

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

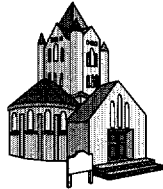
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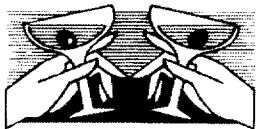
Kicking harmful church habits

Most congregations and denominations are addicted to a lot of self-destructive habits, observes Thomas G. Bandy, a program officer of the United Church of Canada and a former United Methodist pastor, in his book *Kicking Habits* (Abingdon, 1997). As with any other addiction, Bandy finds, the first step toward overcoming this one is admitting it. Then we must embark on a major transformation of the entire system by which our congregation or denomination operates.



Advice from the barflies won't help

Ultimately the transformation will come from God, Bandy realizes. In human terms, however, he finds that it must come from perceptive people on the fringes of the present system or even outside of it. Expecting real change to come from the people



currently in charge, Bandy says, is like expecting alcoholics to get help in overcoming their addiction by consulting their drinking buddies.

Just as alcoholics may realize in sober moments that their habits do harm, some church insiders seem to realize that the present system isn't ideal. However, they talk about its problems and possible solutions only in their own groups, and that's like the alcoholics talking only to their friends at the bar. Without pressure from outsiders, the church insiders will make only cosmetic changes that won't touch the real problems. That's no surprise, because the current system gives these addicts comfort and other rewards that real change might destroy.

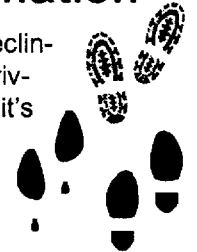


Comfortable people oppose change

None of us are likely to make any big changes in a setup that rewards and comforts us. We feel

Steps toward transformation

Thomas Bandy suggests steps that declining churches must take in order to start thriving. The first step may be the hardest, but it's essential. It's admitting that many familiar church practices are not required by God.



A deliberate process

The other essential step is to use a process deliberately designed to reveal new ways in which God may be calling us to be the church. For this Bandy advocates focusing on worship services, suspending use of the Lectionary and prepared liturgies for several months. We

would feature instead the scriptures about people receiving new insights from God, and calls to go in new directions instead of blindly following religious traditions.

[Jesus] answered them, "Why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?"

—Matthew 15:3

At the same time, Bandy says, we must experiment

with new styles of worship, adding a regular worship service in a different setting if we can't change our sanctuary to allow movement, drama, dance, and other such features. Bandy recommends decreasing preaching and the use of organ music, and increasing the sharing of faith stories and other musical instruments and styles.

Praying, motivating, experimenting

We also must pray together and individually. We might form prayer trios who pray for each other at specific daily times.



At church meetings we'll need to suspend parliamentary procedure and severely reduce time spent on reports and budgets, and focus on motivating attenders instead. We'll need to let members disagree, experiment, and take initiative. We'll need to shift clergy from taking care of them to training them for ministries.

We'll need to spend time in public places talking with strangers and listening to them, as well as listening to people on the fringe of the church and to some who have left it. We'll need to discuss what we've heard, and then make the changes it tells us the church needs to make.



Doing this may seem impossible because it's such a change, but I believe God wants us to do it and will help.

enough incentive to make real changes only when we become very uncomfortable with our current situation. Only then, too, can we see what a better way would be like and how to go about finding it.

Thomas Bandy is reminding us that this is true in the church just as in our personal life, our family, or anything else we're part of. Real change in the church will come from the discontented fringes of church life, not from the contented center.



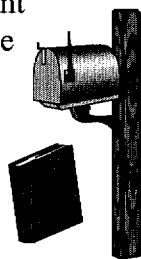
Discouraging confirmation

Like anyone else's recommendations, Bandy's probably include some that aren't wise or wouldn't work, but I believe much of what he is saying deserves our very serious consideration. What he's saying isn't new, and he's far from the only person saying it, but that's part of why I find it so compelling.



The fact that so many well-informed people are making such similar observations about our traditional church practices seems likely to mean that God wants us to get the message and act on it.

For this reason my first reaction to Bandy's book was, "I wish every church member would read this book!" In fact, I wished that so strongly that I decided to send a copy as a gift to every member of my UMC Annual Conference. I found, however, that no one was allowed to have the current Conference membership list except people who needed it for official mailings, so I couldn't make the gift I wanted to make. What a perfect example of what Bandy is saying—a church power group trying to keep outsiders from exposure to ideas and information that might cause change!

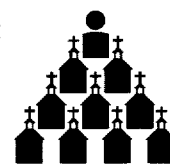


(Unfortunately, I found, this policy regarding membership lists is widely followed throughout the UMC. In next month's *Connections* I'll say more about the harmful effects of such policies.)

God's message rarely comes from the top

A key part of the destructive declining-church pattern to which Thomas Bandy calls our attention is the assumption that visions of what God wants will come down only from the church hierarchy to officially designated committees. In contrast, Bandy

reminds us, the early church found that visions of what God was calling the church to do were revealed to an individual, and usually to one on the fringes of institutional life. Bandy also reminds us that such visions, unlike those that usually come from committees, are notable for revealing something that is original, focused on the future, and different from what has been done in the past.



