

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

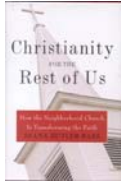
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Signposts of renewal

In a study of fifty thriving mainline Protestant congregations across the U.S., Diana Butler Bass, a scholar who studies American Protestantism, found these congregations experiencing new vitality through innovative use of traditional Christian practices. In her book *Christianity for the Rest of Us: How the Neighborhood Church Is Transforming the Faith* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), she describes ten of these practices that she sees as signposts of renewal.



“I’m tired of feeling so alone!”

Like many other observers, Bass finds that the religious right seems to have hijacked American Christianity, causing its literalist interpretations to be widely but mistakenly seen as the only vital and valid form of the Christian faith. As a result, Christians with a different understanding feel isolated. Bass found in her study, however, that these Christians, “the rest of us” that her book’s title refers to, were much more numerous than she had expected.



Bass found them practicing “a faith that is open and generous, intellectual and emotive, beautiful and just.” And when they realized that there were many others like them, she reports, more often than not they responded, “Thank goodness. That’s me! I am tired of feeling so alone!” I hear that constantly, too, from *Connections* readers all over the U.S. I’ve also heard it recently from readers of a local newspaper article about *Connections* (which is [on my web site](#)).

New ways of being faithful

Diana Bass doesn’t deny that mainline Protestantism is in trouble. “Some of its institutions,” she observes, “unresponsive to change, are probably beyond hope of recovery or repair.” However, “at the edges of mainline institutional decay, some remark-

Jesus asks everyone to change

In *Christianity for the Rest of Us*, Diana Butler Bass says she’s baffled by church members who are unwilling to change. “Some Christians today,” she observes, “fear cultural change, opting instead to make pronouncements about a God who is ‘the same yesterday, today, and forever,’ and insisting that they alone know the way to the mind of God. ... They build churches to protect people from change.”



“I cannot figure this out,” says Bass. “In the New Testament, Jesus asks everyone to change. ... The whole message of the Christian scripture is based in the idea of ... the change of heart that happens when we meet God face-to-face. ... Christianity is a religion about change.”



Saints? Sinners? Service?

Bass reminds us that the church has been seen at times as the gathering of the saints and at other times as a hospital for sinners. She sees that in the middle of the twentieth century, however, mainliners forgot both of these descriptions. “Many mainstream congregations became a kind of Christian version of the Rotary Club,” Bass explains, “understanding the church as a religious place for social acceptability and business connections.” Churches became organizations “run by bureaucracies in the faith business.” In Bass’s view these congregations did many worthy things but paid little attention to people’s spiritual lives. “They simply assumed that people were Christians and knew how to be, think, and pray like Christians.”

We can’t assume that now, and Bass finds that today’s vital mainline congregations see the church neither as a saints’ gathering, a hospital, nor a service club. These congregations don’t emphasize personal salvation in terms of heaven and hell. They see faith as trust in God, morality as enacting God’s justice, and salvation as God’s wholeness. They are basically modest, making few grand claims about eternity and salvation. Rather, they emphasize life in this world.



Which of these patterns fits your congregation?

able congregations are finding new ways of being faithful—ways that offer hope to those Americans who want to be Christian but are wary of the religion found in suburban megachurches.”



Rediscovering Christian riches

The congregations Bass studied described themselves as theologically centrist to liberal-progressive. “They were often in tension with local fundamentalist Christians or, surprisingly, their own denominations. And sometimes both.” They embraced no evangelistic strategy, no programmatic style of church growth. Instead, Bass found that they had rediscovered the riches of the Christian past. Building on tradition, faithfulness, and wisdom, they “offer a distinct alternative to a Christianity based on personal salvation and moral certainty.”



In Bass’s view, this emerging type of Christianity is “about changing from spiritual tourists to pilgrims—about transforming our selves, our congregations, and our communities.” It’s about embarking on a pilgrimage “not to escape life but to embrace it more deeply, to be transformed wholly as a person with new ways of being in community and new hopes for the world.” “At one time I thought I was alone,” Bass admits. “But the rest of us are here. There are many pilgrims on this road.”

Ten vital practices

I’ve usually thought of Christian practices as actions like taking Communion, being baptized, praying, and reading the Bible, but the practices Diana Butler Bass refers to are broader and deeper patterns of actions and attitudes. The practices she found so prominent throughout Christian history and in the vital contemporary congregations she studied are hospitality, discernment, healing, contemplation, testimony, diversity, justice, worship, reflection, and beauty.



Delight mixed with pain

I see these practices as vital, too, and I rarely see them being used in the way I understand them and Bass describes them. Consequently, as I read Bass’s book I felt both delight and pain. I was delighted to

find someone advocating these practices, but at the same time it was painful to be reminded that neither I nor many of the other concerned Christians I hear from have found any nearby congregation that interprets the practices in the ways Bass describes. Because to me they seem so important and so neglected, I’m writing about two of them—hospitality and discernment—in this issue of *Connections* and about others next month.

Hospitality—imitating God’s welcome

“In every congregation I observed,” Diana Butler Bass reports, “hospitality ranked as one of the strongest practices. But it was not just tea and cakes.” We may enjoy having tea and cakes at church (in the churches I know best, it’s donuts and potluck dinners instead), but they have little relation to the hospitality Bass refers to. It’s a kind we don’t hear much about in church.



A rarely mentioned subject

When Bass was a girl, she tells us, no one mentioned the Christian practice of hospitality. Bass thinks this omission might have been because it was something Christians just did. All “nice people” saw themselves as hospitable. But to them, that mainly meant being friendly, having guests in their homes, or hosting social events for friends and family.

