

FORMING CHURCH, FORMING MISSION

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In 1985, a new pastor arrived at the Rockridge United Methodist Church and noted that only about 15 persons attended worship. Most were elderly, lived miles from the church, and had already voted to close the church. Ten years later, 80 people participated on Sundays, and the average age of the adults was closer to 30 years old. No one was moving to those distant suburbs, and a dearth of children and a lack of ethnic variety had been turned into an abundance of kids in a congregation with no ethnic majority.¹ Financially, the church of the mid-1980s was spending the last of the monies acquired from selling the manse and other properties. In 1997 a budget was proposed, passed and subsequently met that was higher than a tithe (10%) of the income of all the member families.

Worship had changed from a rote, formal and somewhat tired obligation to a time of creativity, participation, beauty, tradition and spiritual engagement. While the church's United Methodist tradition had previously offered institutional structures, increasingly the congregation had re-engaged the Wesleyan narrative, including resources in its theology and practices. Previously the church's administrative council had focused on institutional survival; now energies were increasingly directed to the congregation's spiritual formation and missional engagement.

This is not a case study of a mega-church; that kind of phenomenon was not attractive to us. The church was not part of any of the newer denomination-like movements; it was United Methodist with roots in the Evangelical United Brethren. We were not located in a sprawling suburb; rather, the location was urban Oakland, California.

The narratives and reflections here will focus on the years 1986-1996, and provide a window into some of the formative years of change.² I do not intend to present a sequential history or a strategic plan; instead, I will examine how specific characteristics developed and synergistically recreated the congregation. The topics of congregational, spiritual and missional formation are interwoven. By congregational formation, I refer to the character and practices of our "life together", including the work of being a "community of interpreters".³ By spiritual formation I refer not just to those classic disciplines like prayer and Bible study (although these are essential) but to a whole range of personal and family practices that form us affectively, cognitively, conatively⁴ and in skill development. By missional formation I have in mind how we interest peoples and powers around us in being attentive to God's reign and gospel invitation.⁵

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Tell and retell historical narratives

Rockridge United Methodist Church had been in decline for many years. From 1980-85 there had been four pastors. At one time, with several hundred members, this had been the flagship church of the Evangelical United Brethren denomination (EUB) for the San Francisco Bay area. The mid-1960s merger of the EUB with the Methodist Church had created the new United Methodist Church (UMC), but “united” was more a structural description than an accurate relational one. The remaining scars and differences were still very present. The kind of change some of us at Rockridge envisioned would require layers of remembering—bringing into our conversations those congregational memories about values, hopes, divisions and successes. We needed to bring these memories into conversations about theological and biblical narratives. We had noted how often biblical narratives referred to previous social projects, indicating how God’s initiatives toward forming covenant communities met with cooperation or resistance.⁶ If we were to be re-formed into a viable congregation, we needed the stories that had already shaped this people.

We invited ourselves into the homes of the seniors, or invited them to ours, and we sought their memories. “What happened on Sundays?” “How many children were here?” “What are your favourite memories?” “How was your faith nurtured?” “How were you connected to missions?” “What do you appreciate about our sanctuary?” Even though we knew we were going in new directions, these hours were important to us for three reasons: first, we wanted to honour these seniors; second, we wanted to discover historic resources; third, these memories were powerful, whether spoken or not.⁷ We were able to value the faithfulness and diligence of these seniors. We voiced our own respect. We learned of numerous ways the church had been fruitful: supporting missionaries, sending sons and daughters into different forms of ministry, sponsoring affordable housing for retirees, and planting a daughter church in the suburbs. We decided that a larger event was important for this process, so a ‘homecoming’ was planned. Over 150 attended, and six former pastors spoke! This was significant, not only for our accumulation of narratives but because it also helped many marginally involved persons let go. While a few would stay involved for several years, most wanted permission to move on.

In non-public settings, I had spoken of the congregation’s roots being in “militarism and racism.” The congregation had moved from another neighbourhood when that area had become dominantly African-American during the 1930s. They adopted the name “Rockridge” to identify with a nearby housing development that had racial exclusion clauses in the real estate deeds. Then, during the 1950s, this location became increasingly depressed and racially mixed, so almost all of the families moved into the new suburbs over the Oakland Hills to the east. As some members founded a new church there, a few commuted into Oakland to “keep the watch”. The congregation did not express a missional ecclesiology that could have appropriately engaged either of the previous two Oakland neighbourhoods. Concerning militarism, older members recalled the heydays of the church during the Korean war. The naval

bases around Oakland were points of transit for military personnel. The church hosted many of these military families, and the facility was full. Like many US churches, civil religion was assumed and expressed in the display of the US flag on the altar.⁸ As we dealt with memories and began developing new vision, our reflections needed to be honest regarding sins to confess and graces to celebrate. Biblical texts encouraged us in this work; the scriptures provide profound accounts of God's initiatives in forming covenant peoples, along with a great variety of images of both rebellion and faithfulness.

During some of these evenings in our homes, we also began what became a regular practice for us, viz. telling our spiritual autobiographies.⁹ A few of us who were new arrivals had known each other previously, but most of us were strangers. By giving thick descriptions of our spiritual lives, we learned to value both uniqueness and commonness – ways that were different and ways that were similar. This sharing tended to increase our care for each other, to give us new ways to express friendship, and to help us begin seeing what resources might fund our new life together.¹⁰

These were also years in which we gave very specific attention to biblical and historical narratives, described below. We saw how this intertextual work formed us as a new community, giving us roots, interweaving our personal stories, and forming imaginative futures.¹¹ The American philosopher Josiah Royce specifies that a community needs to have shared memories, cooperative activities and common hopes. This is in stark contrast to the superficial concepts of community in our society where quick affinity and minimal affection too easily get labelled “community”. In our events of sharing stories and studying biblical and historic materials, we began to be a community.¹²

