Trying to Get it Right: Taking Seriously the Church as the People Gathered by God

by Linda Cannell

Abstract. This article explores the responsibilities of leadership and organizational matters related to congregations. The primary tasks for members of congregations are to discern their identity and purpose as the people of God, and to live consistently in relation to that identity. It takes more than the ordinary conventional patterns of leadership and organization to help the people of God accomplish these tasks.[1]

It seems that every decade or so, the institutional form of the church reinvents itself. It is no wonder that some members of congregations weary of proposals to adopt the next "new" approach to congregational life and ministry. The focus of this article is not to disparage particular forms of church life or structure. We should know by now that forms come and go. More to the point, how do we think about the inevitability of institutional structure in relation to leadership and congregational development, and to congregational development and theological education?

A Sign of Maturing Leadership: Beginning to Understand God's Purposes for God's People

A maturing understanding of the character and role of leadership corresponds with the way one views organizational structure. Consider a biblical example. Moses' father-in-law Jethro devised an organizational structure that is sometimes idealized in how-to-do-it leadership texts. I concur with Tom Bloomer's assertion that Christian management teaching has focused on Exodus 18 as illustrating a management principle to be put into practice with its mathematical, pyramidal authority structure, forgetting that this plan was given to Moses as an interim solution at the time of Israel's immaturity.[2] The more significant lessons about how to lead a people are found closer to the end of Moses' life. For example, in Exodus 33 a more seasoned Moses asked God to show him his glory. The passage takes on greater significance when it is compared with events described in Exodus 3. Chapters 3 and 33 describe essentially the same thing—God showing Moses his glory. In Exodus 3, God commands Moses to return to Egypt to deliver the people of God. In Exodus 33, Moses had learned a great deal more about what that command actually entailed, and the nature of his role in relation to God's purpose. God manifested himself as powerfully in Exodus 3 as he did in chapter 33; however, the difference is found in Moses' readiness for and perception of God's appearance. In Exodus 33, Moses' statements about the forming of a people are extraordinarily profound, much more profound than he could ever have imagined in Exodus 3 when he was directed to return to Egypt as Deliverer. In Exodus 33, Moses said, "We are not even a people unless you are with us." In Exodus 3 he was more concerned about himself and what the people would think of him. Exodus 33 reveals Moses' more mature understanding of God's purposes for this emerging nation.

The story of Jethro's plan tempts us to equate success in congregational leadership with creating efficient structures to manage groups of people. The profound lesson that Moses had to learn, and the profound lesson that we all have to learn, is that efficient systems are not necessarily a sign that a congregation has finally got it right. Our limited understanding of what is "right" can only be found in the growing apprehension of *God's* intentions for the people that *God* has gathered to accomplish *God's* purposes.

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[1] Revised from Linda Cannell. 2008. Trying to Get it Right: Taking Seriously the Church as a People Gathered by God. *Common Ground Journal* v6 n1 (Fall): 11-20. www.commongroundjournal.org

[2] Tom Bloomer is Provost, University of the Nations, YWAM (Youth with a Mission)

Purposes of Organizational Structures in Congregations

Inevitably, churches implement organizational structures; but church leaders and members need to give more thought than is typical to the particular nature and purpose of those structures. The premise of this article is that the church is a community—with its members committed to worship, service, and learning. The term 'learning organization,' popularized by Peter Senge and others, suggests that entire organizations are able to learn, and must learn if they are to develop. In the early literature on the concept, Watkins and Marsick wrote that the design of a learning organization depends on (1) the creation of continuous learning opportunities, (2) encouragement of inquiry and dialogue, (3) collaboration and team learning, (4) systems that will capture and disseminate learning, (5) the empowerment of people toward a shared vision, and (6) the linking of the organization to its environment.[3] Learning organizations are viewed as living systems rather than as rational, if not mechanistic, structures put in place to manage people and product. More recent literature acknowledges that, while the idea of a learning organization is sound, it has proven to be easier to write about than to accomplish. Creating opportunities for people to learn the skills and attitudes that sustain learning organizations is a critical stage in development.[4]

