

**Changing the Conversation:
Nurturing a Third Way for
Congregations**

by Anthony B. Robinson



**El Sobrante
United Methodist Church**

**A reading for the
All Church Retreat
Saturday, July 18, 2009**

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Changing the culture of organizations, institutions, or a society is about changing the conversation. Different topics are introduced, new language is employed (or old language recovered), and alternative ways of framing the situation are offered. One might observe that each week in worship the church seeks to “change the conversation” through the language of liturgy, the stories of Scripture, the proclaiming of the Word, and the celebration of the sacraments in order that we might see ourselves, our neighbors, and the world in which we live in ways that are both new and truthful.

For congregations—particularly congregations of the mainline Protestant tradition—the way forward has everything to do with changing the conversation. This also means that we will decline the interpretive formulation being offered by the larger culture in order to change the conversation in ways that permit us to see afresh, to hear good news, and to act faithfully. The dominant interpretive framework of American society is on view during each presidential election, when the television networks present us with maps showing the country divided into red and blue, with no alternate colors or shading. This representation constitutes a narrative of polarization. The polarized alternatives it encompasses may be described as left and right or liberal and conservative, or their derivatives, like “pro-life” and “pro-choice” or “pro-economy” and “pro-environment.” While not an exact parallel to the red/blue interpretive schema, the way this polarization gets framed in churches is often evangelical versus liberal (or progressive), or the mega-church model versus the established church. These polarized distinctions come to the fore particularly with reference to worship and music. In worship, we find “contemporary” worship pitted against “traditional.” In music it is praise music versus traditional hymns or classical music. Working, as I do, with a variety of congregations and denominations, I find this narrative to be both ubiquitous and unhelpful. Often it is worse: it is destructive.

Is a third way possible—a way beyond the polarized alternatives of either liberal or conservative, left or right, red or blue, traditional or contemporary, praise or classical? If it is possible, is a third way merely a compromise between extremes, a muddle in the middle, or is it a vital center and a new framing of the conversation? One framing of a third way comes to us from Diana Butler Bass in the description of “intentional churches” she offers in her book *Practicing Congregations*. Such congregations are not adequately described as liberal or conservative, left or right. They combine intentional Christian practices and Christian formation with service and justice emphasis. Another way to describe third-way congregations would be as congregations that are “rooted in faith and engaged in the world.” In such congregations, spirituality is real, worship is vital, God is alive, and people are engaged in practicing and expressing—living—their faith in their vocations and relationships, in service and advocacy on behalf of the poor and marginalized. In either formulation, these are congregations whose primary identity is not either left or right, liberal or conservative, but “Christian.” Their reference points are Scripture, Word, and Sacrament, life in community, and a social critique informed and shaped by all three. Their reference points are not Democratic or Republican. They are not churches that care only, or primarily, about either personal transformation or the public square. They care about and work at both.

For congregations that seek such a third way, there are perhaps 10 important conversations that need to be deepened and sustained in their ongoing life. These conversations are all contributions to and different takes

on the overall effort to change the conversation in ways that nurture an emerging third way that moves beyond current and tired polarization.

Conversation 1: It's Not about You

Many dis-spirited, bewildered, pedaling-as-fast-as-we-can, struggling, or conflicted congregations have come to believe that what they are undergoing is about them. “We are a bad church,” or a dying church, or a failing church, say leaders and members of such congregations. While there are few congregations that cannot stand some improvement, much of what is being faced and experienced by many mainline Protestant churches is not about them. It is about the end of an era, a sea change in the religious ecology of North America and the role of congregations in our society. American Christendom is over. While this may not be news to most clergy, it remains news for many in our congregations. Church leaders need to do a better job of helping their congregations understand what is meant by “Christendom” and what that era meant in terms of church role, Christian formation, mission, and the role of clergy. While we no longer live in the world of American Christendom, old habits die hard, especially if they are not lifted to a conscious level and examined. Not only is Christendom over, but in crucial ways modernity is too. Because many mainline Protestant churches hooked their wagons to the rising star of modernity in the past, this presents many challenges. In all too brief summary, the end of Christendom means that congregations must learn anew how to do adult Christian formation. The end of modernity means that too highly rational or intellectual congregations need to rediscover spirituality. To put it another way, they need to re-encounter both mystery and a living God.