Addictions of declining churches

Like our false expectation that visions of God's call will come down from the top, other destructive practices and attitudes masquerade as real calls of God but are actually harmful addictions, in Thomas Bandy's view. Here are some others he sees.

- Assuming that church task groups plan mission, congregations pay for it, and professionals do it.
- Having many layers of overlapping decision making, designed to reduce risk, avoid controversy, maintain control, and avoid major change.
- Accepting mediocrity—celebrating the number of people involved or the amount of time and energy spent in a church activity, rather than the quality or effectiveness of the result.



- Continually trying to avoid debt—saving for a rainy day and not seeing that rain is already falling. Bandy finds that sound debt management, not freedom from debt, is the key to development.
- Focusing worship on giving attenders information instead of on transforming and motivating them. We base worship on the Lectionary, for example, in order to inform attenders about all parts of the Bible, instead of focusing on the parts that most directly relate to what God's main current agenda for us might be.
- Expecting new members to keep the church's old property and practices relatively unchanged. In a thriving church, Bandy finds, younger members tend to grow up feeling free to change, tear down, or relocate, not because the past was bad but because the ministry of Jesus Christ has moved forward.
- Expecting pastors to be chaplains who take care of the church members (like caring for the dying



in a hospice, someone has said), instead of being visionaries, trainers, motivators, and observers of what the public yearns for. The pastoral leader's job, thriving churches recognize, is not to "look after" members but to train gifted lay people to do it, using the spiritual gifts God has given them. Getting action comes from finding a gifted and called person and turning that person loose.



Responding to spiritual yearnings

If a calling is authentically of Christ, it will address the spiritual yearning of the public directly, clearly, and powerfully, Bandy believes. He finds that despite differences in age, marital status, economic level, or educational background, members of the public today are spiritually yearning and institutionally alienated. They share some characteristics that most thriving churches use as the basis for designing their program.



- Many people in the U.S. today are desperate to be changed and freed from hurts and addictions. However, they struggle with low self-esteem and broken relationships, so they must have self-affirmation before they can acknowledge their need to change.



- They are bored and frantic at the same time.
- They wish for a better life but don't know what it would be.

- They usually don't leave home Sunday mornings except for active outdoor activity or for buying a morning paper.



- They live next door to those of us who are churchgoers.



The fundamental reason new people come to church today, Thomas Bandy observes, is not to belong but to be changed, although for various reasons they may not say this when they come. They're more likely to reveal their real concerns to a complete stranger in the coffee shop or on a plane, Bandy finds, than to someone at church. Therefore the leaders of the thriving church spend most of their time not in church meetings but in what Bandy calls "the public crossroads of life,"

listening and reading between the lines of the conversations they get involved in.

Looking for God's healing power

Thriving churches, Bandy tells us, recognize that transformed adults, especially those age 18-40, are the church's future. According to Bandy, thriving churches see that even the busiest people will make time to do what really has meaning for them. What matters most to them is how they feel following worship services when they attend. They want to feel better or healthier, and to be motivated to learn and serve during the week.



They recognize, Bandy observes, that being in church isn't necessary for being in God's presence. God's healing power, more than just God's presence, is what they long to experience, and to connect with it they will go to church and also make time in busy schedules to attend support groups during the week. What they don't want is to have to negotiate membership classes, read books or bulletins, digest information, or learn specialized church language.



Thus the thriving church's strategy is to help people to experience healing first, says Bandy, and only later to understand what happened and why. "What will determine their future participation," he finds, "is whether or not the church has helped them go deeper, soar higher, see farther, reach wider, and live better one day at a time."

We'll help you follow God's call

"Spiritual maturity," Bandy reminds us, "does not lead to management, but to ministry. It does not lead to bureaucracy, but to some form of activism." So the thriving church prays with people and listens with them, and says, "When you know what God wants you to do, we'll do all we can to help you do it."



In the thriving church, Bandy finds, neither the board, the staff, nor the denomination sets the mission agenda. God does. The church risks equipping people to do what God calls them to do, and saying "Go for it!"

By contrast, in the declining-church system all movement is controlled. Any change must have the institution's stamp of approval before it can be implemented. Church insiders can block access to God-inspired ministries, and can banish non-conformists to the fringes of church life.

The difference between life and death

Becoming the kind of thriving church he's describing, Bandy assures us, is stressful. It will cause some people to drop out. But it will mean the difference between life and death.



I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I. Send me."

—Isaiah 6:8

If Bandy and others who report similar observations are right, as I believe they are, we urgently need to

make major changes. If we're on the fringe of the church we need to risk speaking up more strongly and persistently. If we're in the center we need to risk loosening our control. Wherever we are, we need to recognize our church addictions and to risk letting God heal us of them.

Barbara

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God . . .



—Romans 12:2

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