

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

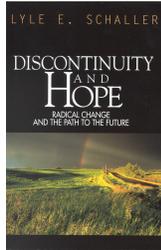


NUMBER 102 - APRIL 2001

BARBARA WENDLAND 505 CHEROKEE DRIVE TEMPLE, TX 76504-3629 254-773-2625 BCWendland@aol.com

Finding hope in change

“While there was considerable continuity in American Christianity between 1800 and 1960, the past four decades of Christianity in America have been marked by an unprecedented degree of discontinuity.” So says church analyst Lyle Schaller in his book *Discontinuity and Hope: Radical Change and the Path to the Future* (Abingdon, 1999).



Both laity and clergy are feeling the effects of this discontinuity—this change from what yesterday’s churches were like. People whose church experience began before 1960 are especially aware of the change. One aspect of it, says Schaller, is that “competition among the churches ... is without precedent in American Christianity.” The re-



sult? “It is far more challenging, difficult, and satisfying to be an effective parish pastor today than it was in the 1950’s. Active churchgoers can readily recognize the increased challenge and difficulty, but Schaller’s claim that being a pastor today is more satisfying may come as a surprise.

The hope has a price tag

Even more surprising may be Schaller’s conclusion. “Most of the consequences of discontinuity,” he finds, “are turning out to be signs of hope.” He quickly adds, however, that the hope has a price tag. Finding hope in the midst of the discontinuity requires accepting the fact that life is more complex today than in earlier years. Also the discontinuity is greater today, and the changes overlap. Besides, Schaller observes, “For many adults their church has become the number one stability zone in their life. Thus when change comes to the church, it can be especially threatening.”



Results to talk about



From the perspective of congregations, Lyle Schaller sees these as the most important results of the church changes that have taken place in recent decades,

- √ An unprecedented level of competition among the churches for new members has developed.
- √ Coming out ahead in this competition requires having “a clearly defined identity or community image based on what that church is doing in ministry.”



- √ In long-standing denominations, the threshold for full membership has become very low. Membership requirements were designed for a high-commitment covenant community, but with time, many congregations have become low-expectation, voluntary associations. Members feel free to choose their own degree of participation rather than meeting the standard prescribed by the denomination’s founders.

- √ Despite their other disadvantages, nondenominational churches tend to have more freedom than denominational ones, to respond to the religious and personal needs of people on a self-identified faith journey, as many young adults are today.

- √ “In today’s world,” Schaller finds, “people come to church in search of certainty, not in a quest for more knowledge.” Churches that proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ with certainty in their teaching and preaching therefore have an edge in today’s church competition.



- √ To thrive, congregations must be large enough to have a variety of programs through which newcomers can enter, at least two high-quality worship services every weekend, an exceptionally gifted and long-tenured pastor, and an emphasis on creating a new tomorrow instead of trying to perpetuate yesterday.



Schaller notices that many church members don’t even accept these descriptions as legitimate topics of conversation. How can we respond to them creatively if we’re not even willing to talk about them?

The crucial question for church members, then, is whether we're willing to pay the price for turning discontinuity into hope. Unfortunately, Schaller points out, "the normal, natural, and predictable response to discontinuity is denial," and that's the reaction we're seeing in a lot of longtime churchgoers. "That stage of denial often endures for at least one generation," Schaller notes, "and usually is accompanied by confusion, gloom, conflict, attempts to perpetuate yesterday, bewilderment, confrontations, pessimism, and sometimes even chaos, but rarely by support for creativity."



Our agenda or God's?

A big part of the problem, Schaller explains, is that the generations born after 1940 have radically changed the context for doing ministry. "Before these generations grew into adolescence," he points out, "the churches could say, 'This is our agenda, take it or leave it.'" But when the after-1940 group arrived, "these folks brought their own agenda and proclaimed, 'This is our agenda. Listen or we'll leave and go elsewhere.'"



As a pre-1940 church member, I find that attitude disturbing. Why should these younger members feel entitled to set the agenda for the church, I wonder. I'm inclined to see the church's agenda as set by God and thus not open to change, especially by people who don't seem to have bothered to find out what the God-given agenda is. And why don't the younger members feel obligated to support the church as older members do, I wonder, instead of feeling free to leave if what the church is doing doesn't happen to suit them?

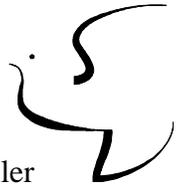


When we react that way, however, we may be overlooking the difference between the church's God-given agenda, which is unique and which we aren't free to change, and the methods for carrying out that agenda, which are many and which often need to be changed in order to reach different groups of people. Schaller assures us that a church that refuses to make needed changes in the methods it uses to carry out God's agenda will keep declining.



Changes can be signs of hope

Here are some of the points of discontinuity that have appeared on the religious scene since the 1950's. They can be signs of hope, Lyle Schaller believes, if we can recognize them as such.



■ **The ecumenical movement**, which says, "Instead of focusing on what separates us, let's lift up what we have in common." This approach, says Schaller, is widely perceived as promoting ambiguity, and on doctrinal questions many of the adults on a self-identified personal spiritual pilgrimage are looking for certainty, not ambiguity. In the competition for new members, congregations that stand for certainty have an advantage.