Conversation 2: And Yet . . . It Is About You

It is a psychological and spiritual truism that we do not control what life brings to us, but we do have some control over how we respond to what life brings. If we are preachers, we didn't bring on an end to Christendom with our preaching. If we are church members, we did not cause these changes by not being good enough Christians. We did not cause this, but we must figure out how to respond to it. Often this involves doing some grieving. Christendom was a known world, and for mainline Protestants it was our world. We have lost a good deal. People in our congregations, especially those over 55, are grieving. As we engage in Conversation 1 about what's changed, and as we do our grief work, however, we are also seeking to discern what God is up to in our new time and to respond with as much wit and courage as we can manage. As we do, we may notice that we not only grieve some aspects of Christendom's demise, we are also liberated by that death. We are free to embrace the wonderful, liberating oddity of being Christians, of following Jesus in a life more challenging and adventuresome than Christendom imagined.

The bottom-line point of Conversation 2 is urgency. Congregations and their leaders can't wait until the dust settles and the smoke clears. It is urgent, if our congregations and denominations are to have a place and a role in North America in the 21st century, to step up to the plate and take on the work that God has given to us in our time. There is, in my experience, a good deal of anxiety in congregations and denominations, but not nearly enough urgency.

Conversation 3: A New Heart

Not long ago I found myself working with the congregations of a particular judicatory. One of their four priorities was “renewing faith,” which they told me seemed the hardest to get a hold of, the hardest to make progress on. I observed that the phrase “renewing faith” implies that we already have faith and need only dust

it off or heat it up. Perhaps, I suggested, we might do better to think less in terms of “renewing” and more in terms of “new-ing,” or, to use biblical scholar and author Marcus Borg’s formulation, “meeting Jesus (again) for the first time.” The civic faith operative in many of our congregations is not adequate for this time. Just renewing that will not get us headed in the right direction. Something deeper, something more, is needed—a new heart.

I have come to think that there are at least four key vessels to this new heart. One is that evangelism starts at home and with us. Many mainline congregations rediscovered or tried to rediscover evangelism in the 1980s as a response to membership declines. To them, “evangelism” effectively meant church growth. That’s not what it means. It means hearing and receiving the good news about what God has done and is doing in Jesus. Before we endeavor to share this with others, we need to hear it ourselves. The first audience for evangelism, for the good news of the gospel, is us, our congregations.

A second vessel of the new heart is the message about God. The question that drove Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation was “Where can I find a loving God?” In our secular, technological, market-driven age, the new urgent question is “Where can I find the living God?” In many of our mainline congregations we talk much of a loving, welcoming, inclusive God. All well and good. But whether God is loving or judging may not be the question. The question, the real one, is whether or not God is living, powerful, vital, and capable of changing, healing, and delivering us. If not, then quit wasting your time.

The third vessel of a new heart is Scripture. Is Scripture a kind of archaeological relic or anthropological artifact, or is it the trustworthy mediation of the living God? Too often it seems that the Bible is treated as decorative or as “great literature” (that we haven’t read and have no intention of reading) rather than the truth about who God is and who we are.

Finally, to create the fourth vessel of our new heart, theology needs to be de-professionalized. “Amateur” need not be interpreted as meaning half-baked or poorly done. It can speak of something done for the love of the thing itself. For a century or more, theology has been limited to professionals, with the consequence that many in mainline Protestant churches are clueless about the core convictions of Christianity and what difference they might make. Without engaging in this third conversation, efforts toward a third way will forever be underfunded and seen simply as the latest new gimmick or program. When lives are transformed by the mercies of God, energy is produced—energy that translates into new forms, mission, and vitality.

Conversation 4: Who Will Lead Them?

During the era of Christendom, clergy tended to have three roles: chaplain, scholar, and part of the authority structure of the town or community. Note that neither “leader” nor “congregational leader” is on the list. Today, however, clergy must be leaders. That is, they must be capable of helping their congregations identify and make progress on their own most pressing problems and deepest challenges. Moreover, clergy must be teachers of the faith and ministry mentors. Both of these roles mean that the ministry is not done primarily by clergy (as in Christendom) but by the people of the church, the members of the congregation.