Congregations as institutions require certain organizational procedures for legal and functional reasons, and churches have relatively similar programmatic structures. However, the church is also something profoundly spiritual, its essence knowable only in part. It is an institution, but it is also the people of God who are expected to learn and practice attitudes and behaviors mandated by and pleasing to God. Since this learning will be complete only in eternity, the maturing of the character God expects is the project of a lifetime—lifelong learning for congregations if you will. No congregation is perfect, the collective behaviors of its member and leaders are never fully mature, no matter how polished its programs, attractive its promotion, smoothly executed its services, or well run its business meetings. In fact, a flawless appearance is probably a sign that all is not well! In effect, congregations and leaders of congregations will never 'get it right.' In this regard, Ted Ward's image of organizations as leaky boats is apt. As leaders we will spend all our years of service in organizations bailing!

If becoming the people of God is differentiated from the quest for institutional success, then questions can be asked about what organizational processes will foster the congregation's *awareness* of its identity and purpose as the people of God; encourage corporate *reflection* (and, when necessary, repentance) concerning differences between corporate behavior and what God clearly expects; and to provide opportunity for all members to embody and *practice* the character God expects.

Organizing a congregation in this manner is much more difficult than simply organizing programs, services, committees, and the other familiar patterns of organizational life. Any organization will need to create job descriptions and statements of purpose and mission, and present plans for this and that, and so on; but, the more difficult and absolutely essential task for the church is to envision

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[3] Karen Watkins and Victoria Marsick. *Sculpting the Learning Organization. (San Francisco, CA:* Jossey-Bass, 1993).
[4] Simply put, a learning organization is one that is continuously assessing, reflecting, learning—and adapting. Early critiques of the movement suggested, rightly, that this shift in organizational behavior (from static structures and top down leadership) was an idea whose time had come but that the skills required of leaders and members of organizations had not been defined well—and that leaders were attempting to implement the dynamics of a learning organization (e.g., dialogue, mutual decision making, formative assessment and so on) before the skills had been nurtured within the organization. However, the concept is evolving. Compare Sarita Chawla and John Renesch (eds). 1995. *Learning Organizations: Developing Cultures for Tomorrow's Workplace.* Portland, OR: Productivity Press, 1995, 2006); Peter Senge. *The Dance of Change: The Challenges to Sustaining Momentum in a Learning Organization, a Fifth Discipline Resource.* (New York, NY: Crown Business, 2014).

organizational processes that will enable the congregation to learn how to be the people of God and to act upon that knowledge. Moses ultimately did learn the difference between organizing a nation and leading God's people.

Organizational Processes for Maturing Congregations

In many respects the church can be seen as an institution, but its character as a human enterprise must be carefully subsumed within the understanding of the church as *God's enterprise among people*. This understanding is especially important because dynamics inherent in structures and procedures in organizations profoundly affect the behavior and attitudes of their members. Members of the church, whether they are aware of it or not, are engaged in processes where the power and authority of God are foremost. And the processes that make it possible for members and leaders to discern God's intent must be subordinate to programs and other systems commonly put in place by human beings. Among other things, the choices a congregation makes about organizational structures reveals attitudes toward decision-making, the willingness to embrace diversity and allow difference of perspective, and the competency of people.

In any organization, two of the fundamental tasks of leadership are to discern the capacities of people, and to foster an environment where they can test their capacities and learn—and flourish. Charles Handy[5] has observed that organizations typically operate on the assumption of incompetence. Therefore, instead of developing people, leadership behavior is characterized by control, issuing of directives, attempts to hold power over the other, and resolution of conflict or differences by memo or other impersonal means. When an organization functions on the assumption of *competence*, on the other hand, paying attention to the development of people and the release of creative imagination is at least possible.

Because the church serves God by serving people, the tension between human action and godly purpose must be held in responsible partnership. Any effective organization nurtures relationship, fosters development, recognizes personal and corporate growth, and provides room for responsible action. The church is no different, but guidance may be needed to help the pastor(s) accept the fact that members must become more than responsible sheep. Pastors are fond of talking about "their" church and about their role as shepherds of the flock. The metaphor has biblical precedent, but when and how do the sheep become shepherds! Without empowerment and the embrace of responsibility, members of congregations are kept in a perpetual state of dependent ministry.

