Renewed life: Seven ways to change congregational culture

by Anthony B. Robinson in the November 15, 2000 issue

Though the past quarter century has been a challenging, sometimes discouraging time for mainline congregations and their leaders, many positive things, often hidden from public view or statistical analysis, have been going on. Many mainline congregations have learned to see scripture afresh, have profited from more biblical preaching and have rediscovered the power and beauty of worship. There has been an explosion of creative new hymnody, reflected and made available in a host of new hymnals. Mainline churches have rethought and reframed their social and political witness in a way that has deepened rather than diminished it. As interest in "spirituality" has grown in the larger culture, many mainline congregations have deepened their own forms of Christian piety through Bible study and prayer, spiritual direction and formation, and a renewed appreciation for the rites and rituals of the church.

From my own experience, I would suggest that mainline congregational culture is changing. Specifically, I see seven shifts in that culture: seven ways that mainline churches are changing—or should be changing—the way they operate.

From civic faith to the practice of transformation: With their churches no longer part of the religious establishment, and with the country increasingly diverse culturally and pluralistic religiously, mainline leaders have had to ask bottom-line questions—questions about purpose, not profit. What is the deep purpose of the church? What is the purpose of our particular church? Descriptions that once defined the church's mission—being the conscience of the community, helping those in need or being a center for civic or social life—are no longer fully adequate.

What is our purpose today? It is suggested by words and phrases like "Christian formation," "spiritual development," "healing," "making disciples." All are images of change, of human transformation.

At the church I serve, we find ourselves reclaiming such familiar yet strange words and phrases as “dying and rising,” “new hearts and new minds,” “being born anew,” “repentance,” “new creation” and “conversion.” Our business is the transformation and formation of persons and communities in light of the vision and values of the gospel.

We are not abandoning the task of addressing issues of our common life as a society. If we are faithful to our scriptures and, in our case, to the Reformed tradition, we will continue to recognize, as Calvin said, that “all of life is lived before and unto God,” and to speak of and to the common good. But we are no longer the sole religious voice, nor the exclusive voice of conscience in the community. Ours is one voice among many. Increasingly, we seek to be an alternative in a society that is often destructive of human relationships and humane values, a society afflicted by a chronic low-grade nihilism that is masked but not healed by material affluence. Those seeking a church today need more than a committee assignment. They need and seek a whole new way of life. The church offers the possibility of transformation in light of the story of God’s grace and the life and practices derived from that story.

From assuming the goods to delivering the goods: When the mainline was the religious establishment, it tended to assume that everyone was more or less Christian. We not only assumed the goods, we watered them down. Being a good Christian was not particularly different from being a good American. The perennial plight of established religious bodies is reaching for the lowest common denominator, muting faith’s distinctives, softening the edges of anything that might create tension between faith and culture.

Today the traditional and classical marks of the church—kerygma (worship and proclamation), didache (teaching), koinonia (community and fellowship) and diakonia (service)—must take precedence. Churches cannot serve a host of side dishes while neglecting the main course. Worship must be the central and formative experience in the life of the congregation. As a seminary intern at our church said to me recently, “What I see here is that if you get Sunday morning right, everything else follows.”

Gathered in worship, a congregation will hear things its members will not hear elsewhere. Gathered in worship, they will hear strange and exotic accounts which call into question a culture that knows no power save its own. In worship people will experience shifts in perspective and alternative sources of power.

Not only is worship crucial to the tasks of human transformation, but the nature of the church's teaching ministry also must change. Once the Sunday school was the primary teaching strategy of the church, and most of the church's teaching was geared toward children. Increasingly now the church must be teaching in everything it does. The aphorism is true, "If we are not modeling what we teach, we are teaching something else." Moreover, the teaching ministry is directed as much to adults as to children. As Clarence Jordan reminded us, "You can't raise live chicks under dead hens." In the congregation I serve, the teaching ministry once put all its eggs in a Sunday forum on community and civic issues. That forum remains strong, but alongside it is a solid menu of the main dishes of Christian faith and learning: scripture, theology, spiritual life and practices, and ethics.