■ **The move from cooperation to competition.** Intercongregational cooperation in addressing social issues and community needs can be productive, Schaller finds, but cooperation in worship, teaching, evangelism, and other member-oriented church programs doesn't lead to numerical growth.



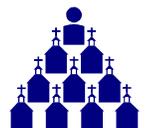
■ **The contemporary religious revival**, with its rebellion against traditional dress codes and classical Christian music. This revival also reflects younger generations' familiarity with television, which presents a faster pace of life in a world filled with color. Today's younger generations, Schaller finds, expect to be active participants rather than passive observers in worship and all other aspects of congregational life.



■ **High expectations.** An increasingly large number of congregations now challenge people rather than assuring them that little will be demanded of them if they join.

■ **The increasing appeal for younger generations, of what Schaller calls the "Made in America" religious traditions** in general and American evangelicism in particular. In contrast, the western European religious heritage tends to appeal more to older generations.

■ **Polity rather than doctrine as the glue that holds denominations together.** Today's denominations,



Schaller observes, include a wide spectrum of doctrine, but this doesn't divide congregations because their denominational structure holds them together.

■ **A greater role for the laity.** Today's thriving congregations, says Lyle Schaller, assume that the laity can be trusted. They recognize that in contrast to earlier years, a large segment of the laity is made up of professionals who are better educated than the pastor and who can be more competent in particular areas of ministry. Church staff members are no longer seen as people who are paid to do the ministry. They're increasingly seen instead, Schaller observes, as trainers, challengers, and scouts looking for gifted people to be colleagues on a ministry team, or as resources and encouragers for volunteers doing ministry.



■ **New definitions for women's ministries.** The old approach, Schaller observes, focused on women who were deeply committed Christians and were determined supporters of world missions. That approach was based on the fact that women were excluded from policy-making positions. That approach, therefore, opened a door for women to use their gifts, but the agenda was originally designed and articulated by men. The new approach focuses instead on

the personal and spiritual journeys of women of all ages. It is based on inclusion and on an agenda that originated with women. It is based also on the assumption that the needs of today's women vary greatly and that no one program or organization can meet all these needs.



■ **Replacement of the small neighborhood worshiping community by the large regional church.** Today's thriving churches, Schaller points

out, focus on a precisely and narrowly defined potential future constituency rather than on the people who live only a few miles from the church building.



■ **Pastors who are mainly leaders instead of lovers.** Schaller quotes the advice that one 83-year-old pastor gives to young pastors, "Preach the Bible and love the people." That advice is inadequate for today's challenges, says Schaller. Today it must be expanded to include also "earn their trust, challenge them to do what they know they cannot do, equip them to meet those challenges, support them in their ministries, and be prepared to respond creatively to the future consequences of present actions." Unfortunately, says Schaller, too many people today want lovers when the churches need leaders. And some church members say the greatest problem is the oversupply of clergy who are neither lovers nor leaders.

■ **More varied resources.** Today's greater complexity of churches' programs, and the stiffer competition for new members, Schaller finds, have created a demand for customized resources. Therefore fewer congregations rely exclusively on materials provided by their denomination. And as a result, Schaller finds, denominations' power to transmit their culture, teaching, traditions, and distinctive identity has weakened.

Replacing denial with hope

Because of these changes, Schaller says, today's endangered congregations are those that average 85 to 200 at worship. They are too large to offer the intimacy that smaller congregations offer, and they're too small to offer the quality and variety of opportunities that large regional churches can offer.

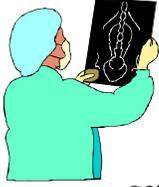


If you've just discovered *Connections* and you want to start getting it monthly by U.S. mail, send me your name, mailing address, and \$5 for the coming year's issues. To get *Connections* by e-mail, let me know at BCWendland@aol.com. If you want any of the 8½ years' back issues that are available, send \$5 for each year you want. For more information, write, phone, or e-mail me (addresses and numbers on page 1), or on the Internet, see www.connectionsonline.org.



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. Some readers make voluntary financial 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 church denominations and some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I believe our churches need to address.

Denying that these changes have happened, Schaller observes, is a predictable response to growing old or to learning that one is terminally ill. But denial, Schaller reminds us, “never has been a source of creativity, innovation, or renewal.”



If Schaller’s observations are accurate, getting past denial is essential if our church congregations are to thrive rather than decline. It’s essential for recognizing the hope that church changes reflect. Schaller is convinced, he says, that “discontinuity with the past often is a powerful source of hope for new generations, even when that

discontinuity is a cause for alarm among the leaders in old institutions.”



For comfortable but declining congregations, Schaller tells us, the attractive path is labeled “Keep on doing ministry as you have always done ministry.” The other path, he says, warns, “Change! Adapt to a new era! The road that brought you to this point leads into oblivion!” Which path is your congregation choosing? How can you help it avoid the paths that lead nowhere? Easter is a good time for finding the hope that’s hidden in what looks like disaster.

Barbara

When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?” When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he said to them, “Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.” — Mark 16:1-7

