



The Grapevine

CONNECTING THE CONGREGATIONS OF THE PRESBYTERY OF DETROIT

January 2018

Exhibiting the Kingdom of Heaven in the World



by the Rev. Dr. Allen D. Timm, Executive Presbyter

Can "mainline" churches be renewed and find new purpose? I recently read a book that shows how the church can join God in sharing the hope of the rule of God in the world. The book is, Liberating Hope!: Daring to Renew the Mainline Church by Michael S. Piazza and Cameron B. Trimble (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2011)

The authors of this book say, yes, mainline churches can be renewed. They come from the Center for Progressive Renewal in Atlanta, an organization with the call to help mainline churches find a new niche. Piazza and Trimble give examples of congregations who have a burden for what breaks the heart of God, can join God in exhibiting the Kingdom of Heaven. In joining God's work, they find new life and new hope.

What breaks the heart of God today? Here are some that the authors list. People have different ideas but will not talk

together to learn from one another. They fear diversity and religious pluralism. The environment has suffered because we won't take care of God's creation. The authors point to a different kind of "compassionate capitalism," where instead of promoting wasteful consumerism, the church helps point to products and services that can help provide what is needed for living. And what can the church do to promote healthcare and healthy food in a community?

They make use of tools for understanding one's church, like the Life Cycle of a Congregation, quoted from Rendle and Mann's Holy Conversations. The graph of the life cycle shows congregations that they can turn back to days when they made an impact and find new life and revitalization.

The theology of this book challenges the mainline church. Let's admit it. Many of our churches love to talk about the pain in the world, but they do not take action that exhibits the Kingdom of heaven. Does worship help us to hear what God offers to us to change the world? Do we have an

experience of God who brings us hope and forgiveness? Or has worship become the pointer to coffee hour and in some churches, weekly feasts, for the main purpose of getting together. In the first church I served as Head of Staff, folks would say to me that if worship wasn't finished in an hour I'd find myself preaching to the choir, because everyone else would be at coffee.

So what is the contribution of this book? There are so many things in the world that break God's heart, and there are folks in the world who are hungry for meaning and purpose. But they don't come to us because they do not see us making a difference. If the church wants to be relevant, they need to use their leadership, buildings and resources, to call together those who want to make a difference.

How do they find what breaks God's heart? By prayer, listening to the Scriptures, and discerning what the Spirit is saying to the church. They talk to community residents and leaders. Following the model of Jesus, church leaders lift up the truth, teach and encourage in the way of the Kingdom, form meaningful

Continued on page 2

communities, provide healing and wholeness, and lift us the vision of the resurrection (207, Piazza and Trimble).

There is a chapter on how “the message can go viral,” using Facebook and other social media. The pastor at the church where I worship, Grosse Pointe Woods, writes a weekly meaningful saying or invitation on the church sign. But then the Pastor takes the message to Facebook, and takes it to a deeper level. To get our message out, we need to know who we are, who our audience is, and what we have to offer. We need to tell stories of changed lives and connect folks to the stories of others.

This book provides many reminders that the pastor can’t change the church all alone.

Sessions need to be permission-giving, and pastors, who have the time to hear the need and see the vision, recruit and train leaders to follow their calling. How do they do that? Pastors see the need and take someone with them to experience what they see. Then the elder returns to session with an urgent invitation for others to join her or him.

The final chapter of the book pulls together advice on how to lead change. First and foremost, the pastor and elders need to recruit leaders to help. Then the session needs to give up the expectation that the purpose of the church is to make people happy. The purpose of the church is to hear God’s call and to serve the community. Leaders need to create a sense of urgency so that other shear the

call. Leaders articulate the future God calls us to create. Constant communication gets the message out to the congregation. Finally, the authors remind us that hearing the call of God begins in our spiritual practices. Joining with others in worship, Bible study and discernment groups, helps us to hear God’s call.

So why the title Liberating Hope? Following Christ into the world liberates people and gives them hope. Piazza and Trimble urge the church to, as the hymn says, “lift high the cross, the love of Christ proclaim, till all the world adores his sacred name.” What breaks the heart of God in your community? Where is Christ calling you to exhibit the kingdom of God?