From givers to receivers who are also givers: We have often in our churches assumed that we were the givers. While it may well be true that "it is more blessed to give than to receive," giving is often easier. Giving puts the giver in a position of control. Receiving, whether of roadside assistance or forgiveness, makes us vulnerable.

For Christians, giving to others is a response to our experience of receiving grace and new life in Christ. We are receivers who give. As Jesus reminds Peter in the Gospel of John's account of the foot-washing at the Last Supper, in order to share the grace of God with others we must also be recipients of that grace ourselves. We can't give to others what we have not received or experienced ourselves. Through the sacraments and rituals of the church people are reminded of our need for grace and permitted to become receivers. Similarly, in community life and civic affairs, we increasingly recognize ourselves as leaders who are themselves being led by God, by the Holy Spirit, by the living Christ.

From board culture to ministry culture: As established churches, congregations often developed elaborate structures of boards and committees similar to those of many other voluntary organizations. Board and committee service was one of the chief ways that people expressed their commitment, and it was one of the central ways in which churches incorporated members and ensured their participation. Since American culture was seen as Christian, ministry was not "out there" but "in here." Increasingly today people sense that mission begins much closer to home, at the church's doorstep, and are receptive in fresh ways to the practice of ministry in daily life.

Today some congregations are experimenting with a model in which members of the congregation are asked to be engaged in ministry rather than to run the church itself. I know a 900-member congregation, for example, at which all but three committees have been abolished, replaced by a host of “ministry teams.” Some ministry teams work in the community, doing such things as tutoring children, feeding the hungry and counseling the troubled. Others are serving within the church by planning liturgical drama, volunteering in the church office and teaching classes. All who join this congregation take part in a seminar called “Discovering Your Gifts for Ministry.” Then they may either join an existing ministry team or start a new one. Instead of trying to find people to fill the slots on the institution’s list of offices and committees, the church tries to help people discern and discover their gifts for ministry and to support them in the exercise of those gifts.

It may not be necessary or even helpful to make such a radical shift. But it is important to help boards shift to a ministry ethos and to help people get in touch with the deep story that authorizes, grounds and drives a ministry. Too often boards operate only at the task or strategic level. Their agenda is the next five tasks, whether fund raising, planning a dinner, or assuring that there are enough Sunday school teachers for the year ahead. But why? What is the large story out of which we live and serve? To ask these questions leads back to worship, biblical study and the need for growth in faith to be part of every ministry team.

Church leaders can assist this shift toward ministry teams by giving the work back to the people. Instead of expecting a ministry team to do what we have always done—which tends to take us where we have always been—leaders need to let ministry teams discover their own directions. Encourage them to take the initiative in defining and solving problems and developing strategies. It is not easy to get people to assume a greater level of responsibility. But the paradox of doing it is that it ends up increasing rather than diminishing people’s energies. Half-hearted commitment seems to use up a great deal more energy than whole-hearted engagement.

A shift from board culture to ministry culture means that a congregation puts less emphasis on control and more on “giving permission.” The relation of church leaders to a congregation and its members changes. Instead of saying, “We will keep you posted on how we’re doing,” the leaders tell members of the congregation, “Go into all the world, and keep us posted.”

From community organization to faith-based ministry: After the dedication of a new community youth center, a leader in my denomination was invited by the mayor of the city to have coffee. The mayor, who happened to be African-American, told the minister, “You know, I appreciate all your efforts in getting this center opened, and I also appreciate your remarks today. But you are a Christian minister and I didn’t hear you say anything that couldn’t have been said by someone else. We need to hear something different from you. We need to hear something from the gospel.”