We were asking, “What is the church?” along with, “How are we to be church in this place and time?”¹³ In ecumenical and denominational resources, ecclesiology often follows the Enlightenment practice of abstract ideologies and Christendom's practice of giving preference to definitions that are global, institutional, or invisible. We were looking for ways to understand what we thought was the locus of New Testament narratives, i.e., the identity and agency of the congregation.¹⁴ It is notable that ecumenical conversations often separate faith and order from mission and evangelism, and that neither deals well with spirituality and discipleship as actually defined and practised in congregations. More recent World Council of Churches' conversations provide encouragement by bridging these disciplines, and these gains can increase if more attention is paid to real congregations.¹⁵

Mission covenant groups

Like many congregations, Rockridge United Methodist Church had accumulated institutional structures. There were committees for everything but, while persons were assigned to those structures, few were functioning. We decided to maintain a minimal structure of the required committees (like finance and personnel), keep their work to the basics, and then put a priority on to (1) the

“whole group” gatherings for worship and education, and (2) a new experiment with a Wesleyan covenant group.

This move to streamline procedural aspects of our organizational labours became a standard for the future. All organizations and their leaders need to give serious attention to three aspects of corporate life: hermeneutics, operations, and relationships.¹⁶ The work in hermeneutics creates the learning community, i.e. a people who interpret text and context as they arrive at common meanings and visions. This work on meanings is at the core of any corporate change process. The operational aspects give structure and activity patterns to embed the meanings in personal and corporate life. The relationships between persons and among groups form the networks, the synapses, and the nerves that make movement, character and faithfulness possible. Congregational leaders must be attentive to these aspects of the church’s identity and agency. This is in contrast to other definitions of leadership that are restricted to chaplaincy, management, preaching, or civic activism. The epistles of Paul and the poetry of the prophets are attentive to this matrix of social formation.

The norm for institutions is to pass on that which is easiest to duplicate; usually this means operations. So, as denominations and congregations commit their life to formal structures and plans, those structures easily last beyond the meanings or the relationships. Any social group that is to have longer term viability must not only nurture these three aspects of common life, but also have leaders (of the whole congregation and of small groups) who take on the responsibility to keep the three aspects cohesive and mutually coherent.

In our studies of our Wesleyan heritage, we not only learned of the “class meetings” and “class leaders” that John Wesley formed to promote serious discipleship, but we also learned that our own United Methodist denomination was working on a new and contextualized approach of those forms.¹⁷ At the suggestion of these instructors, we began one group of eight persons – about a third of the worshipping congregation. These persons agreed on a set of common practices (their “covenant”) and began to meet weekly for purposes of accountability and encouragement.

The covenant clauses were reviewed regularly. This set is from the early 1990s:¹⁸ (1) Each day I will pray, read the scriptures, and reflect on my reading and my life as a disciple. (2) I will participate weekly in worship and education. (3) I will seek to know and develop my spiritual gifts, to be a minister with the Rockridge church, and to follow missional call. (4) I will heed the warnings of the Holy Spirit concerning sin, following the Spirit’s promptings concerning love and righteousness, and nurture the fruit of the Spirit. (5) I will give at least a tithe of all I receive.¹⁹

These groups served us far better than we anticipated. The weekly check-ins deepened the intentionality of our discipleship, which was something most of us had found lacking in other settings. We grew in our capacities to care for each other, to value different perspectives and insights, and to discover and draw on strengths. We felt restless as we spoke of mission while doing little. We commented on ways the preached and studied “word” was getting through

to us. Increasingly we were expressing the freedom that comes with financial generosity. While we had planned this to be a year-long trial, others did not want to wait, so a second group was initiated within six months.

As persons of late modernity, we felt the pressures of individualism. Some decided that they preferred not to discuss their discipleship with others. Others wanted to make major changes in the covenant.²⁰ Because we all came with our own experiences and expectations, the groups were always facing pressures to become some other kind of group, e.g. focused on prayer or study or therapy or action. We had to be clear that the primary purpose was accountability, and that meant accountability to the covenant, to our common life as church and small group, and to the Spirit's promptings.

As we entered into these experiments, we explored the biblical and traditional roots of spiritual practices. Our small groups were not intended to do very much; they were to work in the network of other church practices and relationships. They were, in fact, to help those other practices (worship, study, counselling, mission) be more faithful. Most of us were learning that we needed each other if we wished to gain faithfulness as disciples, and we were also learning that scripture and tradition had valuable resources for us. Spirituality is often taught as an individualistic exercise, and discipleship is often understood as optional, but we were learning the essential connections between personal spirituality and discipleship, and our corporate faithfulness.²¹ While many members understood that the gospel called us to engage neighbourhood and world, we did not easily find ways for covenant groups to do that. We would not become significantly missional until the groups were disbanded and reformed.²²

By the beginning of 1988, about two years into the chaos and energy of experiments, study, and continuing discernment, a few members of the covenant groups wanted to try something new. These individuals had already become our worship team. They planned weekly worship, led music, and studied various traditions. They proposed that they leave their current groups and become a new covenant group, thus combining the accountability for spiritual formation with their ministry on behalf of the congregation. We realized that this countered the tendencies of Western churches to separate everything into distinct areas: a committee for decisions, a team for implementation, another group for prayer or study.²³ Church members tend to be involved in multiple groups but there is little cohesion, for example, between what is studied in one group and what may be implemented in another. This new group believed that their covenant accountability and their worship leadership would be mutually strengthening. They believed that their relationships, their spiritual formation and their ministry would all find resources and cohesion in the merging of purposes and tasks.²⁴ Over the coming years, worship became a powerful centre for God's work of reshaping us personally and corporately, largely because this new group had the capacities to help us re-imagine Sunday mornings, to draw on ancient and new resources, and to nurture a highly participative experience. This set a direction for the whole church so that our covenant groups would become the centre and structure not only for discipleship but also for both inward and outward mission.

