

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

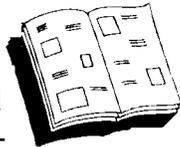
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New ways of being the church

"No spires. No crosses. No robes. ... No pipe organs. No dreary eighteenth-century hymns. No forced solemnity. No Sunday finery. No collection plates." That's what Charles Trueheart, author of a challenging article in the August 1996 *Atlantic Monthly*, finds typical of the relatively new congregations he calls "The Next Church."



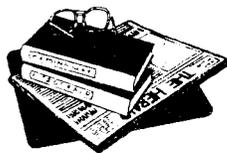
In these congregations, Trueheart observes, "centuries of European tradition and Christian habit are deliberately being abandoned, clearing the way for new, contemporary forms of worship and belonging." And they are drawing lots of people, Trueheart assures us, including many "with patchy or blank histories of churchgoing."



Most of these new congregations, Trueheart points out, are Protestant, but their pattern of church life "transcends denominations and the bounds of traditional churchly behavior." Many new-style churches are independent and entrepreneurial.

Messages we're ignoring

Trueheart, an Episcopalian and a correspondent for *The Washington Post*, is far from alone in noticing the effectiveness and growth of these congregations, in contrast to many traditional ones. Many pastors, seminary professors, and concerned lay church members have been aware of this development for years, and numerous books and articles have been written about it.



But despite the availability of all this information, many church members are ignoring it. Even when our churches are dying, we still refuse to make changes that could save them. The handwriting is on the wall, but we're closing our eyes and hoping it will go away. I'm afraid it won't.

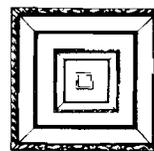
Inertia becomes a death wish

In her powerful book *Dakota* (Ticknor & Fields, 1993) Kathleen Norris tells of the dismay she felt when she traveled teaching writing to schoolchildren. She kept seeing towns and church congregations refusing to use badly needed information and skills that outsiders brought. Norris, a Presbyterian laywoman, found that many local citizens and church members not only rejected the teachers, doctors, and pastors who came. These citizens and church members didn't read national magazines or newspapers, either.



Even in situations where survival depends on changing, Norris observes, "ways of adapting to new social and economic conditions are rejected, not vigorously, but with a strangely resolute inertia." And in today's world, she notes, "this translates into a death wish."

A shrinking frame of reference



As she traveled, Norris repeatedly met people who had come to see their isolation and limited range of vision as desirable. "As their frame of reference diminishes," she sees, "so do their aspirations and their ability to adapt to change." Unfortunately this kind of self-defeating behavior seems to be happening often in towns and congregations of all sizes all over the U.S., and it's contributing to many churches' decline.

We resent anyone who urges us to change

Inertia and isolation, Norris reminds us, lead people to resent anyone who tries to promote change, and thus to reject the very people who could help. "If newcomers' enthusiasm doesn't wear off, if their standards don't fall to meet the town's, and especially if they keep on trying to share what they know," Norris observes, "they have to be discouraged, put down, or even cast out." As a result, Norris finds, pastors and other people who could help "grow weary of pretending not to know what they know, and either leave or cease to offer themselves as resources."



I'm afraid Norris's observations are sadly true of far too many of our churches. We refuse to accept the information and the people who could help us come to life. I'm afraid that if we keep doing this we'll find that, as Kathleen Norris observes, "disconnecting from change does not recapture the past. It loses the future."

Faith comes in cultural packages

Some church members claim that people who want to change the church's methods are being led astray by the culture. But that claim doesn't hold water. It ignores the fact that our traditional symbols and customs also reflect culture. They reflect mainly the European culture of a few centuries ago, however, which isn't a form that conveys meaning to many of today's Americans.



Trueheart's *Atlantic Monthly* article, which I strongly urge you to find and read, reminds us that the religious practices of mainline Christian denominations in America didn't originate with Jesus. "The Anglican liturgy and music that I grew up with," Trueheart reminds himself, "and that I still savor on Sunday mornings for their grandeur and familiarity, seem to me to have the air of eternity. But they are, after all, a fairly recent expression of the faith."



We can't avoid clothing our faith and our religious practice in human, cultural forms. We can only choose which ones we will use, and using some contemporary ones is essential for reaching the people God wants us to reach today.

To reach them, we can't keep providing church only in the forms familiar to longtime members. We must also provide it in ways that will attract the many people who don't have traditional churchgoers' fondness for the "thees" and "thous" of the King James Version of the Bible, or for the hymns of the 18th and 19th centuries.

*Praise to the Lord
who doth prosper
thy work
and defend thee.*

God wants us to reach non-churchgoers

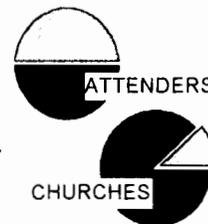
I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. I do it for the sake of the gospel ...
—1 Corinthians 9:22

God calls us to communicate the gospel not just to lifelong churchgoers but also to the people whom the *Atlantic Monthly* article calls "previously unchurched or unhappily churched." And

these are to a large extent the people the new non-traditional congregations are successfully attracting.

Megachurches—half of U.S. churchgoers

Some of the congregations that Charles Trueheart writes about have more than 10,000 attenders during a weekend. There are only about 400 such congregations in the U.S., but they are the fastest-growing ones and they include a lot of churchgoers. Half of today's U.S. churchgoers, Trueheart says, attend only 12% of the 400,000 churches in the U.S.