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18 QUESTIONS FOR 2018

Tim Shapiro, from the Indianapolis Center for Congregations, believes that vibrant congregations exhibit a commitment to increasing congregational capacity. As demands on congregations grow, clergy and laity struggle to “maintain agency over their problems rather than the problems having hold on them.”¹ Through the learning process, congregations can discover how to solve a challenge that once outran them. Based on his congregational theory of development, he explains that the first step is defining the challenge. The following exercise helps members identify their goals: what they already know, what they still need to learn, and how their plan fits into the church’s overall mission.

Questions to Ignite Conversations

Ask members of the governing board or any leadership group in the congregation to review these eighteen questions.² Invite them to select three questions they believe are most crucial for the congregation to discuss. At the first meeting, take a tally of the questions that were chosen. This tally alone will indicate if leaders are focused on the same issues or are concerned about a quite diverse group of questions. Have a conversation about the three questions that received the most votes. Over the course of several meetings, help the group to identify their top questions or concerns. Next, assess the congregation’s level of capacity. Before taking any action steps, determine if the leaders need more information, training, education, or transformation.³

1. What is the distinctive theological message this church seeks to send? What words do we use to define our core values and identity? Do our pastor and lay leaders find agreement and unity around this message?

2. What will be the number one driving force for the allocation of scarce resources (such as time and energy of volunteers, staff time, money, building use) in the future planning of our church’s ministry? Local or world missions? Children’s ministry? Becoming a more diverse worshipping community? Maintaining

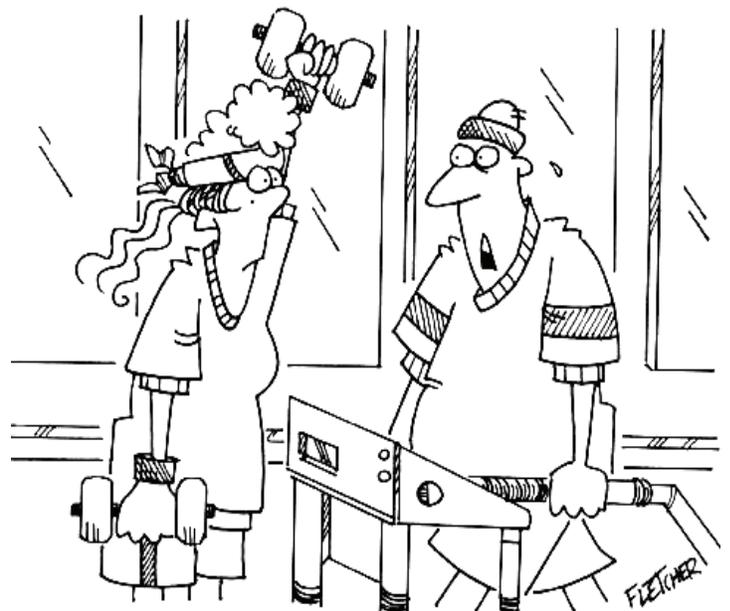
harmony? Satisfying the preferences of our current members?

3. What size is God calling this worshipping community to be? Does our current building and location limit or facilitate our size goals? Are there strategic decisions that we could make about buying or selling property or other assets that could benefit our long-range vision?

4. Are our programs, governance, and staffing consistent with our current size? Do we have a sense of how we compare to other churches of our size in terms of leveraging resources for ministry?

5. How strong is the desire for community among current members? How does this preference balance with those who feel more comfortable with anonymity? Do these contrasting preferences inhibit decision-making about church growth, outreach, or staffing priorities?

6. What approach is best for our congregation to design worship experiences that meet the spiritual needs of multiple generations? How does worship connect to the teaching ministries of the congregation?



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7. How committed is our congregation to continued learning for adults? How many adult classes or groups do we want? When and where will they meet? Who will lead them? Do we have a mechanism for the creation of new groups or classes?

8. How many “congregations” make up this church? In a typical church, about one in three participants regularly attend, give generously, and volunteer many hours in church programs and ministries. Another “congregation” consists of less committed members who attend worship but who rarely serve as leaders or participants in church programs. They tend to give only when they attend. The third “congregation” consists of members who demonstrate minimal involvement and rarely attend. What percentage of your church membership falls into each of the categories? Has this changed over the past five years? What factors could explain these patterns?