A community of interpreters

Because we had gathered from various traditions (e.g., Episcopal, Roman Catholic, Presbyterian, Evangelical Covenant, “independent”), and we brought very different spiritual pilgrimages into this new assembly, we were always seeking what the apostle Paul encouraged as being “of one mind”. This was not the pursuit of forced conformity; rather, we sought a commonness adequate for social cohesion, mutual support, and faithful witness. Unlike churchgoers of previous generations, most of our generation are not people who know the biblical narratives. We tend to know a few stories, and perhaps have participated in the study of a couple of biblical books, but the large narratives and many mutually interpreting sequences are unknown. This means that New Testament references to the Old Testament, or even a preacher’s comment that may connect the exile or the return with some Christian theme, are entirely lost on the hearers. Further, the resources of church history are only available in the rote memory of creeds, which decontextualize theology. We knew that this was a very inadequate foundation for a community.

Since every community is formed socially and textually, we realized that the narratives of our society and our personal narratives shaped us more than the Christian narrative we claimed. Children and adults can chant commercials and popular songs but have only vague and disconnected pieces of biblical and historical narratives. We needed to become what American philosopher Charles Peirce called a “community of interpreters”.²⁵ Our corporate interpretive work was at the intersection of biblical and traditional texts, the Oakland context of our church, and our personal and family experiences. The interpretive task was to know God in this place, and to enter into the trinitarian life that offers grace, reconciliation and salvation.

In the early years of change, we spent many months in an inductive, reflective study of the gospel of Mark. We decided to read a book on the metanarrative of scripture.²⁶ And we studied our Wesleyan heritage through books, articles and sermons. Many of us had valued the lectionary but we realized that this mode was formed when the listeners knew most of the references; that was not our situation. Except for Advent and Lent (the two narratives that everyone knew well enough for lectionary resources to serve us well), we decided to preach through whole Bible books. We would alternate annually between different sections of the Old and New Testaments. We still followed the church calendar carefully, giving artistic and festive attention to holy days.

We were very aware that brief Sunday sermons were insufficient to the formative task. We knew that we, as a corporate body, had to give significant study time to biblical texts if we wanted to claim the heritage and have the necessary resources for our identity and our tasks. Our weekly studies (sometimes on Sunday mornings before worship but more often on a weeknight after a simple meal) became the second centre of our corporate life. Often these studies paralleled the preaching. Therefore, a year in Exodus would cover some texts in preaching and other texts in study, or a year in Matthew would include study evenings that provided a long, thorough engagement with the Sermon

on the Mount. This also allowed us to work with more historical coherence, so a year of preaching from Acts was paralleled with studies of Pauline letters.

Several studies were uniquely formative for us, most notably, Isaiah, Nehemiah, the Sermon on the Mount, Acts and Ephesians. Of those, Jesus' Sermon was especially troubling. Repeated attempts to understand these teachings about blessings, grace and behaviour left us adrift and confused, yet lured. Even as studying the Sermon on the Mount in relationship to the whole of the gospel of Matthew, or in parallel with the Lukan Sermon on the Plain, provided insights, we were still largely alien to the text. Then one evening we experienced a non-modernist shift in our hermeneutics. That evening, the question was transformed from "What does this mean?" to "What kind of people do we need to be for this to make sense?" That led to an overwhelming experience of convictions and longings about our lives: our marriages and families, our jobs and money, our politics and civic lives. The Spirit was forming us so we might be "people of the book".²⁷

We also knew that cognitive engagement with texts was only part of the task. We needed to enter into the texts, experience them, listen to them and imagine them, so that we might know the Spirit's continuing life among us. We often used environmental art (canopies, banners, structures, tapestries) to create a worship space that helped us enter into the narratives. We experienced corporate *lectio divina*, such as when we spent three consecutive Wednesdays having someone read the entire Sermon on the Mount, then sitting in silence with the question, "What is the word for us?", followed by a time of humble sharing about what we were hearing. Further, every covenant group meeting began with the question, "What have you heard, for yourself and for our church, in the preached and studied word?"²⁸

Interpretive praxis and mission

The interpretive task is missional when the people do the work of engaging texts and context. Because of the very nature of God and God's word, a congregation's life of study and prayerful listening will make them attentive to the world around them. Each facet affects the others. Being in the world changes our reading of texts and ourselves, spiritual disciplines change us and thereby alter how we perceive texts and context, and the biblical and historical texts change us and our life in the world. In Aristotle's framework, if some set of activities is to be described as "praxis", then ends are embedded in the current activities. This is behind the thought of Paulo Freire,²⁹ who emphasized that action and reflection were interactive. These defined "praxis" for us. In addition to worship, study, prayer and meditation, the reflection activities included discernment, visioning, planning, analysis, evaluation and internal organizing. The action part of the cycle included engaging the peoples and powers of our environment through conversation, research, participation in other organizations, and organizing coalitions to seek shalom in our city, serving those in need and inviting others to join us in the common life of following Jesus.

