

## THE ONCE AND FUTURE CHURCH

### 1) "A Crack in History"

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It was in the spring of 1997 that two of my seminary colleagues and I met in Ft. Lauderdale for a seminar given by Bill Easum, a United Methodist Pastor, visionary and maverick. He had just written a book entitled, "**Dancing with Dinosaurs**" that suggested that the present path of the institutional church was not dissimilar from that taken by the dinosaurs who vanished from planet earth. That seminar proved to be a pivotal experience for me and my convictions about what it meant to be a pastor in the contemporary church. Already there were whispers about the Church's imminent demise and the pressing need to find short term solutions.

But this seminar was not so much geared to finding solutions as it was to making us aware of the problem and the ramifications. "**We live in a crack in history,**" Bill Easum declared—"**and it is not likely that we will live to see the other side.**" With the hope of a short term solution left in tatters, we were then invited to consider what it meant to grapple with longer term solutions—solutions that would require more years than anyone of us had left. While it was, in one sense, an unsettling time, it also would prove to be an instrumental time for me as it forced me to come to grips, at least in part, with the way things were even if they were not what I wanted them to be.

Today, nearly 20 years later, I find myself still on the path that I embarked upon in Ft. Lauderdale; still living in the "crack in history," still trying to negotiate the challenges and the changes of a world that my seminary education did not—and indeed, could not—prepare me for. The upheaval that we have witnessed over these past twenty years cannot, of course, be limited to the institution of the church. What we have witnessed is a massive shift in institutional authority and loyalty—a shift that has impacted not only the church, but our government and our educational institutions as well. Suddenly, that which was once so firmly in place at the center of our culture in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, finds itself on the outside looking in.

So it is this morning that we begin a three part series of sermons entitled, "**The Once and Future Church,**" a title that is taken from Loren Mead's highly respected book which analyzes both the changes and the challenges that the Church must address if it is to survive this "crack in history." In his sequel to this first book, Meade has suggested that there are five specific challenges that the Church faces today. Over the next three Sundays, Luke and I will plan to outline those challenges as they may apply to our congregation and the future that looms before us.

**These challenges can be summarized as follows:**

**1) Transferring Ownership in the Church 2) New Structures for a New Day 3) Discovering a Passionate Spirituality 4) The Need for Community 5) Becoming an Apostolic People.**

Now, in naming these challenges that Mead outlines, let me say the obvious: These are not exactly headline grabbers! They don't exactly excite the senses or invite heart-pounding interest. I admit that and only ask that you simply not dismiss them, therefore, as boring and irrelevant. I can assure you that they are, in fact, most relevant and that it will be our job to state the case for their consideration.

This morning, I begin by taking on two of these challenges: The question of ownership and the matter of re- structuring the church for ministry in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

So who owns the church? Loren Mead suggests, "In America, the church is owned by its clergy." That, of course, is a pretty bold statement—one that he defends by listing the ways in which the influence of what he calls, "clericalism," has enabled the clergy to become a "privileged caste."

When I read this assessment, I remembered a lecture that Doug Anderson presented at one our clergy gatherings. His premise was the decline of our denomination began not with the 1960's as some have suggested, but with the late 1880's and the end of the frontier. Up until that time, Methodism had been thriving as it followed the migration westward. The formula of operation was pretty simple. A Methodist Circuit Rider (Preacher) would ride into a new town or village and promptly start a church by organizing the lay people for ministry. Once that organization had taken place, the Circuit Rider would move on to another newly settled area and start another church.

This model for ministry was clergy organized and lay empowered. Its focus was outward. That model continued until the westward expansion came to an end and the frontier was closed. Without any new territory to explore for new church sits, the Circuit Rider, suggests Anderson, "got off his horse and moved into a house." And his job description changed from that of planting new churches to being the chaplain of one congregation. In this new role, the former circuit rider was expected to "take care of the congregation" and to do ministry—the very ministry that they had been doing themselves—on their behalf.

While I grant you that this is a rather simplistic assessment of the decline that has beset United Methodism, I do believe that there is some merit in considering the changed dynamic between clergy and laity. While previously, they had worked together in a ministry partnership, that dynamic changed with the new expectation that the preacher / pastor was paid to be their chaplain and that it was his primary job to take care of their needs and to do ministry on their behalf.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century saw the rise of the pastor as a "religious professional" and while that was not, in and of itself, a bad thing, it helped to contribute to the idea that only religious professionals

could be entrusted to do ministry. Laity were, in ways subtle and not so subtle, given the instruction: “Do not try this at home! Leave it to a religious professional!”

And the result, of course, has been the loss of the energy and vitality that, in its frontier hay day, enabled Methodists to build approximately one church a day as people headed west.

Today, says Mead, we must learn to transfer the ownership of the church back to the laity to which it rightfully belongs. A revitalized church will not happen without a revitalized laity—a laity that is passionate about the ministry that it has been called to share. I love the challenging way Eugene Peterson paraphrases the instructions of the writer to the congregation at Ephesus: **“No prolonged infancies please. We’ll not tolerate babes in the woods, small children who are an easy mark for impostors. God wants us to grow up, to know the whole truth and tell it in love—like Christ in everything.” (Ephesians 4: 14-16)**

Now, this does not mean that the clergy no longer have a role in the equation of growing healthy churches. Mead is quite clear that the answer to the problem of clericalism is not to adopt an anti-clerical stance. Faith communities still need pastoral leadership, but that leadership needs to be focused on supporting, encouraging and enabling lay people to be on the front lines of ministry. That ought to be the true goal of every pastor. He suggests that the best way for clergy to view their work is as “interim pastors,” even if they happen to serve a given church for an extended period of time. The choice to view their work as “interim” or temporary work,” will help to keep the focus where it truly belongs—on the role of encouraging and supporting the laity as they carry out the demands of ministry.