The theological curriculum, then, must accomplish more than to teach pastoral/ministry leaders how to build competency in organizational management. Pastoral/ministry leadership will also be seen exercising competencies that include:
- Maintaining responsible tension between human activity and godly intent.
- Helping congregational members discover their identity and purpose as the people of God and the actions and character God expects.
- Enabling diverse perspectives to be heard; and to "authorize" the voice(s) of wisdom from within the congregation that, when needed, will confront, admonish, correct, encourage.
- Leading the congregation to seek the mind of God, leaving the way open for the Holy Spirit to communicate the mind of God in the midst of the congregation.

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[5] For a perspective on the influence of Charles Handy, a churchman, in business and society go to http://www.strategy-business.com/article/03309?pg=all His writings are too numerous to list here.

- Developing a variety of ways to encourage learning and embodiment of knowledge and character in responsible action, service, and justice.

At each stage of a congregation's development, leaders learn to ask the right questions, and they recognize the importance of worship and ritual. A congregation realizes the relationship of godly purpose and human action by bonding the human (social) aspects of institutions to spiritual motive and godly character. In this regard, certain basic Christian commitments are practiced to energize the congregation. For example,

- *Worship* brings us before God and obligates response. Maturing congregations seek to learn the meaning of worship. Corporately they ask questions and seek to discern what *God* requires in worship.
- *Service* engages the people of God with real issues in societies. Maturing congregations recognize that they are communities of reconciliation, seekers of justice, and a grace-full presence in society.
- *Teaching and the commitment to learning* deepen understanding and responsible action. Maturing congregations recognize that discipleship is not optional.

It is important to recognize that these key commitments are *not* manifestations of the church's institutional character whose systems were created by human beings. They are the evidence of *God's* intent for the people of God. Yet, certain skills and actions accompany the commitments that distinguish the people of God. For example, members of maturing congregations learn the art of dialogue that is "more than just talk". They are comfortable with silence, and are learning how to open their hearts and minds to God. Evidences of maturing relationship are seen as the community interacts across cultural, social, gender and age boundaries. People moving toward maturing give time and place to hear those who are 'apt to teach' and not novices.[6] Opportunity is created for corporate and individual reflection on experience, inquiry into questions of faith and issues requiring response, reading, discussing, developing and executing proposals for service. Feasts, rituals, and/or festivals are created to celebrate God's past and present acts among his people.

Further, congregations don't go back to "square one" each time there is an infusion of new people. Church leaders and members devise ways to help newcomers understand distinguishing commitments, corporate history, and opportunities for service. As hospitable communities, maturing congregations also devise ways for the gifts and experience of newcomers to become known so that they can enrich the life of the congregation. In this way, the church as the people of God becomes a living system.

Congregational Practices: Evidences of Basic Commitments

Worship, service, and learning may be worked out in programs (institutional formats); but the godly purpose of these commitments will be lost if they are envisioned only in terms of program and structure. Craig Dykstra and others have described practices derived from Scripture and the long history of the Christian church. These "congregational practices" are not skills or activities in the programmatic sense but can be seen as the evidences of basic Christian commitments and particular to *learning* congregations.

Dykstra asserts that these practices cross regional, cultural, socio-economic, and ethnic boundaries.

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[6] The passages in the epistles often read as instructions for leaders (or as characteristics leaders should demonstrate) are in reality to be read as instructions for the whole people of God. The possible exception is these two qualities which make sense if applied to those able to exercise more mature leadership.