Several lessons became obvious over the years. First, interpretive work was a corporate task, shared not only among clergy and laity, but also made more valuable when there was intentionality about generational and ethnic inclusion. Second, we needed to draw on a broad range of talents, not only those needed for the traditional work of doing theology but also social analysis, organizational development, relational skills and adeptness for intuition or analysis. This led to a practice of plural leadership.³⁰ Third, interpretive work and the related activities of discernment and decision-making are less reliable when the persons who want voice and power are not engaged in the interrelated tasks of personal and corporate disciplines, and missional outreach. None of these practices was optional for those who wanted to shape our church and help guide our tasks.³¹

When the worship team decided to become a covenant group, thus merging ministry with covenant, there was a deep sense that this might be helpful for all of us. As the Celebration Mission Covenant Group began this new approach, they were also drawn to find artistic expressions of God's grace that could connect with our neighbourhood. Over the coming years they promoted block parties, helped take participatory art into the nearby public schools, and created community events during Advent that drew many non-members. This missional emphasis was to reshape all of us. Other members who wanted to continue the "covenant life" formed Listening Covenant Groups. These focused on discerning how we might shape missional outreach.³²

We knew that if we were to engage this context, we needed to learn more about its people, its history, its strengths and its weaknesses. A city planner among us voiced a call for a 'Discover Oakland' Mission Group. Unlike our norm for other Mission Covenant Groups (MCGs), this group specified that it would be temporary – lasting for perhaps a year. This group led the congregation in biblical studies and on-the-ground exploration. We commissioned a demographic study; we walked and prayed and conversed in routes around schools, businesses and public housing; and we gained information on housing, economics and social needs. The information and perspectives of the 'Discover Oakland' MCG would serve the church well for many years.³³

As the new MCGs began, we also decided to specify several ways of "belonging". Like other churches, we often had persons who were visiting and testing the church's life and ministries. We welcomed them into worship, study, missional activities and homes. We eventually began a nine-month class that would give newcomers plenty of time to discuss our theological heritage, hear stories, learn about United Methodism, experience our spiritual practices and discern if they wished to become church members. We embraced the standard UMC approach to membership vows being an affirmation of baptismal vows.³⁴ All who were members of the church were also invited to become "covenant members", i.e. to be active in one of the covenant groups. This was an annually renewable commitment, preceded by a time for discernment then celebrated in a special liturgy. Sociologically, this combined a "centre-set" approach (personal and corporate covenant disciplines and missional partici-

pation defined the centre of our church) plus clear “boundaries” (the vows of membership and the annual recommitment to MCG practices).

At times we lamented our slowness. The activists among us could get frustrated. Sometimes our own lives were in too much turmoil for us to make progress. And the demands of simply helping each other gain maturity could diminish missional energies. However, over time, we saw how our personal practices of daily prayer, our corporate practices of worship, study and discernment, our convictions that every believer was to be intentionally engaged in discipleship and mission, and our prayerful efforts to engage the neighbourhoods, all helped us hear and act on the Spirit’s voice. There has been significant variety in MCGs: adult education and computer literacy, work with children and youth, housing and job training, relating medical professions to prayer, and cross-cultural and international missions.

Multiple layers of missional engagement

A local school gave us a setting in which to learn about the multiple layers of missional outreach. This primary school, serving a multiethnic and largely impoverished population, did not have a good record of serving the children. Test scores were low, most teachers were discouraged and many thought that the principal’s leadership was inadequate. A Children’s MCG had begun at our church, and, along with nurturing our own children,³⁵ this MCG helped create a homework centre at a partner church nearby. Through the homework centre children and their parents, we became more connected with the school.

One member of the Children’s MCG, who was a primary teacher and reading specialist, made inquiries about being involved at the school. After several rebuffs by the principal, he was invited to lead several weeks of training for the teachers in this school. This helped begin relationships, and the MCG delivered refreshments for each session.³⁶ Eventually, the principal hired the reading specialist.³⁷ As was often true, one MCG provided missional clarity, strategies and leadership, while other church members joined in certain projects. Over the years, members were active as tutors, homework centre coordinators, teacher assistants, and soccer coaches. When we saw that some key teachers were leaving due to frustrations with the principal, we realized that we could not make the needed gains without a new principal. This task of dealing with school administrators and unions would demand several levels of political engagement. The systems are not designed to be responsive to children and parents. Only after over a year of personal and organized efforts were we able to secure a change, and then the “participatory” hiring process for a new principal was also subverted by other administrators. Another transition would be needed before some level of trust and effectiveness would be realized.

This work of a church in the systemic ‘brokenness’ of society demonstrated to us why a church has to be a stable and persistent force in a specific location. Avery Dulles, building on the work of Charles Cooley, writes that a “commu-

nity” (congregation) needs to exhibit relative intimacy, proximity and permanence.³⁸ This counters congregational models built on our society’s values for casual relationships, commuter lives and frequent relocation. Only with adequate focus on geography and committed practices can a congregation serve the cause of neighbourhood shalom. Also, while one tutor or one coach can make meaningful contributions to a child, the systems take multiple approaches and endurance. We learned that this was also true about other spheres of brokenness in Oakland. In a network of thirty churches, we worked on the political, corporate and financial matters of health care, food security, education and neighbourhood redevelopment. This approach to church-based community organizing, effectively led by the Pacific Institute of Community Organizing, provided a way for churches to work on local, city and state-wide issues that we believed were related to our vision of serving the shalom of the city.³⁹

Church mission as life

Several metaphors had funded our changes as we moved from institutional lethargy to our experiments in corporate spirituality and mission. The salt, light and leaven images of the gospels were common in our reflections. We knew that our personal and corporate “internal” work was essential to God’s heart, and these metaphors spoke to both our identity and agency. The images paralleled the praxis model and indicated that the integrity and fecundity of God’s reign meant that we needed to live our lives as an alternative to the destructive forces around us. It was not sufficient to create programmes or hire staff to do good things; our own lives had to express the goodness of the gospel. We determined only to create missional activities that were rooted in our own lives. We did not want to plan and finance activities for “professional” Christian workers while we remained centred in our society’s norms of consumerism, materialism and careerism. The metaphors of salt, light and leaven could frame our engagement with our environment only if our lives – our homes, parenting, jobs, politics and monies – created noticeable bridges between the world and worship.

