The making of a postliberal: Beyond civic faith: Two stories

by Anthony B. Robinson in the October 14, 1998 issue

Seattle's Plymouth Congregational Church could be described as an "old first church." Founded in 1869 when the population of the city was 1,000, the church conceived of its mission as one of civilizing this rough-and-tumble city on the nation's western edge. Members of the congregation have served at one time or another on the City Council and school board and as mayor. At the turn of the century Plymouth members led the effort to close down Seattle's thriving brothels and gambling establishments. The church also functioned as "mother church" to most of the 20 other Congregational churches in the city.

Plymouth has a proud history of civic activism. It organized boys and girls clubs between 1910 and the mid-'30s; it helped with refugee resettlement efforts following World War II and the Vietnam war. In the early 1980s the congregation pioneered an innovative low-income housing development program, and today the parish supports a ministry to the mentally ill.

Yet in 1990, when I began my pastorate at Plymouth, all was not well. The congregation had grown older. The median age of the membership was nearly 60, and a third of the congregation's members were over 80. Membership, though relatively stable, had been on the decline for several decades. Most Sundays the sanctuary was less than half full. In the late 1980s the congregation was paralyzed by a conflict regarding divestment of its endowment fund in support of South Africa's antiapartheid movement. The church was struggling to articulate its identity and purpose in a compelling and theological way. Congregational community was fractured by competing interest groups and agendas.

These challenges exposed a greater problem: the faith and ethos that had animated the church for generations were ill-suited to the present. It was a problem familiar to many Protestant churches: once mainline, they had become old-line. I describe the inherited faith and ethos of Plymouth as "civic faith." A child of theological liberalism

and its civic faith expression, I believe that civic faith holds some great strengths but also great weaknesses. I am engaged in a lover's quarrel with this heritage.

For civic faith, the mission of the church is to ameliorate human suffering and to be the moral conscience of the community. In this understanding the church is a center of civic life. It provides an avenue by which the fortunate and powerful may offer assistance to the less fortunate and powerful. Such a church seeks to embody and carry religious meaning for the civil society. It is part of the larger reality of Christendom, American style, which rests on the assumption that ours is in some sense a "Christian" society and nation. It was for such a church and faith that my childhood in the Congregational Church and my education prepared me.

There are real virtues in "civic faith," including the emphasis on service, the concern for the life of the broader community and the attempt to relate Christian faith to the life of the society. But the world for which this was an appropriate model no longer exists.

In the late 20th century, we live in a pluralistic society with a host of religious options and worldviews. Christianity has been disestablished. Our society is somewhere between indifferent and hostile to it. It has become both presumptuous and impossible to think of oneself as the conscience of the community or as the carrier and embodiment of religious meaning for civil society. Today we may be a voice at the table, but we are no longer the host.

For downtown congregations, for the "Old First" churches, there are additional changes and challenges. The economic and political elites began moving out of many city centers in the 1960s, and many have also moved away from the churches. It is no longer incumbent upon members of the social elite to be church members. Meanwhile, social policy changes have resulted in a concentration of the least fortunate in the cities. The chronically mentally ill, people with AIDS and the homeless poor are no longer "out there," they are in our urban congregations. They are members, fellow travelers or frequent claimants on church resources. Meanwhile, the community beyond the church's doors is more heterogeneous--ethnically, religiously and in its variety of lifestyles--than the one envisioned by civic faith.

What brings people to a church in the last decade of the 20th century? People seeking a church today are still interested in helping others, but they are also

spread thin and exhausted by the demands of work and family. What brings them to church are their own religious questions, their spiritual longings, their search for meaning and for God. Often they are unchurched or little churched and are eager for study and deepened understanding. Often the catalyst for coming is a crisis--divorce, substance abuse, the loss of a job, a death or suicide in the family, an experience of depression. When they walk into a mainline congregation they may be met with a litany of the world's needs or problems and the expectation that they will help shoulder them. But as one woman said to me recently, "I give all week in my work and in my family. On Sunday I need to receive something. I don't need to be reminded of my responsibilities every week. I do need to be reminded of God's grace and presence."