9. What proportion of the operating budget should we allocate to increase the church’s visibility and to invite new people to participate in our church’s ministries?

10. Does our congregation reflect the racial, ethnic, and economic diversity of our neighborhood or region? If not, what barriers keep newcomers from becoming active participants in our church?

11. Are we a regional church, neighborhood church, or something else? What is our primary calling in this geographic location?

12. What assumptions underlie our current church-staffing model? Does our mission depend on staffing at least one full-time ordained clergy person? How might a bi-vocational, part-time, or second career pastoral leader enhance our effectiveness?

13. What do we anticipate the church’s challenges and opportunities to be ten years from now? What ministries are likely to become more important or less important because of those changes?

14. What is the greatest impediment to designing and implementing a new five-year plan? Is one of the obstacles a high level of contentment with the status quo? Another possibility is a long list of attractive alternative courses of action and the reluctance to choose out of fear of making the wrong choice.

15. Does fear play a role our decision-making? For example, in some church locations, fear arises from incidents of vandalism and crime in the neighborhood. In other instances, fear stems from a sense that the church lacks measures to address future potential

problems. Does our congregation allow members to express their fears and are there processes to acknowledge practical realities in our future planning?

16. How does our congregation respond to disappointment? Can we describe some setbacks and what we learned from the experience? Did we find an alternative path forward?⁴

17. Will the passage of time expand our range of attractive choices? In general, the best time to strengthen and reinforce ministry is the present. What immediate actions would allow us to take advantage of multiple options?

18. Are our congregation’s best days ahead of us or behind us? What evidence points to our “best days” as a congregation? Are our criteria consistent with our core religious commitments?

Could Something Be Better?

Our theological views and commitments color the ways we think about the past, present, and future of our congregation. And as American churches embrace broader narratives about our nation’s history, their own church story reflects those themes. For example, historians find two distinct American “jeremiads”—stories of decline, like the prophecies of Jeremiah.⁵ The traditionalist jeremiad sees the past as virtuous and the present as full of problems. On the other hand, the progressive jeremiad sees the past as the source of our best ideals or principles, upon which we can build a better future. Both jeremiads acknowledge our present problems. But the traditionalist jeremiad asserts that the best approach to overcoming present challenges is to return to past ways of believing and behaving. Whereas the progressive jeremiad finds heroic examples of people facing predicaments and overcoming injustice. Both views reflect a tension between despair in the present and a hope for the future. Disappointment in the present is central to the American narrative and central to what drives churches to take on their next challenge.

1. Tim Shapiro, *How Your Congregation Learns: The Learning Journey from Challenge to Achievement* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield: 2017), 4-8, xv.

2. Many of these questions are similar to ones asked by church consultants Lyle Schaller and Herb Miller in their ministry with congregations.

3. Shapiro, 36.

4. *Ibid.*, 77.

5. Andrew R. Murphy, *Prodigal Nation: Moral Decline and Divine Punishment from New England to 9/11* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

BEST PRACTICES FOR CHURCH MEMBERS SERVING AS STAFF

Jean grew up in a large Methodist church in Ohio—confirmed there, active as a young adult, and married there. To accept a part-time job at the church, and later to go full time as the youth director, felt like a natural fit. “But to be on that side of the fence, attending staff meetings, was different,” she said. “I was seeing the magic behind the scenes that I didn’t know about. It was all about numbers. I still needed to be filled spiritually, to learn and to grow, and all of a sudden it was a business.”

During eight years on staff, she watched things get worse under a new senior pastor and neglected her own spiritual life while running a large, busy youth group. “I watched as other staff members walked out the door,” she said. “We were trapped in a toxic environment.” The birth of her third child gave her a convenient reason to leave.

Ultimately, Jean’s story has a happy ending. After a two-year break from her church employment, a change in senior leadership improved morale. When the new pastor offered her a different full-time job, she accepted. “I still struggle with the balance of worship for myself,” she said. “You’ve got to be intentional about your own spiritual growth.” After everything she’s been through, she would still encourage a friend to apply for a church job, “but you have to be strong emotionally to separate the business side from the spiritual, religious side. I don’t care who you are, they don’t blend well.”