In 1985, he identified the following as the more significant practices of the community of faith:[7]

> (1) telling the Christian story to one another; (2) interpreting together the meaning of that story for our life in the world; (3) worshiping God together: praising God and giving thanks for God's redemptive work in the world and for our lives together; (4) praying together; (5) listening and talking attentively to one another; (6) confessing to one another, and forgiving and reconciling with one another; (7) tolerating one another's failures and encouraging one another; (8) giving one another away, letting go of one another, freeing each other for the work each must do and the life each must live; (9) performing faithful acts of service and witness; (10) suffering for and with other people; (11) providing hospitality and care, not only to one another but also (perhaps especially) to strangers; and (12) criticizing and resisting all those powers and patterns (both within the church and in the world as a whole) which destroy human beings and corrode human community.[8]

Dykstra stressed the importance of involvement in these practices and growing in understanding of what they mean, and he argued that understanding of belief and the nature of one's spiritual journey is fostered as participation in the practices becomes more complex and varied.[9] Dykstra continues to stress that practices are not activities or duties. They are rather biblically derived patterns of action in Christian community through which God's grace, mercy, and presence can become known.[10] Diana Butler Bass[11] wrote that as congregations engage in religious practices they are formed into deeper patterns of service. Miroslav Volf and Dorothy Bass assert that practices become those things that congregations do over time to address human need in the light of God's active presence.[12]

The Problem of Puzzles

We find it difficult to envision congregations in terms other than programs and services. We presume that these activities distinguish congregations from other organizations in society. Yet, it is puzzling that many people, Christian and non-Christian, seem to find little in churches that sets them apart from other helping organizations in society. Many today doubt the validity of religious institutions while, at the same time they are searching for spiritual meaning. For many in society—and in congregations—the church often does not have the kind of "persona" that even non-believers instinctively feel it should have. When the church fails to incarnate biblical principles and godly intentions, it becomes incomprehensible, not only to the world, but also to ourselves.

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[7] The holistic nature of these practices is important. For example, to make one practice (e.g., hospitality) the defining behavior of the church fails to recognize the richness of the character that God expects of the church. Taken together, the practices could also form the basis for a diagnostic conversation. It is not uncommon for churches to use diagnostic tools as a way to get feedback about their institutional health. Yet those tools will not help a congregation understand how it is navigating the constructive tension between human action and godly intent.

[8] Craig Dykstra. No Longer Strangers. *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 6, no. 3 (November 1985): 188–200:197
See further elaboration in Dorothy Bass. *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People.* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1998); Miroslav Volf and Dorothy Bass, eds. *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life.* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001); Diana Butler Bass. *The Practicing Congregation: Imagining a New Old Church.* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2004); and Craig Dykstra. *Growing in the Life of Faith: Education and Christian Practices. Second Edition.* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005).

[9] Dykstra 1985, 199

[10] See http://www.practicingourfaith.org/what-are-christian-practices

[11] Diana Butler Bass. *Christianity for the Rest of Us: How the Neighborhood Church is Transforming Faith.* (San Francisco, CA: Harper, 2006).

[12] Volf and Bass 2001.

Essential Motives for the Church

Dykstra[13] posed two questions that are at the heart of what it takes to embody practices in congregations: "What does it mean to live the Christian life faithfully and well?" and "How can we help one another to do so?" We have accepted as normative, models of organization that often do little to help congregations become the people who demonstrate the character and behavior God expects. The notion that we have to ask different questions, allow time for character to develop, give priority to spiritual over institutional goals, seems idealistic in the extreme. Yet, understanding their identity and purpose as the people of God, and learning to live authentically in relation to that understanding, are non-negotiable outcomes for the people of God. Similarly, those who sincerely seek to exercise leadership *within* a congregation may, like Moses, come to realize that God does have a purpose for the church that is so much greater than what we typically envision as a successful congregation.

Congregational Practices and Theological Education

If the pre-eminent role of leaders is to help members of congregations discover and live authentically in relation to their identity and purpose as the people of God, the nature and purpose of theological education also has to be considered in light of that role. Competencies such as listening with understanding, creating a context wherein people can flourish, treating people across the various human boundaries with respect, making room for spiritual direction of others and spiritual development of oneself, responsible self-awareness, fostering dialogue, making wise decisions and helping others to do so, framing effective questions, interviewing with discernment, upholding principle with courage, and so on are essential when the church is accepted as being in constructive tension between human (institutional) activity and godly intent. The conventional theological curriculum (now generally considered to be hopelessly overcrowded with courses and programs) and an instructional design that is held captive by schedules and the pressure to get courses done are just not adequate for the sort of formation that is required of pastoral leadership.