This is not the world of civic faith. In that world we tended to assume that ours was a Christian society, and that almost everyone around us was a Christian and understood what that means. This tended to be a least-common-denominator understanding, as in "Christians are nice people, good citizens and on the side of decency and social betterment." "Christian" was defined morally or even moralistically, rather than in terms of theological conviction. In a religiously pluralistic world, such general definitions are too thin, too superficial and too moralistic. In many of today's congregations people ask, "How do we differ from any other civic-minded group?"

By the 1970s and '80s many of the best expressions of the civic faith had given way to a "gone-to-seed" variety of that faith. By "gone-to-seed" I mean that historic norms and legitimate sources of authority--especially scripture and tradition--were sacrificed to the authority of individual experience and personal preference. The peculiar language of the church was often sacrificed as we tried to speak the language of the culture. There was a sense of embarrassment when people spoke openly of God or Jesus. A "don't ask, don't tell" policy came to prevail in matters of personal faith.

It is not easy to say exactly when or how I became dissatisfied with civic faith and concerned that it seemed thin, inadequate to the task and ill-suited to new realities. In many ways that process began long before I entered seminary in the early 1970s or was ordained in the latter part of that decade. It had something to do with the string of national traumas and tragedies that took place in the '60s and '70s, when I was a teenager and young adult. The assassinations of the Kennedys and of King, the horrors of Vietnam, the tragicomedy of Watergate--these events showed at least

the inadequacy of liberal progressivism and its claim that the world was getting better and better. All resulted in a vastly diminished trust in institutions and authority in any form. They drove truck-sized holes through the sacred canopy where mainline churches, public schools, scouts and service clubs were the key strands in a unified web of meaning, order and purpose.

As these traumas gave way in the '70s to a widening drug culture, a catapulting divorce rate and hyperinflation, I came to believe that the challenge many people faced was not--as the liberal consensus held--to free themselves from oppressive tradition and authority. Rather, it seemed that many sought something solid to stand on in the midst of modernity's shifting sands. In the face of betrayal by presidents, parents and institutions, some rejected all authority and tradition. Others sought new and more reliable sources of authority and direction.

At Union Theological Seminary in New York in the '70s, life was geared to equipping future clergy to be agents of change. The church was described as a great sleeping giant, and we clergy were to give the sleeping giant a swift kick, arousing it to address the problems of racism, sexism, capitalism and militarism. But this approach soon began to seem thin, presumptuous and moralistic. More than that, it seemed out of touch with the reality of people's lives.

The churches I first encountered--inner-city congregations in New York City and rural congregations in upstate New York--were anything but sleeping giants. As a friend put it, "Here were people holding on by their fingernails, barely able to survive. And their survival needs were not merely financial. They were theological." These were people desperate for meaning, with increasingly few clues about what to the tell the kids.

I began to ask myself what the church specifically had to offer, and to find resources for a deepened faith in the scriptures. In the civic faith world in which I grew up, the Bible and its stories were mainly treated as texts of moral examples. The scriptures were often ornamental, attached to already arrived-at conclusions and convictions. Preaching was a reminder of what right-thinking citizens already knew. And amid all this, the impression was unmistakably conveyed that the Bible was an incoherent relic, one that we had outgrown but which we kept around because we weren't quite sure what else to do with it.

When I actually ventured into the world of the Bible I found something different and unexpected. As often as not God seemed to prefer working with sinners rather than saints, and in the Bible almost everyone turned out to be both sinner and saint, with the worst sinners being the ones who were convinced that they were the greatest saints. I discovered that while the Bible is a diverse and messy book, it has an overall wholeness and coherence, almost all of which points to a God who is intent on messing up settled worlds and opinions and calling human beings into relationship with mystery. Most of all, I found the Bible's texts and stories were not inert and passive, awaiting our interpretation. They were alive and eager to have their say, if we could but muster the courage to listen. In my earliest preaching ventures I used the biblical text as, at best, a resource. Dissatisfied with that, I came to see the biblical text as source more than resource. I stopped anxiously asking, "What am I ever going to say?" and began asking, "What is the text trying to say, and what is it trying to do with us?"