Because of their size these giant churches can provide the large variety of programs and the multimedia technology that today's younger people consider important. These churches routinely use overhead projectors instead of hymnals and prayer books. Preachers illustrate their messages with projected sketches and cartoons, and with video clips. Dramatic skits and personal testimonials illustrate the points the preacher is making.



Trueheart assures us, however, that not every effective new-style congregation is huge. Hundreds of small and medium-size ones are thriving because they have deliberately chosen to make the kind of changes that keep them from being part of the decline that so many others are experiencing.

Music is crucial

In the view of Trueheart and many other observers of today's church scene, upbeat contemporary music featuring multimedia is probably the number-one attraction in the new churches. It is also the biggest irritation for traditionalists. More than any other issue or symbol, Trueheart finds, music divides congregations that are otherwise ready and able to grow. "The pipe organ, the old hymnal, and the robed choir are emblems of continuity and cohesion to those who uphold tradition," he points out, but they communicate "encrustation and exclusion" to those who don't.



"Whether a church uses contemporary music or not defines which kind of people it wants," Trueheart observes. "When it uses contemporary music, it's saying it wants unchurched people—especially those of childbearing and child-rearing age."

Alien communication forms don't work

A recent book by George G. Hunter III, *Church for the Unchurched* (Abingdon Press, 1996), includes observations similar to Trueheart's. To reach non-Christian people, Hunter reminds us, a church must present the Christian faith in a form that the people in its mission field will understand and be attracted by. Our main current mission field isn't some far-away place, it is all around us. And Hunter sees that "when the church's communication forms are alien to the host people"—the people the church is in the midst of—"they may never perceive that Christianity's God is for people like them."



We would have no problem seeing the truth of this statement if we applied it to a foreign country. If we were starting a church in France, we would know that it needed a pastor who could speak French. We would know that its worship needed to use scripture quotes from a French translation, and songs with French words. Why, then, do we refuse to use today's words and today's communication media when we want to reach today's people?

Discovering that we matter to God

George Hunter finds that the part of the gospel that people must typically discover first, in order to discover the rest, is the message that they matter to God. Then they experience a new relationship with God and with the church—the people of God—and they want to do the will of God. Churches that are thriving today, Hunter observes, are finding effective ways of helping today's people discover that they matter to God.



The greatest barrier to this discovery, Hunter finds, is cultural. When unchurched people talk about church people, Hunter observes, "they do not refer to people who transparently love God and their neighbors, who serve the community and live for others." Instead, unchurched people tend to see

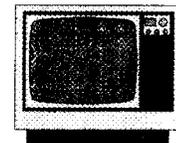


only pious jargon and antiquated music, buildings, and dress. They therefore suspect that the church's agenda is merely to convert them to

these cultural styles that they find pointless or even unattractive.

Cohesive and proudly evangelical

Both Trueheart and Hunter observe that although the new churches are market-driven, culturally sensitive, and cutting-edge, they are rarely what we think of as progressive or liberal when it comes to the basics of faith. They aren't what is considered fundamentalist or pentecostal either, and they aren't television ministries.



Trueheart finds them to be cohesive congregations that are "proudly evangelical." They are devoted to missions and conversion and to taking the Bible seriously. Plentiful, intense lay participation is prominent in these churches, too, Trueheart finds. Even though many of them have large staffs, small groups with volunteer leaders play vital roles. What motivates these volunteers is the feeling that they are doing something that matters.

Community in an impersonal society

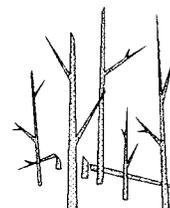


In Trueheart's view, the new-style congregations are reorganizing religious life to fill the void left by the declining influence of schools, families, neighborhoods, old-time churches, and other social institutions that once held civic life together. The new churches, according to Trueheart, are becoming the nearest thing to community that a whole generation is likely to have known or is likely to find in the impersonal, transient society we now live in.

Providing that community, it seems to me, is a worthwhile aim. And it's certainly consistent with what the Bible tells us the church is meant to do.

In danger of withering away?

"I'm not a natural mark for megachurch membership," Trueheart concludes, and so do I when read books and articles like Trueheart's and



Hunter's. But Trueheart also sees that we're speaking a foreign language to many of today's people, and he fears that his church is therefore in serious danger of withering away. He suspects it may



even deserve that fate "if it doesn't get intentional, and soon." I have the same concern about mine and about the other mainline churches that are still using only the words, music, and methods of long ago.

Our churches must keep providing some of the kinds of worship and other activities that our present members find essential, but if we want to survive and be faithful to God's call we can't limit ourselves to those. And those of us who don't like the new kinds of worship will have to



help provide them. We'll have to furnish the financial support, votes, and positive voices that our churches need for starting new activities and keeping them going. We need to do it for the sake of the gospel, and we need to do it right away.

Barbara

Next month . . . ?



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New ways of being the church

The rock of faith hasn't moved



In his autobiography, *My American Journey* (Random House, 1995), General Colin Powell poignantly describes his feelings about his father's funeral. "The funeral service was held at St. Margaret's, our old family church in the South Bronx. By now, the modernists had taken over. All that had meant so much to me, the imagery, the poetry, the liturgy, had been changed. The church had adopted a new service ... I knew my attachment to the forms of the past was more emotional than intellectual. But I found it disconcerting to discover that the rock of faith I was raised on could move."

God alone is
my rock ...
—Psalm 62:6

Many longtime churchgoers share his feelings. But what has moved isn't the rock. It is only the packaging that we've seen the rock wrapped in. That's important to remember.

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