The exilic call by Jeremiah for transplanted Israel to seek the shalom of Babylon, and the “new urbanism”⁴⁰ image of the “urban village” also fuelled our imaginations. Again, these metaphors required that our lives be connected with whatever message we wanted to enact and speak. If we were to invite neighbours to hear or see the gospel, we needed to be an inviting alternative to all others who claimed to offer them choices. One imaginative result was that six church families began to explore the possibility of a co-housing development in the neighbourhood.⁴¹ We were already involved in different MCGs, but we wanted to live in a neighbourhood near the church in order to enhance our own social interaction and to be more visible in the neighbourhood so that we could demonstrate some of our values (ecological values with construction and gardening, hospitality with neighbourhood children, youth and families). Eventually, through remodeling and new con-

struction, we created nine units for singles and families, including some rental apartments.

Like all churches, except those that have quit breathing, our church life was messy. Sometimes it seemed we did little more than talk. We were too often surprised at how personal and relational problems required so much energy that everything else slowed down. We were constantly restructuring our approaches to leadership, and seldom provided the mentoring needed for the level of expectations. But, as we read the New Testament epistles, we learned that everything we faced seemed to be common currency in the first churches.

Voices

One can hear theological reflections in the voices of members. A Japanese-American artist, who has been part of the church since the transition began:

I have wanted to bring my worlds closer together, to have this worship art (inward journey) connect to neighbourhood art (outward journey). In this process, I began seeing how this creative/artistic gift is tied to a hospitality gift – the joy of doing art collaboratively, inviting others into the art, hoping it might help them ask a next question, inviting questions about Jesus. I think this is growing a gift in evangelism.

A businessman:

Executing the mission of the group pushed me to make decisions about how my time was distributed between job, church and home. In covenant relationships, I began to realize that my time invested in church was life to me as well as to the folks who were church with me. In this service, I experienced joy and exhaustion, fulfilment and emptiness. In other words, it was not happiness-ever-after. Still isn't. But I have, in the context of a covenant group, fellow travellers who encourage me to listen deeply, and who walk beside me on a common journey.

A businesswoman:

A year ago I made a job switch that makes my work life less demanding so I have more time for my first vocation (church). I have seen fruit and am amazed with what God has done with this very small change. I am increasingly aware of how much my woundedness and God's work on my growing edges centre on children. I think the training and credentials I have in business will somehow be used to serve mission. I suspect it will be much more exciting than anything I could have envisioned.

Finally, a neighbour who jogged by the co-housing project when the solar roofs were being installed asked, "What are those?" A resident answered, "Solar panels. We have adopted lots of ways to be more responsible with the earth." So another question, "Isn't that the new soccer coach?" Then she also recognized the reading specialist. Evidently she had heard of our faith community, so she inquired about specifics, "What church are you from?" When told, she remarked, "I grew up Methodist, but it was very different. I'll visit you on Sunday."

NOTES

- ¹ Asian Americans and Euro-Americans made up about 80-85% of the worshipping congregation, with others being Latino/a or of African descent.
- ² Later comments are in the forthcoming Barrett, Lois, ed., *Treasure in Clay Jars: Patterns in Missional Faithfulness*, (Gospel in Our Culture Series) Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2003, and in Sine, Tom, *Mustard Seed Versus McWorld*, Grand Rapids, Baker Book House, 1999, pp. 210-212.
- ³ The prophetic and paradigmatic book *Life Together* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer provided the first term (New York, Harper & Row, 1954). The “community of interpreters” will receive more attention below. While most books on Christian education work with a framework of individual discipleship, the corporateness of goals is emphasized in Westerhoff, John, *Will Our Children Have Faith?*, rev. ed., Harrisburg, PA, Morehouse, 2000; Pazmiño, Robert, *Latin American Journey: Insights for Christian Education in North America*, Cleveland, United Church Press, 1994; and Foster, Charles, *Educating Congregations*, Nashville, Abingdon, 1994.
- ⁴ For those of us working on Christian education, pastoral leadership and congregation formation, the concept of conation is helpfully developed in Thomas Groome’s *Sharing Faith*, San Francisco, HarperCollins, 1991. The concept focuses on the formation of character, wisdom and tendencies.
- ⁵ These three aspects of formation overlap and are mutually interpretive. Missional formation is not just programmatic or even just a relational encounter; it is both the identity and agency of the congregation in the world. See Yoder, John H., *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical*, Michael Cartwright, ed., Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1994; Yoder, John H., *For the Nations: Essays Public and Private*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1997; Hauerwas, Stanley, *After Christendom?*, Nashville, Abingdon, 1991; Hauerwas, Stanley, *In Good Company: The Church as Polis*, Notre Dame, IN, Notre Dame Press, 1995; Newbigin, Lesslie, *A Word in Season*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1994; Newbigin, Lesslie, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, rev. ed., 1995; Budde, Michael and Robert Brimlow, eds, *The Church as Counterculture*, Albany, NY, State University of New York Press, 2000. This missional understanding of the congregation is the focus of those building on the work of Lesslie Newbigin, especially Guder, Darrell, ed., *Missional Church*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1998, and other books in The Gospel in Our Culture series. A newsletter and other resources can be found on the website www.gocn.org. Also beneficent especially for congregational use is Van Gelder, Craig, *The Essence of the Church*, Grand Rapids, Baker, 2000. Finally, several volumes in The Christian Mission and Modern Culture series by Trinity Press International, Harrisburg, PA, serve us well, notably Hall, Douglas John, *The End of Christendom and the Future of Christianity*, 1997; Shenk, Wilbert, *Write the Vision: The Church Renewed*, 1995; and Kenneson, Philip, *Beyond Sectarianism. Re-Imagining Church and World*, 1999. See also note 13.
- ⁶ We were especially instructed by the decades around the Babylonian exile. See contributions by Brueggemann, Walter, *Cadences of Home: Preaching among Exiles*, Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 1997; *id.*, *A Commentary on Jeremiah: Exile and Homecoming*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1998; and *id.*, *Hopeful Imagination: Prophetic Voices in Exile*, Philadelphia, Fortress, 1986; also Copenhagen, Martin, Anthony Robinson, and William Willimon, *Good News in Exile*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1999; Smith, Daniel, *The Religion of the Landless: The Social Context of the Babylonian Exile*, Bloomington, IN, Meyer Stone Books, 1989.
- ⁷ Appreciative inquiry is a mode of questioning and promoting organizational change that has much promise for congregations. See Watkins, Jane Magruder and Bernard Mohr, *Appreciative Inquiry: Change at the Speed of Imagination*, San Francisco, Jossey Bass, 2001; see also Booy, Dirk and Sarone Ole Sena, “Capacity Building Using the Appreciative Inquiry Approach” in Myers, Bryant, ed., *Working with the Poor*, Monrovia, CA, World Vision, 1999, pp. 38-55.
- ⁸ The USA flag was quietly removed within a couple of years.
- ⁹ A brief guide for writing a spiritual autobiography can be found in the “Articles” section of my web page: www.fuller.edu/sot/faculty/branson
- ¹⁰ During our nine-month catechetical class, newcomers would hear the spiritual autobiographies of members, and those joining the church would tell their own spiritual journey at a special gathering of the congregation.
- ¹¹ The constitutive role of narrative for congregations has been advanced by, among others, Stanley Hauerwas, Walter Brueggemann, and Alasdair MacIntyre. For example, see Hauerwas, Stanley and L. Gregory Jones, eds, *Why Narrative? Readings in Narrative Theology*, Grand