Besides, there seemed to be no strangers or travelers to welcome. Bass knew everyone in her small hometown, and as far as she knew, everyone was a Christian. “We knew about Jews—mostly from the Bible—but we never actually met any. Some Pentecostals lived on the margins ... and we knew that—somewhere—black people had their own churches. But that was the limit of religious diversity. Hindus, Muslims, and Buddhists lived in exotic, faraway countries.” In addition, Bass felt sure that everyone in her town believed the same things about God and morality.



Today’s Americans are nomads

Today’s world isn’t like that. “Contemporary Americans,” Bass reminds us, “are nomads.” Many move often, so they’re far from family and are con-

stantly newcomers where they live and work. What's more, they don't all believe the same things, and Hindus, Muslims, or Buddhists may live next door.

Today's faithful churches thus recognize, Bass finds, that the Christian practice of hospitality—welcoming people even if they're not like us—has re-

Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.
—Romans 15:7

emerged as foundational to the spiritual life. "Through hospitality," Bass reminds us, "Christians imitate God's welcome."

Not a code word for promotion

Bass notices that in many churches, however, rather than God's all-inclusive welcome, hospitality seems to be merely a code word for promoting the church and signing people up as pledging members. I recently was dismayed to see an official church plea for what seemed to be this kind of hospitality. It urged United Methodist churches to become certified by submitting a form to qualify for a "Welcoming Congregation Award." A congregation would get different numbers of points for doing each of forty listed activities. They included having a church brochure and a welcome coordinator, sending a newsletter to visitors, training ushers quarterly, and having a welcoming sign on the street.

Such efforts are useful, but a congregation could do all forty and yet be extremely inhospitable. Many churches have an elaborate system of greeters, for example, but deny full rights to homosexual people.

Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.
—Hebrews 13:2

Some have well-trained ushers and impressive brochures but bad-mouth anyone whose political or theological views differ from the majority. Such tactics leave those congregations a long way from showing real hospitality, yet this award doesn't give points for abandoning such inhospitable practices.



Not a tame practice

"True hospitality," Bass assures us, "is not a recruitment strategy designed to manipulate strangers into membership."

It is not a program. Also, "hospitality is not a tame practice, an option to offer only to those who are likeable." It is risky and sometimes dangerous. God's hospitality demands that all be welcome as full participants in our congregations and in our lives.

Discernment—listening for truth

Next to hospitality, Diana Butler Bass found that discernment was the most widespread spiritual practice among the vital mainline Protestant churches in her study. For these congregations, she observed, discernment often took the form of explicitly asking questions such as "Who am I?", "What does God want me to do with my life?", and "How can I be true to both myself and God?"



Bass emphasizes that for these vital congregations discernment is not just an individual process. It is also a corporate practice that the congregations do openly in their study groups and conversations. She emphasizes, too, that it's not just a secular weighing of the pluses and minuses of different actions under consideration, or an evaluation of desired outcomes. Rather, she explains, discernment in these congregations is "serious reflection on scrip-

This issue, many back issues, a list of the books I've written about, and more information about *Connections* are available free from my web site, www.connectionsonline.org. To get *Connections* monthly by e-mail, let me know at BCWendland@aol.com. To start getting *Connections* monthly by U.S. Mail, send me your name, mailing address, and \$5 for the coming year's issues. If you want me to mail you paper copies of any of the 14 years' back issues, send me \$5 for each year or any 12 issues you want.



I'm a United Methodist lay woman, and neither a church employee nor a clergyman's wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Many readers make monetary contributions but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all 50 states, D.C., and Puerto Rico—laity and clergy in at least 12 denominations plus some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I feel Christians need to consider and churches need to address.

ture, grounded in prayer and informed by experience. It is both deeply personal and entirely communal.”

Discernment is especially important in today’s church, Bass finds, because in a pluralist society like ours, no one group and no one interpretation of Christianity has enough authority for its claim of truth to be seen as the only legitimate one. In the congregations Bass studied, discerning God’s will was not equated to some infallible doctrinal answer, handed down from on high for all eternity. Instead, it involved asking “God questions” and seeing the movement of the Spirit in today’s world.



True discernment, in Bass’s view, “is a perilous practice that involves self-criticism, questions, and risk, and it often redirects our lives.”

Practices that support each other

Important contributors to the practice of discernment Diana Butler Bass describes are several of the other practices she found prominent in vital mainline congregations, especially contemplation, theological reflection, and testimony. In next month’s *Connections* I’ll say more about how she saw these being practiced in the congregations she studied.

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Connections

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What could I do to motivate or help my own congregation to adopt the kind of practices Diana Butler Bass finds in vital mainline Protestant congregations? How could I as a lay church member at least help to get a broader understanding of Christianity included more often in sermons and study groups?



These crucial questions keep arising for me whenever I read views like the ones I report in this *Connections*. I get these questions continually from *Connections* readers, too. What are the answers for us?



• Speaking up is undoubtedly one answer. It’s essential to let our pastors and fellow church members know why we consider such practices and views important and, if we’ve experienced these practices or changed to these views, how we’ve seen worthwhile results.

• Offering to lead a group in using unfamiliar practices, getting new information, or considering varied views can sometimes help, although fearful, autocratic leaders may reject our offers.

• Finding kindred spirits to meet with outside of the congregation can help, but they’re hard to find. Fearing criticism or thinking they’re alone, they may not reveal their views and concerns.

Still, if we want our churches to change, it’s essential to keep doing all of these and more.

