Off-road ministry: What I learned from mountain biking

by Pamela Fickenscher in the March 6, 2007 issue

For five years, from 1997 to 2002, I was pastor of a congregation of mostly 20- and 30-somethings, a group some would call postmodern or—though this term appeared later—"emergent." Spirit Garage, the "church with the really big door," was born in the Uptown neighborhood of Minneapolis, an area populated by thousands of young people, including students and those working their first postcollege jobs. The neighborhood had plenty of churches, but most were not very successful at reaching this particular population. So Bethlehem Lutheran decided to start a new worshiping community of young adults. Within a year we had more than 100 young people worshiping regularly.

People would frequently ask us about our model or formula for this ministry. I could never give much of an answer because so much of what we were doing seemed instinctive. I still find it hard to describe the "hows" of it. But I have found a way to pass on what wisdom I have about ministry in the postmodern era, based on my involvement, while at Spirit Garage, in racing mountain bikes.

I can't really explain why I decided to be part of a relay team racing for 24 hours up, down and across ski slopes on a bike. There is no rational reason for doing such a thing. But I can give a relational (and thereby postmodern) reason: my husband talked me into it. Along the way I learned eight lessons that are as applicable to ministry as they are to biking. (Though I no longer serve at Spirit Garage, it continues to be a worshiping community, so I will often use the present tense.)

It's about the experience. People who are passionate about mountain biking are convinced that only people who have experienced the same pain, the same rush of feeling your bike underneath you hurtle over tree roots and rocks—only those people can really understand the experience. Thus the first rule is simply: you have to be there. I thought the sport was crazy before I started it and continued to feel that way at the beginning of every ride. But once I was rolling, once I'd hopped the

first rock, those doubts evaporated.

The early versions of seeker-oriented worship took the approach that Christian faith could be introduced in a way that removed the cultural barriers so often present in worship. The seeker service was largely a presentation bracketed with peppy music, a sort of infomercial *about* Christianity that did little to actually expose a seeker to the experience of worship. Intellectual commitment to something called faith was assumed to be a prerequisite to the actual experience of belonging to a Christian community. Once you made that commitment you might "graduate" to participation in a small group and attendance at a service that included Bible study or Holy Communion.

By contrast, postmodern or emergent forms of worship assume that the only way a person becomes committed to community is by living in community. The only way one comes to faith is by experiencing the actions of faith: prayer, study, giving, communion. Rather than talk about faith, we invite people into faith community. The questions and struggles that arise are best answered within the context of community instead of in a presentation.

You think you're on the edge? *You're not even close*. Hurtling downhill on narrow, rock-studded dirt trails might sound extreme enough. But there are people who do this every weekend. And some people do it for 24 hours straight. I thought a 24-hour relay seemed like a pretty big deal by itself until I learned that there are soloists who race the whole 24 hours by themselves. And then there are those who race solo on single-speed bikes. Hello, knee surgery. But hey—it's more "real" that way.

Postmodern culture is a search for what is real. Sensation is essential to it. Many postmoderns are not content with what we would consider simple experience. They want it to be more intense, more real, more transformational. If you begin transforming worship to reach postmoderns, people will soon be asking, "How can we go further?"

When I started Spirit Garage, I thought we were a little "out there." After all, we were meeting in theaters and worshiping amid the sets for *Debbie Does Dallas* and for a play about the Armenian Holocaust. Our space was only a church as long as we were gathered there. We had a rock band good enough to play in secular clubs.

But we were not at all on the real edge of mainstream culture. Yes, we had lots of people with tattoos and piercings and facial hair. We had Goths and bikers and

recovering addicts and adrenaline freaks and Scrabble champions. But it was clear to me that my role was to constantly point outside the community, both to the further edges of the culture that we weren't reaching and to the larger church, which seemed as foreign to people in our church as we were to it. What is real is the property of neither "edgy" postmodern culture nor the church; it belongs to God, who holds them both.

Show your scars. I spent one summer of my life hardly ever wearing shorts because my legs were so nicked up with scabs and scrapes from my weekly falls on the course. Even people who didn't know me very well would immediately stare at my legs and ask, "What happened to you?" This is not the reaction any woman wants in regard to her legs. However, I'm actually proud of those scars. They mean that I'm out there.

One of the comments most frequently made about Spirit Garage is that it is an authentic community. To a lot of people, being authentic means that our brokenness is evident. There is no smooth polish or veneer put on our failings as individuals or as a community. People weep openly in worship and are not afraid to say exactly what they think about the church, about God—and about the mess the world is in.

While many traditions have taught preachers to leave the "I" out of their sermons, postmodern audiences are hungry for the messenger and the message to draw closer together. Personal experience is granted far more authority than academic learning or even the scriptures themselves. I had to learn to preach in a way that approached testimony more than exegesis.

Of course, there is always a danger in acts of self-revelation that the gospel will be buried under the focus on personal experience, that the "for example" of God working in my life will be heard as *the* example. Moreover, the preacher has to be very cautious about his or her motives for self-revelation. Does this story add to or detract from the power of the gospel? My personal rule of thumb was that I needed to reveal my scars, but never my open wounds. If God had worked in my life to accompany me through difficulties, to heal wounds, then that witness could powerfully reach those who were hurting now. But my current struggles of faith were not to be worked out in the pulpit.

Eat early and often. After only one lap of the course, I was astonished by how much I needed to eat. Not that I was hungry, mind you. Endurance athletes learn quickly

that you need to drink before you are thirsty and eat even though your body isn't signaling hunger. Failure to stay a step ahead of the body's signals results in dehydration and, without carbs, the "bonk." So you carry energy bars and multiple water bottles. Food planning becomes the primary work of the team.