Note that while the term "theological education" is often a synonym for "theological school" that linkage is not satisfactory. Just as education does not equal public school, theological education does not equal theological school. Though the term itself is problematic (too broad to be definitive of anything), I would prefer to define theological education as "theological education for the whole people of God"; and to see theological schools as *one* way to get that job done.

Ted Ward asserts that the challenge of the 21st century is for institutions to learn how to relate to and work with other institutions. In *The Necessary Revolution*, Peter Senge states what should be obvious by now: the world is shaped by networks or webs of organizations. In commenting on the consequences of the Industrial Revolution on the 20th century, Senge observed that, "No one had a plan for the Industrial Revolution. No ministry was put in charge. No single business led the way. . . . The Industrial Age was not planned but innovated. The next age will be no different. . . . today's innovators are showing how to create a different future by learning how to see the larger systems of which they are a part and to foster collaboration across every imaginable boundary."[14]

The future of theological schools must include significant partnerships across agencies and with

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[13] Dykstra 2005.

[14] Peter Senge, Peter, Bryan Smith, Nina Kruschwitz, Joe Laur, and Sara Schley. *The Necessary Revolution: How Individuals and Corporations are Working Together to Create a Sustainable World.* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 2008) pp. 9-10.

individuals that are likewise concerned about education and human and community development. If we can accept this as a possible future, we no longer have to identify theological education with a particular institutional form (e.g., seminary or church); and, it should be noted, we are also freed from identifying education with particular methods and curriculum. *Learning* can result from many and varied instructional formats and venues (e.g., the classroom is simply one venue). Freed from overcrowded, conventional forms, stakeholders are able to define what it is that *schools* are uniquely designed to accomplish—avoiding as they do so the tendency to certain besetting sins of the academy. They can establish productive integration with forms of education, wherever they may be found, that are better suited for professional/ministry education and development.

Tasks appropriate to theological education, then, are to uphold the quality of congregational practices, examine them against the long history of the church, and situate them in societies and cultures. Orienting theological education for the whole people of God to the practices of congregations would seem more defensible than orienting it primarily to some grand intellectual project, or to developing management skills. When we identify the practices of congregations with the theological quest to know God truly,[15] matters of piety and knowledge and responsible service are seen as one whole; concerns about organizational patterns and leadership are not permitted to devolve to a pragmatic concern for what works.

> Mission is the meaning of the church. . . . The church becomes the mission, the living outreach of God to the world. The church exists only insofar as it carries Christ to the world. The church is only part of the mission, the mission of God sending his son to the world. Without this mission, there would be no church. The idea of church without mission is an absurdity.[16]

God said, "I will build my church." It is neither our responsibility nor our right to seek to build it ourselves. The aphorism, the church doesn't have a mission; the mission has a church, is apt.[17] Preoccupation with building institutions and empires causes us to lose sight of the reality that the purpose and mission of congregations, the people of God, is God's alone to define and ours to seek to discern and then to respond in humble obedience.

About the Author

Linda Cannell retired as the Academic Dean at North Park Theological Seminary in December 2011. From 2006-2008, she was Lois W. Bennett Distinguished Professor of Educational Ministries at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, in South Hamilton, Massachusetts, and from 1990-2006 professor of Educational Ministries and director of the Doctor of Philosophy in Educational Studies program at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Illinois. She has held numerous church staff and guest faculty positions. In Canada, she directed EEQUIP Ministries for eight years serving as a consultant to churches, denominations, and theological schools in Canada and the United States. Until 2013 she directed the Candospirit Network, a nonprofit initiative designed to connect leaders across organizations and countries.

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[15] Kelsey, David. *To Understand God Truly: What's Theological about a Theological School?* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1992).

[16] Vincent Donovan. *Christianity Rediscovered.* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003), p. 77.

[17] Attributed variously to David Bosch, Craig Van Gelder, or Chris Wright