- Rapids, Eerdmans, 1989. I also benefited from Paul Ricoeur's *Time and Narrative*, 4 vols, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1988, especially volumes I and III.
- ¹² Royce, Josiah, *The Problem of Christianity*, Chicago, IL, USA, University of Chicago Press, 1918, pp. 257-270. Robert Bellah and his research team, in their discussion of "community of memory," note the importance of a community's "committed practices"; see Bellah, Robert, et al., *Habits of the Heart*, Berkeley, CA, University of California Press, 1985, pp. 152-155.
- ¹³ We are well served by a growing number of books on congregational life and mission. Robert Banks' *Paul's Idea of Community* follows insights in the epistles (Peabody, MA, Hendrickson, 1994, rev.); In *A Peculiar People: The Church as Culture in a Post-Christian Society*, Rodney Clapp pushes for the primary role of congregational life as Christians are formed into an alternative community in society (Downers Grove, IL, InterVarsity Press, 1996); William Willimon & Stanley Hauerwas was ignited much of the current debate with *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony*, Nashville, TN, Abingdon, 1989. Also of great help on the biblical narrative and ecclesiology are two of Gerhard Lohfink's works: *Jesus and Community: The Social Dimension of Christian Faith*, Philadelphia, Fortress, 1982; and *Does God Need the Church?*, Collegeville, MN, The Liturgical Press, 1999. With wisdom and contextual savvy, James McClendon provided the needed theological depth with his three-volume systematic theology: *Ethics* (Vol. 1, 1986), *Doctrine* (Vol. 2, 1994), and *Witness* (Vol. 3, 2000), Nashville, Abingdon.
- ¹⁴ Consistent with this, *The Nature and Purpose of the Church* (World Council of Churches, Faith and Order Paper No. 181) gives most of its attention to "Church" with an uppercase "C." Even the "sign" and "foretaste" language, which could be foundational for explorations about congregations (§42), is strangely focused on uppercase "C" "Church." The few paragraphs on the local church (§§65-67) address more the interrelationships than the identity and agency of congregations themselves. G.R. Evans, in *The Church and the Churches*, Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 1994, posits the need for ecumenical relationships to permeate all levels of church expression (worshipping communities, dioceses, denominations, Rome, universal). Her summary chart (pp. 111-113) is very useful for observing various ways the local or the universal takes priority in Christian theory and practice.
- ¹⁵ Another observation coheres to this topic: It has not been uncommon for institutional ecumenism to give preference to the perspectives of ecclesial bodies that are notable for their decline in membership and missional impact. This is not to endorse statistical reverence; rather it is to promote "doubt that is redeeming" in some quarters, and deeper conversation and partnership in others.
- ¹⁶ Branson, Mark Lau, "Forming God's People", *Congregations*, Vol. 29, Number 1, Jan/Feb, 2003, pp. 22-26. www.alban.org/journal.asp
- ¹⁷ Manskar, Steven, *Accountable Discipleship: Living in God's Household*, Nashville, TN, Discipleship Resources, 2000; Watson, Gayle Turner, *Guide for Covenant Discipleship Groups*, Nashville, TN, Discipleship Resources, 2000; Watson, David Lowes, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting*, Nashville, TN, Discipleship Resources, 1985; Jennings, Theodore, Jr., *Good News to the Poor: John Wesley's Evangelical Economics*, Nashville, TN, Abingdon, 1990. Additional materials on covenant groups available from the United Methodist Church can be found at www.gbod.org/smallgroup/. The legislative basis is in *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church*, Nashville, United Methodist Publishing House, 2000, §229 and §269. Other resources on disciplined practices include Yoder, John H., "Sacrament as Social Process: Christ the Transformer of Culture", in *Theology Today*, vol. 48, no.1, April 1991, pp. 33-44; and Yoder, John H., *Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community Before the Watching World*, Nashville, Discipleship Resources, 1992; Bass, Dorothy, ed., *Practicing Our Faith*, San Francisco, Jossey Bass, 1997; Foster, Richard, *Celebration of Discipline* (3rd ed.), San Francisco, Harper & Row, 1988.
- ¹⁸ Although wording and some specifics of the covenant changed over the years, no item was dropped. The most significant addition was a commitment "to keep the sabbath holy." The church's Annotated Covenant is available on my website, see note 9.
- ¹⁹ Concerning money and possessions, we know we are embedded in a society of consumer capitalism that is committed to creating desires and forming us to sacrifice for those desires. The gospel, embodied in a congregation, provides the alternative. As we studied scripture, learned about our own context, and wrote "money autobiographies", it was not uncommon for desires and practices to be radically reshaped. I can recall numerous instances when someone would come to a covenant meeting with credit cards in hand, asking that others keep them out of reach. We also spent significant time working together on personal and family budgets. See Brueggemann, Walter, "The Liturgy of Abundance, the Myth of Scarcity," in *Deep Memory*,

Exuberant Hope: Contested Truth in a Post-Christian World, Minneapolis, Augsburg Fortress, 2000, pp.69-76; and Clapp, Rodney (ed.), *The Consuming Passion: Christianity & the Consumer Culture*, Downers Grove, IL, InterVarsity Press, 1998.