Understanding and Avoiding Potential Problems

Having done consulting in both church and corporate settings, Susan Beaumont¹ has found that corporate employees are generally happier than church workers. The difference, she thinks, is that corporations tend to have very clear policies and require accountability from employees. Beaumont lists the following potential problems to watch out for:

- Members want to join the staff to get inside information or have a closer connection to the pastor.
- Pastors often supervise on either extreme of the spectrum: little to no supervision, or micro-managing.
- There’s no training support for pastors regarding effective supervision techniques.
- Job descriptions are unclear, which sets up conflict between the expectations of the pastor as a supervisor and the member-employee who was not well-informed of her or his job duties.
- Regular employee evaluations are either non-existent or not helpful.

Each of these can be remedied by taking the time to be clear about expectations, having review parameters in place, and following through on corrective actions. George Bullard,² a veteran church consultant, takes this one step further, recommending that



WHEN FIRING CHURCH EMPLOYEES, PASTOR TED OFTEN USED THE "PASS THE BUCK" TECHNIQUE.

churches and member-employees work out a covenant agreement (“not a contract”) for one to three years that spells out goals, roles, and responsibilities. That makes it clear to both sides that the job is not a permanent entitlement and leaves room to renew it if the arrangement is working well. And this covenant works both ways. The senior pastor does have a legitimate role, or even a responsibility, for the spiritual development of the staff. Whether they are members of that church, a different church, or no church, Bullard argues that pastors “should focus on the ministry of God and relationships of people to God, to one another, to the community.”

And if an employee obviously isn’t working out? While there will be difficult decisions to make, as Bullard argues, you can provide discipline or even let someone go in a way that is redemptive. For example, if a person has substance abuse or emotional problems, “a secular business would just fire them. A church has a responsibility to help them connect with systems that will redeem them.”

Pastors Not Called to Management

Of the potential problems listed above, poor management skills from the pastor can be the biggest issue for member-employees who see the pastor both as a spiritual guide and as a boss. This issue is highlighted by Beaumont, who points out that “people don’t feel called into ministry to do supervision.” Furthermore, Bullard argues that the “majority of senior pastors don’t have an arena where they learned management skills.” This can cause conflict to develop in the church office, or the pastor may hand off management responsibilities to businesspeople who make up the church’s governing board. The former causes the souring of the spiritual relationship between the pastor and the member-employee, whereas the latter can lead to those businesspeople pressuring the pastor “to allow business principles to overwhelm what should be a caring, Christ-like relationship.”

Ultimately, Beaumont argues that pastors need a covenant relationship with their congregation and an employment relationship with their staff. Part of that employment relationship requires pastors to understand and employ effective supervisory techniques. If staff members are reporting dissatisfaction with how the pastor is providing management (either too much or too little), the personnel committee and

church governing board should work together to locate training options for the pastor so that her or his supervisory skills may improve.

Making the Decision

Churches, with guidance from the pastor, need to decide whether or not they should hire members to staff positions. Some churches refuse to hire members altogether in order to avoid situations like what Jean experienced. Of course, as Beaumont points out, there are also benefits to hiring members, particularly for program or mission positions, because those members feel strongly connected to the mission.

No matter the position a person holds, if churches decide to allow members to work as staff, potential member-employees need a clear understanding that their relationship to the congregation will change from covenantal to employment. Additionally, for anyone on a church staff, whether member or not, Bullard reminds us that “the principal relationship is one of employment, not pastoral care.”

Balancing Member and Employee Roles

A pastor or a church committee often want to hire someone from the congregation whom they already know, but clear guidelines are necessary to make the situation work well. Of course, many relationships between a church and its member-employees work smoothly.

Patti, who joined her Presbyterian church in Kentucky more than twenty-five years ago, accepted a position as the church’s administrative assistant in 2002 and is still on the job. The pastor “encouraged me to set boundaries for myself,” Patti said. Patti’s biggest temptation is to jump in and do a job herself rather than delegating, but that is a tension of her own making. She said her role as a worshiper on Sunday morning is not affected, and that even if she has to talk shop with congregants, she doesn’t mind. Patti’s pastor recalled, “I remember saying to our personnel chair that Patti was probably the only church member we should consider. So the short answer is: it can work if it’s the right person.”

1. All quotes from Susan Beaumont are from an interview with David Lewellen.

2. All quotes from George Bullard are from an interview with David Lewellen.