

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life



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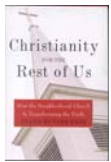
More signposts of renewal

In *Christianity for the Rest of Us: How the Neighborhood Church Is Transforming the Faith* (HarperSan-Francisco, 2006), Diana Butler Bass reports on fifty thriving mainline Protestant congregations that are experiencing new vitality through innovative use of traditional Christian practices. She describes ten of these, which she sees as signposts of renewal: hospitality, discernment, healing, contemplation, testimony, diversity, justice, worship, reflection, and beauty.



Practices that support each other

Last month I wrote about hospitality. In the vital congregations Bass studied, it isn't just donuts or efforts to boost attendance or pledges. Instead, it is encouraging all kinds of people to participate fully in the church. I also reported her findings about discernment. She found the vital churches consistently making deliberate, open efforts to discern who they were in God's sight and what God wanted them to do, in their personal and congregational lives. They searched together and didn't just rely on doctrines adopted centuries ago.



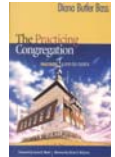
This month I'm writing about three others of the Christian practices that Bass, like other current church observers, finds so influential. Many of the practices are intertwined, it seems. Hospitality requires accepting diversity. Reflection and contemplation can lead to discernment and make the need for hospitality and for promoting justice apparent. Like Bass, I'm dismayed by seeing these practices so often ignored.

■ Reflection

One of the most encouraging parts of Diana Butler Bass's book for me was her acknowledgment of

Custom or tradition?

In *The Practicing Congregation: Imagining a New Old Church* (Alban, 2004), Diana Butler Bass discusses the difference between custom and tradition. She finds that when church members talk about tradition, they often mean a mere custom of the congregations they're aware of, and often a custom that started only in the 1950s.



For Bass, customs are actions done in accordance with precedent. Custom and routine, she explains, are social practices that develop over time. They have no particular ancient, symbolic, or sacred status. Tradition, however, is something more basic that accompanies such actions. Customs therefore may (and often must) change, but traditions are "forms of belief and practice that are understood to have longer historical grounding linked to some more ancient and universal source of authority and meaning."

We mistake custom for tradition

I'm not sure the distinction Bass makes between these words applies to their general usage. Customs can be regional, family, or personal traditions. I think she's right, however, in saying that churchgoers often confuse convention and routine with Christian tradition. They treat actions as sacred Christian tradition when they actually are only customs that these churchgoers happen to be most familiar with. An example of this, I assume, would be confusing the tradition of Communion with a particular way of serving Communion. If a congregation has usually served manufactured wafers and grape juice in individual cups to worshipers kneeling at the altar, members may get upset if a pastor starts using bread broken from a loaf and dipped into a common cup by worshipers walking by the server. Bass has even found an event like a yearly church fund-raising bazaar taking on sacred status in the eyes of some members, when it is only a local custom, not Christian tradition, and may actually need to be changed.

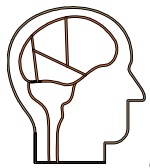


Treating mere customs as sacred traditions can keep a church from moving forward when it needs to.

theological reflection as a practice important to vital churches. In these congregations, she found, teaching and Bible study didn't emphasize conformity to dogma and doctrine. Instead, members of these congregations explored the Bible using the tools and findings of contemporary scholarship, and they never avoided hard questions or squelched them with pat answers. In fact, for members of these congregations, Bass observed, "the questions, along with their arguments, are essential to understanding ..."



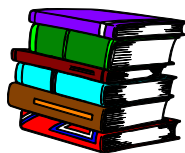
"For the people I met," reports Diana Butler Bass, "thinking theologically did not mean arriving at certain conclusions." She quoted one such person who "thought of church not as providing answers but of opening people to 'glimpses' of truth."



Bass finds that in vital congregations, "Bible study is a practice of thoughtful faithfulness, one that blends Christian commitment with openness. As such, learning moves beyond information and becomes spiritual formation in a way of life ... that nurtures compassion and justice. From this perspective, Bible study emerges as spiritual inquisitiveness, a pathway through the mind that transforms the heart. ... Heart and head, spirit and intellect, tradition and questioning—all of a piece."

■ Diversity

Diversity is also important in Bible study, as in other church activities. We need to avoid presenting only interpretations of the Bible that reflect the majority viewpoints and experiences of the congregation, or using commentaries written by writers who all have the same view. When diverse interpretations aren't presented, "the rest of us" that Diana Butler Bass found (and I find from responses to *Connections*) will keep mistakenly thinking that they're alone or that there's something wrong with them. They won't hear the Bible's contents explained in any way that makes sense to them.



Jesus didn't demand uniformity

Along with presenting varied interpretations of the Bible and Christian history and doctrine, it's also important for our churches to welcome the diver-

sity in people, whether based on gender, race, sexual orientation, life experience, or other factors. Acceptance of all these kinds of diversity is essential for true hospitality and community.



Diana Butler Bass is dismayed, as I also am, by hearing Christians snidely say that welcoming diversity is mere "political correctness" or is evidence that relativism and secularism have invaded the church. What some Christians often sneer at as "political correctness" is actually what I consider "Christian correctness." It's being careful not to put people down by speaking in ways that treat them as if they didn't exist or at best were second-class, as by avoiding the use of all-masculine words for God and for groups that include women.

