

Practicing our Faith
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Scripture: 1 Peter 3:13-22 and John 14:15-21

Some months ago, Bob Yeager invited me to meet with the membership committee to talk with them about attracting new members to the church. It's the type of conversation I have not infrequently with the 40 churches of my charge. *How do we get the new members to support the programs that make our church run?* Almost always—when I have these conversations—I also hear the *what are they doing right that we are doing wrong* question. That is, what makes those conservative churches grow when we aren't?

Mainline churches look at growing conservative churches with a green eye. They build large buildings, create lobbies with bookstores, coffee bars and laundry-mats, have burgeoning youth programs, worship in auditoriums with praise music and skits, and seem to be growing uncontrollably. So what are they doing right? Or is it that that their unthinking, black and white theology and the gospel of prosperity just attracts more people? Do they just give people what they want? You see, when aren't feeling numerically inferior, we been feel theological superior.

Truth is that there are two demographic factors that are correlated to the decline of the mainline and the growth of evangelical faith. One is that church growth is highly correlated with community growth. Churches in towns that are growing tend to grow, churches in towns that stable or in a decline do not grow. This is not only bad news for Westport, its bad news any church that was established over 100 years ago, as many mainline churches were.

Also correlated to growth is a birthrate: Mainline Protestants are not having as many children as Pentecostal, evangelical, and conservative Christians. Our young adults simply aren't birthing enough babies to replace those mainline saints that go on to meet their maker.

So the bad news is that the quickest fix to the numbers problem is to start your church anew in a growing community in the Sunbelt and supply lots of fertility drugs.

The good news is that—while numbers are a problem for our institutions—they are *not* a problem for our faith or our faithfulness.

Finding vibrant churches among the mainline is not difficult, contrary to popular belief and conservative media reports. Indeed researcher Diana Butler Bass found a number of such congregations in a 4-year study of mainline church vitality.

And listen to this: Not to long ago, Bill Hybels, founder of the mega-church Willow creek decided to evaluate the effectiveness of the programs of his 12,000-member church. What he discovered blew his socks off. Willow Creek's leaders concluded that participation in programs did not inculcate Christian discipleship and that they had spent "millions of dollars" on programs thinking that they would help people grow—only to find that there was no real increase in parishioners' love for God or their neighbor.

We made a mistake," (says Hybels.) What we should have done when people crossed the line of faith and became Christians, we should have started telling people and teaching people that they have to take responsibility to become 'self-feeders.' We should have gotten people, taught people, how to read their Bible between service, how to do the spiritual practices much more aggressively on their own.¹

Those big box churches may not have a numbers problem. But they do have the same church problem that we do. And it's a problem that laid out right before us in today's scripture: It's a Holy Spirit problem--

If you love me, you will keep my commandments. I will ask the father and he will send you another advocate. This is the spirit of truth whom the world cannot receive because sees him nor knows him (Jesus says). You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

There is a gap between this world and the true church. There is a gap between the world of whose ahead and just one more advantage and make it convenient and entertain me and you get what you pay for and whaddy worth...

... and the ridiculous reign of God where outcasts are welcome, the poor are rich, the self-righteous older brother is as loved as the returning prodigal,

where death has no sting, and hope sings and sings, where love is beyond hallmark and hormone and is willing to share its last meager crumb.

The church lives in both of these worlds. Our Reformed ancestors talked about the visible and the invisible church as a way of naming this dual reality.ⁱⁱ The visible church is institutional, with its budgets and meetings and discussions about whether to worship at 10 or 10:30, and programs teach Christian parenting or movie nights with faith themes, and the invisible church is our holy Spirit-dwelling-reality, one we only know of in the ever so fleeting glimpses we see the cranky former moderator as our dearest brother, and the kid with 4 tattoos and pink hair as beautiful, and the rustling of a cough drop wrapper as angelic, and the stranger as the best person to talk to in coffee hour, and the tragic funeral as infused with a holy love.