I accepted a position as a student assistant at a small African-American congregation, and met people who spoke about their faith freely and without embarrassment. "These people talk about Jesus and they seem to mean it!," I told my wife. I found this both compelling and alarming. I began to see how important the language and stories of faith were in forming and sustaining an identity strong enough to resist the corrosions of a prevailing cynicism and market mentality.

I discovered the power of worship as the time and place in which one met the living God. Here the words of the Westminster Catechism about the chief end of man ("to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever") began to make sense. Worship was enjoyable. I longed for it, even though my civic faith background and my seminary classes had implied that the really important stuff went on beyond the church's walls. I began to understand the link between worship and mission. I found worship to be an experience of both delight and danger. You would meet the Risen One there, and there was no telling what might happen next.

In 1977 I began serving a congregation in the foothills of the Cascade Mountains. It was in these years that I became aware of the designation "mainline," but there was irony in this. If "mainline" meant the center of the theological spectrum and was in some way representative of the religious ethos of the society, we were not it. In the small towns and suburbs east of Seattle, the Assembly of God was probably closest to the mainline. Our church sat proudly on a main street, all dressed up for a part that it was no longer asked to play.

The members of that congregation shared a civic faith perspective but had little interest in Christian formation or in a teaching ministry. We seemed to believe that everyone already knew what being a Christian meant. We seemed to believe that one could be a Christian without training. Our approach to new members was, "We just need to get these people on a committee, involved in some project, and they'll be fine."

With some exceptions, education was for children, while worship was for adults. Besides, the self and one's own experience were sovereign. Truth was to be found by turning within, not by becoming a part of a community or being formed in and by a tradition. I became convinced, however, that recovery of the teaching ministry was crucial and that being a minister meant being a teacher of the faith.

Some people, often people in their 20s and 30s, were yearning to be taught the faith. This was something that burgeoning new conservative churches were happy to provide. "Para-church" Bible studies, meditation centers and prayer groups were springing up everywhere--everywhere but in the mainline churches. Busy with civic and community projects, we were expecting people to bear faith's fruits while giving little attention to faith's roots.

In the early 1980s I accepted a call to a multiracial congregation in Honolulu. I hoped to rebuild a church that had once numbered over 700, but after a series of difficulties had sunk below 200 members. And a fair number of the remaining 200 were not on good terms with one another! Added to this was the challenge posed by two dozen homeless persons who had taken up residence on the church grounds. Eventually I discovered that these were not the free-spirited '60s types that many imagined them to be. They were persons suffering from mental illness and substance abuse--often both. Neither the congregation nor I was prepared for such a consuming challenge. My inherited theology, with its heavy emphasis on shouldering the problems of the world and fixing them, met its match. A cloud settled over my life.

A year into the pastorate I suffered a serious depression which lasted two years. I felt overwhelmed and debilitated. I couldn't imagine what was going on. Understanding, treatment and learning came slowly. I learned that I needed a different and deeper kind of faith, one that put less responsibility on me and taught me of God's grace, of learning to trust the Spirit's leading. I came to see that I had turned a religion of grace into a religion of good works and achievement. I preached

grace, but it was hard to receive it myself. The replacement of a religion of grace with a religion of good works and activism had contributed to my own experience of a terrifying depression. It was also, I believed, the problem at the heart of the "civic faith" dilemma.

