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Church Development Discussion Papers

TITLE: Guardians or Traders?

AUTHOR(S): Paul MacLean

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"Will our churches be relevant to the issues of daily living in the future? This is not true at present, especially for young adults."

This comment was made by a young woman at an event led by Potentials. I'm coming to the conclusion that her question and others like it present a challenge at a very deep level to our congregations. The behavioural change which is required doesn't come naturally.

I thought again about "what comes naturally" to a congregation by attending the Jane Jacobs conference in Toronto, and by reading one of her books, *Systems of Survival*. It's a book about ethics, examining the morals and values that underpin all viable working life in the institutions and enterprises which make up modern society. In particular I found some new insights on the nature and function of organized religion and congregations.

Jacobs traces human behaviour, at least in its economic and political mode, to two basic instincts, the instincts to take and to trade. These are the two ways we have made a living since the dawn of human history. Hunters and gathers worked their territory and took from it what they needed to survive; little markets sprang up so that people were able to exchange goods and services and live from trading. Agriculture seems to be a hybrid, needing both of these instincts to be successful.

The key point is that each way of making a living has its own distinct set of moral precepts which Jacobs calls the guardian syndrome (for the takers) and the commercial syndrome (for the traders).

The ethical guidelines for traders are:

- come to voluntary agreements
- collaborate easily with strangers
- compete
- respect contracts
- use initiative and enterprise
- be open to inventiveness and novelty
- invest for productive purposes
- be industrious, thrifty and optimistic.

The ethical standards for guardians are:

- shun trading
- be obedient and disciplined
- adhere to tradition
- respect hierarchy
- treasure honour
- be loyal, ostentatious and exclusive
- dispense largesse
- show fortitude and be fatalistic.

It is easy to see that commercial enterprises thrive when they follow the trader's precepts; but if they start to behave as if they were guardians they lose their competitive edge and falter. Similarly, institutions such as governments with the responsibility for guarding territory often make poor traders because they can't behave as free commercial agents. Jacobs' opinion is that both syndromes shouldn't be mixed (although they should be flexible).

Where does the church fit in? If you go down those two lists of moral precepts, which one best defines the behaviour of the church to which you belong? Jacobs gives the example of a Presbyterian church wanting an unspecified donation for a wedding service, but unable to set a fee despite earnest inquiries from the bride and groom. In other words, a guardian at sea in the trader's world. How well is your church able to connect ("trade") with people outside the congregation and their issues of daily living?

If it is true that the church as an institution behaves primarily as a guardian, then there are some questions. I find Jesus' teaching and behaviour more in line with the traders than the guardians. He ran afoul in a major way of the moral guardians of his day. It was something of the trader's mentality that challenged the assumptions about who was included in God's kingdom; furthermore Jesus actively sought out the outsiders and marginalized, "collaborating with strangers and aliens." If we are governed by the guardian syndrome, haven't we lost touch with this entrepreneurial trading spirit which is at least one part of the nature and activity of God?

Paul MacLean is the former Executive Director of Potentials, a Canadian ecumenical centre for the development of ministry and congregations. Paul is now an independent congregational consultant.

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