Ditto for Spirit Garage. When Spirit Garage began in 1997, the few allies I found were from nonconfessional, nonliturgical traditions, people well versed in praise music and biblical messages but unfamiliar with traditional liturgical order. But weekly Eucharist was a theological bottom line for me, and I had a hunch that it could be the core of hospitality to those who were seeking Jesus. Imagine my surprise when I found Southern Baptists and nondenominational ministers rediscovering the Lord's Supper in their own churches! Not only that, some were discovering Luther's theology of the real presence.

Perhaps it was the generational shift toward experience that led so many churches to stop worrying about their PowerPoints and start focusing on the bread and wine. Perhaps, amid all the "virtual" ways that this generation has learned to connect, there is still a powerful need for the tangible, face-to-face connection of serving one another heavenly food. Perhaps it was the fact that this meal is always word and meal, that the celebration of the Eucharist gives us an opportunity to tell the central story of our faith every time it is celebrated. That story I told in the sermon linking the gospel to the film *Moulin Rouge* might have flopped, but the presence of Christ is still here, in bread and wine, in community gathered, named and claimed as Jesus' own.

Gear is good, *practice is better*. Like any hobby, mountain biking has its own little industry that convinces you that you really need about $8,500 worth of gear to enjoy being outside. There are vast catalogs of parts, gloves, jerseys, shoes, headlights and water bottles, all in the latest colors and the most high-tech materials. Facing more time in a bike seat than ever before, much of it in complete darkness, I did spend a bit on gear. It was easy to see how I'd need it. But all the gear in the world does not prepare you for the trail. The times we actually rode the course all night were worth far more than my stuff—and there's nothing more satisfying than passing somebody on a bike that cost twice as much as yours.

People assume that ministry with young adults has to have lots of bells and whistles—full band, stellar sound system, a killer Web site and a big screen. But the gear is not the point. No one ever left Spirit Garage because it wasn't high-tech

enough. What really makes us who we are is practice. The practices are common to most Christian communities, but at Spirit Garage they are carried out in an intentionally contextual way. We pray and lay hands on one another; we testify to what God has done in our lives; we read scripture and gather around Jesus' table; we regularly give a portion of our offerings to others outside our community; we use our musical and artistic gifts to express our faith in worship and in ways that reach out to others.

Sometimes working in the dark is easier. The part of the 24-hour relay that frightened me the most turned out to be the most enjoyable. Riding in the dark with nothing but the bike's own light on the trail focused me and calmed me. I had to slow up a little, but I fell less often and felt better because there was nothing but me and the trail to worry about. The competition aspect that was so apparent at the start of the race fell away as people began to focus only on the path ahead.

There is a lot of darkness in ministry of any kind. So many of the struggles that are associated with youth—fear of commitment, financial debt, restlessness, depression, drug and alcohol dependence, sexual infidelity—are present in every congregation. My ministry is no different from anyone else's in that respect. At Spirit Garage we found that acknowledging that darkness did nothing to diminish the light of Christ. In fact, acknowledging the difficulties we faced allowed us to be gentler with one another. As Philo said, "Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a great battle."

I found a tremendous receptivity to the gospel once people figured out that we did not define *faith* as certainty. As one of our members put it, "Here I don't feel like I have to have my act together. In fact, when I'm here, I know it's not an act."

Keep your eyes on where you want to go, *not on what you want to avoid*. I expected that mountain biking would get me in shape. And it did, perhaps the best shape of my life. But what most surprised me was the mental discipline it took to make it through a course in one piece. I quickly learned that most of mountain biking is in the eyes. The bike will follow you where you look. If you watch fellow bikers crash, you're likely to end up as part of the crash. If you obsess about that rock or tree you don't want to hit, you will run into it.

Bikers talk of finding a "line," which means focusing on the track you need your wheels to follow rather than on the obstacles you wish to avoid. Train your eyes; the bike will follow. Get sloppy vision, and you will be off your bike—and on your

back—in a heartbeat.

Many people of my generation—unchurched, dechurched and overchurched—are good at being against things. We've seen way too many messes made in our lifetime but often lack the ability to envision a better way. We're against bad marriages, so we fear commitment. We're against environmental damage, but don't know how to break free of the consumer culture that drives it. We're against phony politics, but often fail to get involved, or even vote. We're against boring, irrelevant or hypocritical churches, but fear investing ourselves in the human institution that the church inevitably is.

After being around Spirit Garage for a while, people eventually discovered that, indeed, this was a human community. We struggled about growth, about music, about clashing personalities. We struggled with our relationship to the church that started us and the denomination that supported us. And our members struggled with finding a way out of the fear of hypocrisy and into a faith that was passionate but also allowed to fail and that could let others fail. My job in preaching became to point out the "line," the path that Jesus showed amid all the obstacles, and to reassure people that no matter how big the rock or how wide the tree, there was a way through.

Fall down, *get back up*. After I had been hiding scabs and scrapes for about a month, someone asked me, "So, is falling down just part of the sport?" I answered, "Yes." It's like skiing; most people learn by being taken by a friend up the lift to the top of a slope they don't think they can get down—and having to get down somehow. At first you're so terrified you might even walk part of it, but eventually you figure you have to get on the bike and ride, trusting that your wheels and brakes will work, and your eyes and legs will be trustworthy.

If I learned anything at all in experimental ministry, it was a theology of grace. The grace of God holds us most of all when we mess up, when we take risks and do not have any idea whether we can get down the path we've started on.

The story is told about a town at the bottom of a hill atop which a group of cloistered monks lived and prayed. The townspeople knew of the monastery, but rarely had contact with the monks or knew anything about their daily lives. So one day a curious boy headed up the mountain.

"What do you do here?" he asked when he arrived.

“What do we do?” replied the monk. “We fall down, and we get back up. We fall down, and we get back up.”

By the grace of God, so does the church.