In our own congregation, we are blessed to have groups like the Kindness Korps that are dedicated to the day to day tasks of being in ministry to a variety of people who have a variety of needs. I am so grateful for the many who have stepped forward in their ministry of care, compassion and service, often expressed in ways that few other people will ever know about. I cannot begin to tell you about the difference this ministry has made and is making. Not only that, but it inspires me to see this as a model for what ministry in the 21<sup>st</sup> century must look like if we are to move beyond the old mindset that suggests that real ministry is only for those who have made ministry their profession.

There must be a renewed sense of ownership within the laity of our congregations if our congregations are going to survive this “crack in history.”

**A second challenge that the Church must face as it lives into the 21<sup>st</sup> century is that of finding new structures that will enable rather than inhibit ministry.**

Mead’s premise is that the current denominational structures that support our churches are far more cumbersome, expensive and problematic than they can afford to be. In a time of institutional suspicion and question, the structures that we once took for granted are less and less viable.

Many of us grew up in a time in which we automatically thought in denominational terms. We were a Presbyterian, or a Lutheran or a United Methodist. That was simply the way our

religious realm was ordered and structured. We had seminaries that would train and then ordain suitable candidates to pastor these churches that were cut from the denominational mold. It was a system that worked for most all of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but in the last 20-30 years, we have witnessed the rise of independent or “non-denominational” churches—churches that did not necessarily embrace the traditions and rituals of the various denominations. And guess what? Some of those pastors were not seminary trained and not denominationally ordained. This is not to suggest that they hadn’t been trained. It is merely to point out that their training took place outside of the denominationally approved guidelines. They were playing by a different set of rules...a set of non-denominational rules.

In light of this trend, there are a number of sociologists who project that the continued decline and even demise of denominations in the remaining part of this century. Where our denominations once reflected the cultural traditions and ethnic rituals of the “old country,” that is no longer the case. Mead believes that because the real differences between denominations today are more and more negligible, and the goals and visions that motivate them are more and more the same, it only makes sense to restructure the ways in which we do ministry to include an approach that reaches far beyond denominational boundaries.

In fact, he suggests that this has already happened—even if our structures have yet to accommodate this new reality of inter-denominational sharing.

Perhaps the greatest need for re-structuring, however, can be observed in the realm of inter-faith relationships.

Traditionally, the boundaries that have separated faith traditions from each other have been far more imposing than denominational boundaries. When I was a boy, I remember those who insisted that we pray for those who were not Christian so that we might be able to convert them and thus ensure their salvation.

While there are, no doubt, some who still believe that this attitude toward other faiths is the only viable approach, there are a growing number of us who are mindful of the consequences of this form of cultural imperialism and have no desire to perpetuate its legacy. We believe that we can and we must break down the barriers that too long have separated Christian and Jew and Muslim and Hindu—to name but a few members of our religious family.

The simple truth of the matter is that our world can no longer afford the narrow provincialism that declares that one’s own faith is the only true faith and therefore, must be elevated above all the rest. That attitude has been largely responsible for the present turmoil and conflict that threatens the health and well-being of our world. It is, to put it succinctly, killing us, literally and figuratively. We simply have to find a better way for our own good and the good of all. As Mead puts it so well, “The church of the future is called to stand beside and with other faiths—not over them.”

As you can read in our announcements this morning, **Father Tom Bonnacci** will be with us for a Thursday evening series this fall that is designed to help us do just that—**stand beside and with other faith traditions**. This does not mean that we all have to believe all the same things

or observe all the same traditions—not at all. What it does mean is that we must learn to respect, honor and appreciate the many diverse ways in which the human hunger for God and for the common good manifest themselves. No one faith has a corner on the market of true faith and the sooner that we realize that, the sooner we can be about the work of tearing down the walls that have divided us and replacing them with the bridges that will help to unite us.

When Bob Dylan ignited the 60's with his song, "The Times, They are a Changin'," little did he understand the extent of the change that he was pointing to. Over the last 50 years, the pace of this change has only seemed to accelerate. I'm reminded of the guy that likened his experience of change with the chicken trying to lay an egg on the escalator. "Just when you get all settled in," he said, "the bottom drops out."

The bottom has indeed, dropped out. Institutions, such as the church, that once held a revered place in the center of our cultural allegiance have now been pushed to the margins and are teetering on the edge. And we are left to face the challenges of a world that no longer abides by the rules and the guidelines that once neatly defined our world.

The church that **once was** when I began my ministry 40 years ago, is no longer a part of our contemporary landscape. The Church that **will yet be** has, of course, yet to be fully shaped and clearly defined. As we make our way through this "crack in history," I trust that we will have the patience and the openness to understand the nature of the challenges that face us and the courage to respond with deep thought and bold action. Indeed, if the Church is to have a future, it will require nothing less. Amen.