which to measure vitality. When compounded with demographic factors of childbirth, aging, education, and mobility, the mainline suffered worst when cultural trends conspired against it. Instead of counting members, many denominations now track attendance. These statistics tentatively indicate that while people hesitate to join mainline churches officially, more are attending than in a generation.

While none of this is great news ("Yippee! We stopped bleeding!"), it is not bad news either. Like Wall Street, we may be bumping along at the bottom of a long bear market.

What Fosters Vitality?

More significant than numbers, however, are anecdotal reports of vitality from across the mainline. These days, every mainline leader seems to know the story of St. What-a-Surprise, a particularly vital, healthy, and growing congregation in his or her town. In recent years, I have heard this tale repeatedly—an old, dying, often urban, church is now thriving.

But what fosters this vitality? How did St. What-a-Surprise do it? What was the difference between a Glass and Garden and a St. Stephen's?

Over the years, church leaders have advanced a number of explanations and programmatic responses to answer these questions. Unlike some observers of mainline religion, I do not think a specific plan or program creates vitality. Rather, I believe that vitality is as unique as a congregation itself. Individual experiences of vitality can be grouped into four general categories:

- the evangelical style,
- the new paradigm style,
- the diagnostic style, and
- the intentional (or practicing) congregational style.

Each style may promote vitality under some circumstances, but of the four, the last—the intentional congregation—offers the greatest hope for mainline churches.

A Matter of Style

In 1972, Dean M. Kelley outlined the evangelical style in his book *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing* (New York: Harper & Row). By suggesting that conservative theology directly corresponded to vitality, Kelley implied that to reverse the decline, congregations and denominations needed to embrace evangelicalism. Denominational conservatives loved Kelley's book. And his thesis rang true in the 1970s and early 1980s, during the high tide of the Jesus movement, the Moral Majority, and the charismatic revival. Many of the current denominational renewal movements took their cue from Kelley and his followers.

The "new paradigm" style arose in imitation of the success of Willow Creek Community Church, a "megachurch" in South Barrington, Illinois, near Chicago. This strategy suggested that mainline churches would grow if they minimized their distinctiveness and offered seekers what they wanted—an anonymous, symbolically neutral, user-friendly church. This market-driven approach resonated with the materially successful baby boomers, who were thronging back to church in the late 1980s and early 1990s—people turned off by traditional religion.

The third, the diagnostic style, borrowed insights from psychological therapy and the social sciences. Its proponents contended that mainline congregations suffered from systemic problems inhibiting vitality—most of which could be cured by a skilled practitioner. This approach has been most successfully presented by the Alban Institute, by mainline seminaries, and by some of the denominations themselves. According to this theory, neither mainline theology nor traditions are necessarily problematic. Rather, the institutions themselves are somehow "broken" and

need to be repaired. Once correctly diagnosed and readjusted, congregations can get on with "being church."

When the Theories Don't Fit

All three of the styles described above have, in certain cases, worked—as attested to by a legion of publications, conferences, and devoted fans. However, *not one* of them explains what happened at Glass and Garden and St. Stephen's.

Analyzed by the evangelical theory, Glass and Garden failed because it subscribed to Protestant liberalism and lacked the rigor of conservative thought. However, by that measure, St. Stephen's should have failed as well. St. Stephen's was both lively *and* liberal. Its vision statement still reveals a progressive impulse: that the community is "grounded in the scriptural messages of wisdom, mercy, and justice," enabling "God's people to engage in co-creation through a nurturing environment." According to this thesis, however, St. Stephen's should have declined—and probably should no longer exist.

Measured against the "new paradigm" theory, Glass and Garden should have succeeded and St. Stephen's should have failed. Glass and Garden muted denominational distinctiveness, created a symbolically neutral worship space, and geared its services toward seekers. St. Stephen's met in a Spanish adobe building with stained-glass windows and icons; it had two unwieldy worship books (a hymnal and a prayerbook) for the liturgically unskilled to navigate. Yet the parish's newcomer class was full—while Glass and Garden looked in vain for new faces. In the case of these two churches, the one laden with art, architecture, and liturgy from the Christian past displayed more vitality than did the presumably nonthreatening one.

According to the diagnostic theory, Glass and Garden likely suffered from some dysfunction, while St. Stephen's must have been a generally healthy congregation. However, neither seemed notably better or worse than other congregations of which I have been a member. Both appear, in retrospect, to have suffered from a modicum of conflict and dysfunction. Leadership was not an issue, either. Each pastor was a thoughtful, theologically mature person with a clear sense of identity and vision. But only St. Stephen's was full of life.

The Intentional Congregation

Mainline observers have largely overlooked an outside-the-box possibility—the emergence of a fourth style, the intentional (or practicing) congregation. The omission stems from the fact that these congregations form no national movement and claim no single source of inspiration. They have no party, no platform, no seminary, no publication, and no organization. Each is a unique and inventive blend of local vision, denominational identity, and Christian practice. Such congregations exist. I know. Over the years, I have been a member of a number of them.

Intentional congregations are neither "conservative" nor "liberal." They are not seeker oriented, but seekers are attracted by their spiritual practices. Like any other human community, they have their share of conflict and dysfunction. These churches resist labeling, serve no identifiable theological "party," and reject programmatic fixes. Here's how I would define them:

> In these congregations, transmission of identity, tradition, and practice occurs not by birth, and thus, it is not assumed; rather, transmission occurs through choice and through reflective engagement, as a process both individual and communal. These churches tend to be theologically moderate-to-liberal and are reinvigorating historic practices based upon ancient Christian tradition; they might also be called "neo-traditional," because they reach back so as to move forward. In these congregations, people choose to embrace or recreate practices drawn from the long Christian tradition—practices that bind them together and connect them with older patterns of living as meaningful ways to relate to a post-Christian society.

These congregations have developed against the backdrop of decline—often struggling alone to be faithful against great odds.

A Rich Resource for Churches

St. Stephen's was an intentional congregation. Its life was shaped by the practices of thanksgiving (the Eucharist), compassion (works of mercy and justice), and healing (personal and corporate wholeness and pastoral care), which were grounded in—and formed by—Anglican tradition. Two decades after my brief pilgrimage among the people of St. Stephen's, their vision statement proclaims the purposeful faith that I, a stranger, once sensed there: "We are committed to providing experiences for the celebration of God's gifts through the practice of kindness and hospitality."

Because of its innate creativity, resonance with tradition, and insistence upon Christian distinctiveness, the intentional, or practicing, pattern may be the richest resource for mainline Protestants who seek to revitalize congregations and move ahead in mission. But to draw upon it, we need to see it, name it, and continually commit ourselves to the way of life given through our baptism. We must teach and nurture this vision, and be willing to change as God's spirit directs. When we really live in community—as if our very lives depended on practicing our faith—I can guarantee that our congregations will be more vital. The past 20 years may have been the worst of times, but perhaps those years have forced us to recognize the goodness of grace and wisdom embodied in the ways we practice Christian faith. Instead of weeping over numbers, it is time to appreciate where God has taken us. For some of us, the worst has brought out our very best.

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