If clergy in the Christendom era tended to be chaplains and scholars who did what ministry was done, laity tended to run the church or manage the ministry. This meant large numbers of church members served on seemingly endless boards and committees. Today, particularly for third-way churches, major shifts are in

order. Increasingly, leadership needs to be entrusted to the called and elected leaders of the congregation, while ministry needs to be given to the laos, the people, the church.

Conversation 5: Why Are We Here?

Many—too many—long-established congregations have come to see their purpose as being to maintain themselves. The question that goes begging in these congregations is “For what are we maintaining ourselves? What is our mission?” I prefer the word “purpose” to “mission” since the latter tends to carry a good deal of baggage. Why are we here? What is our purpose? Would we be able to tell if we were fulfilling our purpose or not?

I do not think that the purpose of the church is all that mysterious or elusive. It can be adequately suggested, in my view, by responses such as, “Churches exist to change lives,” or “Churches exist to grow people of faith,” or “Churches are here to be and make disciples of Jesus,” or “The Church teaches and embodies love of God and love of neighbor.” What is mysterious is the way churches manage to forget or misplace their purpose. Without much thinking about it, many congregations and their members have come to think that the purpose of the church is the comfort and satisfaction of its members. But this seriously distorts the whole venture. The ongoing conversation about purpose and staying “on purpose” is crucial for third-way congregations.

Conversation 6: Let’s Get (Less) Organized

Some of the best clergy with whom I have worked are saying things like, “I don’t have energy for the institutional thing, but I do have energy for discipleship.” I take that to mean that many Protestant congregations have become burdened with elaborate, nearly Byzantine organizational structures that have assumed a life of their own but do not effectively further essential ministry or core purpose in this new time. The comment of clergy is mirrored in the difficulty that many congregations are experiencing in getting sufficient names to fill out the slate for their boards and committees. In too many congregations, the way the congregation is organized to do business, and the implicit idea that the best way to get people involved is to get them on a committee, is proving counterproductive. Moreover, the elaborate organizational structures of many congregations are designed more for maintenance than mission; they are designed to maintain the status quo rather than respond to new challenges.

An alternative to the typical way in which congregations are organized may be gained from the field of “whole systems design,” in which a congregation is thought of less as an organization and more as a system. If a congregation is a system whose purpose is to grow people of faith or to be and make disciples of Jesus Christ, what are the key components of such a system? They might be as few as three: welcoming or inviting, transforming and forming, and preparing and sending. People are welcomed to the community, engaged in experiences that grow faith, and sent into the world to serve, in ways that make use of their gifts, as instruments of God’s grace and presence. Congregations might restructure around such a simple and integrated systems approach. Unlike the organizational model that often pits one area of church life against another (“more money for music means less for social action”), a systems approach to congregational life requires that each part of the system be healthy because each part depends on every other part for the whole to work.

Conversation 7: Taking on Adaptive Challenges

I find useful the distinction leadership expert Ronald Heifetz makes between technical problems and adaptive challenges. The latter, in my view, require intrinsically spiritual work for they involve loss, risk, and the changing of hearts and minds. The former tend to a problem/solution frame, and typically experts or authorities are called upon to do the work. Once purpose is in place, congregations and their leaders need to ask, “What are the adaptive challenges upon which we need to work and make progress in order to more fully realize our purpose?” Adaptive challenges facing many congregations include learning how to do adult Christian formation, or how to work with God to make Christians, how to make the shift from board culture to ministry culture, and how to move from stewardship as meeting the budget to growing congregations of generous people. Any one of those is a five-year piece of work. Together, two or three key adaptive challenges make up a congregation’s vision. In the helpful formulation of Wesley Seminary church leadership professor Lovett Weems, *purpose* stems from exploring the question, “Why are we here?” and *vision* emerges from asking, “Given why we are here, what is God calling us to do in the next five years?”