There were days, weeks and months when God seemed utterly absent, but there were regenerative forces at work. I found my way to a retreat center run by a couple of elderly Maryknoll sisters. They taught me how to pray the scriptures, how to make a retreat, how to receive spiritual direction. Stubbornly I disregarded a psychiatrist's advice that I change professions. I came to learn the truth of Paul's words, "My grace is made perfect in weaknesses," and "My grace is sufficient for thee."

I began not only to forge a new and more fully lived theology, but also to understand the dynamics of the great shift going on in the role and place of the mainline churches. I read John Gardner's essay "On Leadership." The founder of Common Cause, Gardner described institutions in denial. "Motivation tends to run down, values decay. The problems of today go unsolved while people mumble the slogans of yesterday. Group loyalties block self-examination. One sees organizations whose structures and processes were designed to solve problems that no longer exist. If regenerative forces are not at work the end is predictable."

This seemed an apt description of the mainline churches in the 1980s. Denial was deep at all levels of the church. I realized that this was a large, complex problem, one that I would probably spend the rest of my ministry addressing. But through my personal struggle, I recognized that regenerative forces are at work sometimes because of us, sometimes in spite of us. I came to see that one way to face the demons in the churches I knew and loved was to face them within myself. I began to sense that one of the best ways to bring about change is to act on our best hunches, intuitions and convictions, to live into the new reality that is breaking into the midst of the old, and not to wait for permission or consensus to emerge.

How then do I go about ministry today? What constitutes a postliberal agenda? What of the civic faith inheritance do I continue to value? What emphases do I now have in ministry that I would never have quite imagined when I walked out of Union Seminary and was ordained 21 years ago?

First of all, I never imagined that I would be thinking about, and trying to find ways to talk about, conversion. But I am. Much of mainline Protestantism has been

focused on accommodation, on adjusting the faith to "modern sensibilities." We have given too much away. I find myself returning to biblical language that has to do with change, with turning, with new life and new beginnings. "Repentance," "new hearts and new minds," "dying and rising in Christ," "being born anew." I am not interested in fundamentalist versions of conversion which are privatistic, scripted and inclined to present Christian commitment as the end of suffering or problems. It may be the beginning of them. But I do believe that forming new hearts and new minds constitute the level to be working at, and the level at which many in our congregations long to be addressed. They are waiting, I believe, for their ministers to say, "Something is at stake here, something that makes all the difference in the world."

Second, I see worship as crucial. Too much worship is trivial. Missing is a sense of God's presence, of worship as risky engagement with a peculiar God. Sometimes we clergy seem to construe our role as protecting our congregations from God's holiness and grace.

Third, while I support programs focused on social and political issues, I try to push people to reflect as Christians on such concerns, drawing on scripture and tradition to do so. When I address issues of social justice and community concern, I try to speak as a teacher of the faith. I try to avoid the predictabilities of liberal or conservative agendas.

Fourth, no longer do I see the teaching ministry of the church as primarily the business of providing information or a few interesting ideas for members to ponder. We are in the business of conversion and formation. Adult education in the church cannot be all electives, all side dishes. I am eager to focus on the main course, the core curriculum of church life and study aimed at helping people become Christian and at sustaining the church as a peculiar people.

Finally, while the civic-faith agenda of service remains important, service and advocacy ministries today need to be faith-based. Cut off from faith's roots and the ability to articulate why, as Christians, we are doing what we do, we won't do much. I want more, not less, public witness, but I want to see such witness as part of the practice of discipleship and of the whole fabric of worship, teaching, community and service.

I never expected to be in love with the Bible, but I am.

I never imagined I would be encouraging people to reclaim spiritual practices like Sabbath-keeping, but I am.

I never expected to be talking with people who say something like,"I want to have a spiritual life. How do I begin?" But I find myself more and more having just that conversation.

When people in my congregation say, "I have trouble with Easter," I try not to solve the problem for them by explaining it--or explaining it away. Now I say, "Gee, that's great. Easter is tough. It's troubling, all right. It may require change. New hearts, new minds. But don't worry, with God all things are possible."