During the period of establishment, we tended to function like any other civic or community organization. It was enough to support worthwhile agencies that were “doing the work of the church,” and our emphasis tended to fall on material aid. Today a growing number of people are recognizing the value of a clearly articulated faith-based identity for a congregation’s witness and service. In part this flows from the recognition that many of the most intractable social problems are not simply economic or even political. They are spiritual, and involve all aspects of people and their relationship to their community. In addition, faith-based ministries provide a way for Christians to live out and grow in their faith as they practice discipleship.

The shift is evident in my congregation’s mission work. Once we primarily supported agencies and programs that were meeting the needs of the least fortunate in the city. Today we are developing “Houses of Healing,” residential, spiritually based communities for persons recovering from mental illnesses. We are starting a new congregation in another part of the city. We are joining a congregation in Nicaragua to build a job skills training center for women in Managua that is operated as a faith-based ministry. All these recognize and include a noncoercive faith expression as part of the ministry. All offer members opportunities to exercise and grow in discipleship.

From seeing the budget as an end to seeing it as a means: Since the late ’60s, many churches and denominations have limited themselves to trying to survive. “Meeting the budget” or “making the budget” has been an annual rallying cry. But it doesn’t require extended reflection to see that “making the budget” is not a cry that is likely to capture people’s imagination. Nevertheless, it gradually supplanted more ambitious and imaginative goals like “building a church” or “supporting a new ministry.” The budget became an end instead of the means to an end.

When “making the budget” becomes our goal, chances are that we are not asking the essential prior question, “What are we trying to accomplish?” or “What is our business?” Congregations must see the budget as a means and as a tool for ministry and mission. We need to break with the pattern of letting the budget determine what is possible.

In our congregation, it has proven helpful to do five-year plans, recognizing that such a plan is a guideline and not a fixed or set-in-stone document. Such strategic planning starts by asking, “What do we understand God to be calling us to be and do in the next five years?” Then, and only then, are we ready to move to the second question: “What resources do we need to do this?” Budgets are built in response to mission and ministry goals, not the other way around.

In addition, we have come to think of our financial resources as flowing in three streams: support of the annual operating budget (usually from people’s annual incomes); our planned giving and endowment program (from people’s accumulated assets); and periodic capital drives (drawing on both annual income and accumulated assets). To encourage engagement in all three forms of giving, a clear and compelling vision of what the church is trying to accomplish is essential. In any long-established institution it is a challenge to take such an approach, but it is important to work at it. Otherwise, inertia sets in. No new goals or hopes fire our dreams and imaginations.

From passive to active membership growth: Mainline Protestants no longer have a “guaranteed market share” by virtue of their history, tradition, location and place in the social network. In many instances, locations have become problematic and established networks have vanished.

I noticed an interesting bit of information in my denomination’s most recent annual report. Churches “most likely” to experience decline shared three characteristics: they were founded before 1900, they were located in cities, and their membership was more than half female. The congregation I serve happens to meet all three of these criteria. And yet we are growing—modestly, to be sure, but growing. Perhaps even more important than our modest growth in membership is our more rapid growth in worship attendance. What’s making the difference? No one factor, but rather the combination of shifts in congregational culture which I have described.

Moreover, we encourage people to shift from being passive to active by inviting others to church. The oft-repeated phrase for calling disciples in the Gospel of John is stunningly simple: “Come and see.” Most of us can manage that. (“Something wonderful is happening, come and see!”) It is not up to us to make people come. It is only our responsibility to extend an invitation, and to provide hospitality when the invitation is accepted. Hospitality means receiving the other graciously, and creating a safe space for newcomers to share their gifts, as well as offering them the gifts of the congregation. Perhaps a part of the challenge for mainline congregations is to recover their confidence that we do indeed have something to share.

I think the basis for a renewed confidence exists and is reaappearing. Signs of renewed life are discernible in a host of vital and renewed congregations. Congregations that had been left for dead by the experts seem to be defying their critics and proving the words of the old hymn: “New occasions teach new duties.”