The visible church needs people to run programs and sit on committees, and members to count, the invisible church needs people to practice their faith and sit in prayer and count God's blessings

The visible church is about who serves communion, the invisible church is about the divine communing with us. In The visible church is about getting people to programs, the invisible church is about people getting God, the visible church is about doing things right, the invisible church is about seeking the righteousness of God.

How we nurture this invisible church is the same for us at Saugatuck as it is for Bill Hybels at Willow Creek: *If you love me you will keep my commandments.*

My commandments, Jesus says. Not the 10 of Moses or the vast confusing commandments of Leviticus—Jesus' commandments. Which are found strewn like so many olive pits and almond shells along the dusty roads of his ministry:

Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near." Mat 4:17

Pray for those who persecute you,

If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.

If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.

Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. Mat 5:43-48

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. Love your neighbor as yourself. Mat 22:36-40

Keep my commandments: Diana Butler Bass noticed that vital mainline churches had *intentional* practices. There were things that people actually *did* in these congregations that engaged folks in an individual faith and a communal faithfulness.

These practices flow from the rivers of tradition but are free from the rigor mortis of traditionalism. They are practices painted in the colors God has given the local church and made particular by the regular brushstrokes of the 90 year old member or the radically new canvas of the first time visitor.

Practices—*activities, rooted in the church, individual and communal.*

Activities: Practices involve people in an activity—it may be anything from the practice of forgiveness to sharing ones faith to hospitality to walking a labyrinth to singing the songs of faith. Practices move us from the unseen internal workings of faith and doubt to the concrete world of cause and effect where what I do impacts a tangible world.

Rooted in the church: That is, practices don't fit neatly into the expectations of the world. They don't meet the world's standards of efficacy, or respectability. They involves things like Sabbath-keeping, or prayer, most impractical. And respectability? Churches with intentional practices of hospitality have ticked off the neighbors by welcoming the homeless; churches with intentional practices of peace have protested wars to the accusations of not supporting troops. Churches with intentional practices of prophetic preaching have provoked the wider public.

Individual: Practices must engage the individual. Programs of the church fail if they do not encourage the individual to do her own work. If a church makes it central practice one of caring for the environment, it is not enough that the church recycle workshop bulletins. The church must encourage and equip the

individual to those disciplines that will make him attentive to the environment in his Monday through Saturday life.

Communal: Rev. DR. Barbara Lunblad recalls being told: The reason mountain climbers are tied together is to keep the sane ones from going home."ⁱⁱⁱ The life of faith is—frankly—a bit wacky. I think of that binding rope as the Spirit of truth that which connects all of us fools-for-Christ in a common fate and outcome as we journey from through the peaks and valleys of the life of faith.

The church that an institution with a budget to meet and children to teach, coffee to serve and a boiler to fix. The church is also a Spirit-of-truth filled beloved bride of Christ in the world but not of it.

And Spirit requires something of us: Keep my commandments. Live a particular and peculiar way. The Spirit of truth dwells only where there are intentional faith. These practices turn the obligation of Jesus' commandments into joy. The practices become a daily rehearsal of a life-giving play, one whose end, whose conclusion is known, but whose plot and characters are forever changing.

What is Saugatuck's practice? How might you live less in your visible church and more fully into the invisible church? How might you take the best of your communal life and invite people into intentional private practices that will complete the circle by tying each person back to an invisible whole?

And what about you? What will you do this week to love Jesus and to keep his commandments?

Susan Townsley

ⁱ Diana Butler Bass, *Intentionality Vitality and Practice*, Alban Institute, <http://www.alban.org/conversation.aspx?id=5280>

ⁱⁱ For them the difference was between that church inhabited by all people and that made up only of the true saints, those saved by grace. Distinctions between true saints and feared sinners were great. We more rightly think of ourselves as moving between visible and invisible church as persons who are at once sinners and saintly.

ⁱⁱⁱ [The Rev. Dr. Barbara K. Lundblad](#) "I Will Not Leave You Orphaned," preached April 30, 2005. <http://www.day1.net/index.php5?view=transcripts&tid=494>