- ²⁰ Another effect of consumer capitalism is the language and mythology of “choice.” When this is brought to congregational life, Christianity and its practices are treated like a *smorgasbord* or supermarket, where an individual can select what suits one’s own preferences. Churches that are developing the disciplined practices of classical spirituality and significant mission will find that newcomers may wish to identify with the church without adopting its practices. Further, they may speak against those practices without assuming responsibility for adequate study or prayerful consideration of the larger consequences of their proposals. This is not dissimilar to material consumption that is disconnected from ecological impact.
- ²¹ See especially Kenneson, Philip, *Life on the Vine: Cultivating the Fruit of the Spirit in Christian Community*, Downers Grove, IL, InterVarsity Press, 1999; also Chittister, Joan, *Wisdom Distilled from the Daily: Living the Rule of St. Benedict Today*, San Francisco, CA, Harper & Row, 1990. Our sabbath practices were resourced by Dawn, Marva, *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly: Ceasing, Resting, Embracing, Feasting*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1989.
- ²² We received inspiration and took a number of priorities and practices from the Church of the Savior in Washington, DC. The best overview is Elizabeth O’Connor’s *Servant Leaders. Servant Structures*, Washington DC, The Servant Leadership School, 1991. Also, see her two earlier books *Call to Commitment*, New York, Harper and Row, 1963, reprinted, Washington DC, Servant Leadership Press, 1994, and *Journey Inward, Journey Outward*, New York, Harper and Row, 1975, and the collection of sermons by Cosby, N. Gordon, *By Grace Transformed*, New York, Crossroad Publishing Company, 1999 (all available through their website www.pottershousebooks.org).
- ²³ Segmentation and specialisation are marks of modernity, serving specific purposes of positivist knowledge and effectiveness, but often undermining synergism, interpretation and community when applied without attention to those values.
- ²⁴ Worship quickly became central to our formation and nurture. The ingredients of praise, word and table were woven together with increased meaning, energy and participation. Our intercultural and intergenerational commitments received attention, visual arts deepened our experience, liturgies were received and created, and varieties of music and movement helped us hear and respond to the Holy Spirit’s life among us.
- ²⁵ Charles Peirce, noted in Josiah Royce, *op. cit.*, p. 285ff. This phrase is more recently used by Robert Bellah et al., *op. cit.*, p. 152ff.
- ²⁶ Bright, John, *The Kingdom of God*, Nashville, Abingdon, 1953; we later also read the less technical *Journey Towards Holiness* (Kreider, Alan, Scottdale, PA, Herald Press, 1987), which works from the large narratives to ecclesial and personal discipleship. Also, see Newbigin, Lesslie, *A Walk through the Bible*, Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 1999.
- ²⁷ Not discussed here is the very significant corporate work on congregational texts. In 1989-90 almost all adult members spent many hours in studying biblical texts, historical resources, and contemporary writers as we created our church vision statement. This document, with the headings of word, worship, community, and service, gave attention to the inward and outward aspects of our corporate life. The church’s Vision Statement and structures receive attention in “Sanctification and Mission: Journey Inward, Journey Outward”, *Covenant Discipleship Quarterly*, vol. 7, no. 1, Fall 1991, pp. 2-3, 10; and in “Accountability for Following Jesus”, *Covenant Discipleship Quarterly*, vol. 7, no. 2, Winter 1992, pp. 6-7, 5; also in “Consagración y Misión: Viaje Interno, Viaje Externo”, *Discípulos Responsables*, vol. 5, no. 2, Invierno 1992, pp. 2-3, 10; and in “La Responsabilidad de Seguir a Jesús”, *Discípulos Responsables*, vol. 5, no. 3, Primavera 1992, pp. 6-7, 5. Again, in the mid-1990s, we did similar work on a text that expressed the “Essentials of Church Life and Mission”. The three key concepts became formation (spiritual practices and mission covenant groups), vocation (our vocation as church is prior to individual jobs and careers), and location (requiring attentiveness to the specifics of place and cultures). The process we employed to create these provided multiple opportunities for members to participate in study, prayer, written responses and conversations. These documents were used in membership classes, at special annual worship services to renew missional commitments, and in the leadership processes of approving new mission covenant groups. This process was not unlike the common practices of ecumenical organizations, but it is inclusive and generative at the congregational level. Both documents are on my website, see note 9.
- ²⁸ Our prayerful work at personal and corporate listening was profoundly shaped by what we called “listening nights”. In addition to our discernment work in MCGs, we also gave attention

to individuals who wished to place personal decisions before their church brothers and sisters. Such topics included jobs, housing, missional participation, and various family decisions. In conversation with a class leader (a MCG's "lay pastor"), the topic was discussed, wisdom was sought, a group of less than eight was selected, and a time for discernment was set. To add enjoyment, favourite foods were often provided. When we gathered, we dedicated a couple of hours to a full listening, to questions for clarity, then to prayerful silence. Out of the silence, participants humbly offered what they had received in the prayer time: biblical texts, additional questions, some statement of values or priorities, or an image or metaphor. The Holy Spirit's participation was especially obvious when options were shaped by images and alternatives that had not previously been considered; at other times, the whole group would experience an affective calm when considering one of the options developed during the earlier wisdom-seeking phase.