Conversation 8: The Church and the Public Square

Once the mainline churches dominated the public square, literally. We stood there, proudly, adjacent to the bank, the town hall, the library, or the hospital. Our preachers addressed and often provided the leadership for reform movements from abolition to civil rights. Today we have shrunk and mainline Protestant churches have mostly opted out of the public square. Oh, there may be denominational offices lobbying in Washington, D. C. or ecumenical agencies advocating for this or that at the state capital, but as for congregations and clergy who are thoughtfully engaged, as Christians, in the public square, little is happening. Instead, one of two things tends to occur: either the church tries to make the world over again in its own image, and wakes up, as usual, to discover that the world (or the Republican Party) has made the church over again in its image, or the church slinks off to the margins with little to say or do save wring its hands. That is to say, either there is a new kind of triumphalism or there is a bewildered quietism. What is the role of the church in the public square today? Is it not possible that we might play a role that is neither triumphal nor tongue-tied but rather speaking forthrightly and acting resolutely as a voice in the public conversation? In line with the general theme of this article, the church and its leaders must find a way to speak that does not simply say, “I agree with that” or “me too” to the Republicans or Democrats, to the left or right, but speaks Christianly and theologically in ways that are provocative, compelling, and faithful.

Conversation 9: Death and Resurrection

There are some congregations where death is not the worst thing that can happen. It may even be the best thing that can happen, because without a death there can be no resurrection. Some congregations of the historic mainline will be able to make the shifts necessary to become churches of a third way and experience new purpose and vitality. Others, however, will not. In some situations, congregations and denominations need to be about the work of death and resurrection.

Take two examples from my own recent experience. One neighborhood church had dwindled to about 20 members with an average age of 83. Its denomination had poured in thousands of dollars to “renew” this congregation, but to no avail. It had become a kind of club, and efforts at growth tended to be, “Come join our club (but don’t change anything!).” Not without some struggle a plan was developed that called for closing the church, having a fallow or sabbatical period, and choosing a new name, a new purpose, and a new pastor—all of whom reflected the racially and culturally diverse look of the community around the church. Today, six years later, this resurrection experiment is a vital congregation of between 150 and 200 active participants. Without death, this resurrection could not have taken place!

Another example, a work in progress, features six congregations in a university district. Taken alone, each congregation was experiencing scarcity: not enough money, not enough members, not enough future. However, when the six looked at themselves in a new frame, as one new congregation with a variety of spiritual traditions and practices, they saw abundance. Together they have land assets valued at over 100 million dollars. They have a rich tapestry of spiritual traditions. But, again, a resurrection will necessitate a death.

Conversation 10: Where Do We Start?

With so much work to do and so many conversations to be had, where do you start? Do you start with exploring the sea change in the culture, the end of American Christendom and its implications for virtually every aspect of the church’s life? That may be the right place to start in some situations. In others it might be the case that people know things have changed, and what’s needed is to build a sense of urgency. Still another starting point, should your congregation be in a pastoral search process, is to ask, “Do we want a leader or a chaplain?”

For many congregations, focusing on “purpose” will be a good starting point. If that’s the case, keep in mind that arriving at a reasonably clear, theologically sound statement of purpose is only half the battle. Congregations not only need a clear and compelling statement of purpose, they also need a sense of purpose. The two are related but different. A statement of purpose puts the big idea into words. A sense of purpose gets you out of bed in the morning and keeps you going in the face of challenges.

Wherever you start, it’s important to hold together two qualities that don’t always go well together: urgency and patience. This work, recognizing that Christendom is over and yet the need for the church and gospel is not over but, if anything, more acute means we can’t wait. We have to get on this right now. We have to work to become new congregations with a great sense of urgency. And yet we must be patient. We must be patient with each other because this is tough, demanding work. We must be patient with our leaders as they learn new ways and as they struggle to acquire new skills. We must be patient as old structures give way and we don’t quite know what the new ones are. Doing this work means that we don’t have the answers in advance. We are learning as we go.

Like the Hebrews who were learning what it meant to be Israel during their long journey in the wilderness, like the church in the Book of Acts learning what it meant to be church, we are in a time of new learning. As we change the conversation we shall come to see this new time not as a time of inevitable decline or disarray but as a new time of learning, of deepening faith, and of a great and godly adventure.

Congregations, 2007-07-01

Summer 2007, Number 3

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