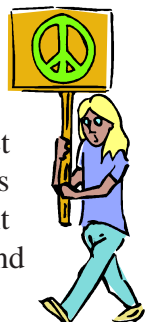
Bass finds that because of a twisted insistence on sameness, especially in belief, in the Christian West, vast numbers of people doubt or reject Christianity because of what they see as its hypocrisy. She reminds us that the New Testament shows Jesus's followers as one of the most diverse groups imaginable, and that Jesus apparently didn't demand uniformity.



Demanding uniformity brings brutality

"When Christians elevate uniformity ...," Bass sees, "shunning, excommunication, heresy trials, inquisitions, schism, crusades, and religious warfare are among the predictable results." "How can a religion that speaks so eloquently of love," she asks, "so brutally destroy its questioners, its dissenters, its innovators, and its competitors?" I wonder that, too, when I see fellow church members attacking, ousting, or shunning members they disagree with.

An especially important way in which we need to display diversity in our churches is by hearing about a wide range of views and experiences. We need to hear faith stories that make clear that even among committed Christians, people understand Christianity differently, interpret the Bible differently, experience God's presence differently, come to different conclusions about what God is like, and have come to their present views by dif-



ferent routes, and that no one of these ways is the only right one. This means we need to hear testimony in our congregations, and we need to hear it from people who differ from us and from those whose views are in the minority.

■ Testimony—talking the walk

We hear a lot about the need to “walk the talk”—to act on what we say we believe. That’s important, but Diana Butler Bass reminds us that so is “talking the walk.” We need to let others know what experiences and information have led us to our present beliefs about God and the Bible and to our present understanding of Christianity.



Unfortunately, however, the word “testimony” has negative connotations for many of us. It may evoke memories of rambling, predictable, jargon-filled accounts of someone’s “accepting Jesus and being saved” at age five, or stories of other conversion experiences that happened decades ago and apparently were the end of the testifiers’ spiritual growth.

Bass found testimonies prominent in the vital congregations she studied, but they weren’t that kind that makes hearers groan and roll their eyes. They were stories of recent experiences of God’s presence. They told of continuing spiritual growth, of faith journeys that keep expanding and leading to new and often unexpected places.



“The entire New Testament is a testimony,” Bass reminds us, “a record of experiences that early Christians had with the transformative power of God. Those early believers wrote down their testimonies, their experiences of sharing their testimonies,



and the impact of their testimonies on the people around them. This basic structure underlies almost every book in the New Testament.”

Changing both pastors and members

Hearing members’ stories of their faith journeys could enliven worship services. A member’s story could be a replacement for the pastor’s sermon monthly or at least quarterly, or a brief faith story could be added to the usual sermon. Strict adherence to time limits would be important, of course, and help with composition and delivery would sometimes be needed, to make such presentations inspiring rather than tiresome.



Adding testimony to worship could be a jolt to some members, so Bass suggests starting small. She tells of a pastor who started by including five members’ testimonies in worship on the five Sundays in Lent. That pastor acknowledged that the practice was risky though it started valuable change in the church. And she reported that members weren’t the only riskers or the only ones changed. “I have been changed, too,” this pastor said. “The practice of testimony was a process of releasing control and risking that testimony could outshine the sermon.”

To reduce risk and time, however, the stories could be shared in writing instead. Each worship bulletin could include a member’s faith story, to give worshipers food for thought as they arrived. The story could then be included in the next church newsletter and put on the church web site so that people who hadn’t been at worship could read it. Like oral accounts, however, these might need good editing.

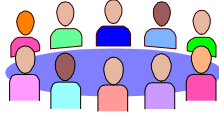
Another helpful way to present testimony in the church is to have members share their faith jour-

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.

neys in their church-school classes or other groups. This allows more time and can be less intimidating for members who would be uneasy about speaking to a larger, less familiar group.



Helping both speakers and hearers

Testimony can help both testifiers and hearers. Telling about our faith journey makes us see it more clearly. It can make us see changes we hadn't recognized, or new steps we need to take. It can show us inconsistencies in our beliefs, that we need to look at. In Diana Butler Bass's words, "testimony reminds

us of where we have been, helps us see where we are, and directs us toward unanticipated paths."

Hearing others' stories reminds us of the many ways in which God's presence shows up in people's lives, and the many ways in which people feel called to apply the teachings and example of Jesus. Hearing what has led others to their present views can make us less inclined to be critical of people who differ from us. Hearing each other's stories thus helps to build community. Wouldn't all of those results be helpful for our churches and our personal lives?

Barbara



Connections

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March 2007



An opportunity for thinking Christians

On March 9 and 10 I will be speaking at the annual Perkins Theological School for the Laity, in Dallas, Texas, on the Southern Methodist University campus. This program is presented by Perkins School of Theology, the United Methodist seminary that is part of S.M.U. My talks will be part of a joint presentation with Dr. Joerg Rieger, a Perkins professor of systematic theology.



At a luncheon on Friday, March 9, I will speak about what I wrote in the December 2005 *Connections*—the responses to my having admitted I was often dismayed by worship services. Dr. Rieger will speak about seeing similar reactions in many parts of the world, revealing what he calls "faithful Christians who can't stand the church any more."

In a Saturday, March 10, workshop, he and I and attenders will discuss varied understandings of what being a Christian means, and the many different images of God—some mutually exclusive—that we hear presented in church and in conversations with Christians. At a March 10 luncheon I will receive the annual laity award given by Perkins.



If you like to think about your beliefs, I think you'd enjoy these events as well as other classes and talks that this program includes. To get full information and register to attend, phone 1-888-843-6564, ext. 4, or 214-768-2124, or see this web site— http://www.smu.edu/theology/public_progs/PTSL/laity_main.html .