²⁹ Freire, Paulo, *Education for Critical Consciousness*, New York, Continuum, 1973 and *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, New York, Seabury, 1970.

³⁰ The pursuit of plural leadership is at the junction of several other concepts: learning community, team building, change theory, and corporate discernment. Senge, Peter, *The Fifth Discipline*, New York, Doubleday, 1990; Groome, Thomas, *Sharing Faith: The Way of Shared Praxis*, San Francisco, HarperCollins, 1991; Hawkins, Thomas, *The Learning Congregation*, Louisville, KY, Westminster John Knox, 1997; Roxburgh, Alan, *The Missionary Congregation, Leadership, & Liminality*, Harrisburg, PA, Trinity Press, 1997; Morris, Danny and Olsen, Charles, *Discerning God's Will Together*, Bethesda, MD, Alban, 1997; Ogden, Greg, *The New Reformation: Returning the Ministry to the People of God*, Grand Rapids, MI, Zondervan, 1990; Heuser, Roger, *Leadership & Team Building*, Matthews, NC, CMR Press, 1999; see also Branson, Mark Lau, "Three Spheres of Leadership", *Congregations*, Vol. 29, Number 1, pp. 22-26, www.alban.org/journal.asp

³¹ Some called this set of practices "legalism", out of their sense of exclusion, or a desire for more influence. This response requires some clarity. If legalism in biblical scenarios is a system of merit, of earning the grace of God, then those more embedded in the practices were very aware that we could not earn such grace. And those who wanted to reshape our corporate life while insisting on individually chosen levels of participation were more likely to be living by checklists and status, i.e. seeking merit.

³² In those first couple of years, only one additional group came forward. This group, soon called the Parables Mission Covenant Group, led adult formation and leadership development for the congregation, hosted the annual retreats (one contemplative, the other more for fellowship and study), and developed the curriculum and teaching teams for the annual new members class. When we sought avenues for serving the neighbourhood, we were less successful. We hosted poetry readings during an Advent season, explored opportunities for tutoring adults at local libraries, and assisted other churches in leadership development. However, the internal ministries kept us very occupied, and little attention was put into outreach. We assumed that missional outreach was essential to covenant life. After several years, while several of us continued to serve internal church ministries, Parables MCG disbanded, largely because we did not gain clarity about a missional role. Over the years we were not especially hesitant to disband groups. We knew this was a laboratory, and we did not want to be overly invested in any one structure. We primarily wanted to learn how to discern the Spirit's guidance and to gain the capacity to detect faithfulness and fruit in us and in our mission.

³³ These steps had helped us develop a way to birth new groups: Whenever a couple of persons believed they were seeing a faithful missional direction, they would check that vision with some church leaders. If it was consistent with our vision statement and what we knew of our neighbourhoods, they would be asked to "sound" the call during a worship service. Those who wanted to explore further were invited to a more thorough discussion. If at least three persons believed the perceived missional direction was God's call, they then had to bring a simple mission statement and a plan for their first year to the church's ministry council. The corporate discernment, often with welcomed suggestions and sometimes cautions about overly ambitious plans, usually led to approval for the new MCG, access to adequate budget resources, and a blessing in a worship service.

³⁴ The foundational vows include: "Do you renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of this world, and repent of your sin? (I do) Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves? (I do) Do you confess Jesus Christ as your Saviour, put your whole trust in his grace, and promise to serve him as your Lord, in union with the Church which Christ has opened to

- people of all ages, nations and races? (I do) According to the grace given to you, will you remain faithful members of Christ's holy Church and serve as Christ's representatives in the world? (I will)." The United Methodist Book of Worship, Nashville, The United Methodist Publishing House, 1992, p. 88.
- ³⁵ Two major directions for the nurture of our own children were the move to making Sunday worship an intergenerational activity, and our adopting "Godly Play," a Montessori-style approach with biblical narratives that we used for our Sunday school before the worship gathering (www.godlyplay.org). Also, see the online conversation from the Gospel in Our Culture Network at www.gocn.org/news131.htm#chatline/.
- ³⁶ One teacher was heard to say, "That's the first time a church has ever done anything for me!"
- ³⁷ The principal, after offering him a job, rescinded the offer because of errors in her (the principal's) bookkeeping. However, the church and a local business quickly provided the funding gap for the first year. This small congregation, without any significant wealth, often brought needed resources beyond their regular tithe.
- ³⁸ Dulles, Avery, *Models of the Church*, New York, Doubleday, 1987, expanded edition; Cooley, C.H., *Social Organizations*, 1909, reprinted, New York, Schocken Books, 1967.
- ³⁹ Concerning congregations and community organizing, see Wood, Richard L., *Faith In Action: Religion, Race, and Democratic Organizing in America*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2002; Pierce, Gregory F.A., *Activism that Makes Sense*, Chicago, ACTA, 1984; Jacobsen, Dennis, *Doing Justice: Congregations and Community Organizing*, Minneapolis, Fortress, 2001; Linthicum, Robert, *Empowering the Poor: Community Organizing among the City's "Rag, Tag and Bobtail"*, Monrovia, CA, World Vision, 1991.
- ⁴⁰ Katz, Peter and Scully, Vincent, *The New Urbanism: Toward an Architecture of Community*, New York, McGraw-Hill, 1993; Duany, Andres, Plater-Zyberk, Elizabeth, and Speck, Jeff, *Suburban Nation: The Rise of Sprawl and the Decline of the American Dream*, New York, North Point Press, 2001.
- ⁴¹ For general information, see www.cohousing.org/.