



Potentials

I N P R I N T

Summer 1998

I N S I D E

Developing new churches today means having the courage to...

- understand our social context
- support new and energetic expressions of church community
- accept the risks in creating something new
- examine critically the current and inherited models of new church development
- resource leadership
- create Christian communities with people with little or no church background.

An Address to the Annual General Meeting of the Toronto United Church Council June 4, 1998

New Church Development as a Mission Priority in the Context of the Church's Current Life

by Paul MacLean

Thank you for the invitation to speak to you on the subject of new church development. It has given me the impetus and opportunity to explore a subject which is full of interest and challenge. My exploration has led me to listen to the reflections of experienced practitioners in this field and do some reading. It's also pushed me to reflect more on my own experience of about seventeen years in parallel development and three years in starting up a new organization.

I'm also aware that I am speaking to a group of people who are members and supporters of a creative and forward-looking force within the church, the Toronto United Church Council. Potentials is privileged to be one of the residents of 761 Queen St, a TUCC project which illustrates the creative thinking and determination of your organization.

Bravery in the Present Context

It is a brave thing to be considering new church development when so many of the indications are that the historic denominations are losing ground in our society. Although a large

percentage of the population still identifies themselves as Christian and indicates an allegiance to a particular denomination, for the last fifty years church membership rolls and participation in congregational life measured as a percentage of the population have been in decline. As we all know the younger you are in Canada, the less likely you are to participate in organized religion, so that the rate of decline can only be expected to increase in the future. Indeed, the only census religious category which is growing is the group which say "none" to the many options presented for religious affiliation. In many urban settings in Canada this group is now larger than the largest of the Protestant groups (which are usually United Church or Anglican).

The picture of people who do participate in congregational life is also changing. The biggest shift is towards less frequent participation. Put simply, many of those who used to attend church weekly now do so monthly (the largest category), and those who used to participate monthly have declined into occasional attendance. And of course, the situation is not black and white, but gradations of grey. The affiliation is still there for a vast majority of the population, but participation is becoming weaker.

Another factor is also at play. Denominational loyalty isn't quite the force it used to be amongst people who are looking for a church. When people are choosing a church or thinking of switching to another one it seems that other factors, such as the sense of community, the place of children and youth, and leadership style, are more important than the denomination in which they were brought up. This at least is a healthy trend, although it does cause some havoc when the assumptions of one denomination about authority are brought into the decision making processes of another. For example former Roman Catholics may take a while to get used to being Presbyterians.

One could go on. The purpose of this little statistical review is not to make us all feel depressed about decline in church membership, participation and affiliation, but to see the context in which we engage in new church development. I used the word brave deliberately, because I believe we should found new churches, not for present active membership, but for those who are elsewhere on this scale of church participation. Obviously to create churches for people who have little Christian memory or who are totally unchurched is more difficult and we cannot expect to have large scale success in terms of numbers. But we cannot operate on the old assumptions present in church planning of just several decades ago, where it was assumed that in any given population a certain percentage would be United Church adherents, and of those, a certain

percentage would almost automatically become members of the new church. These assumptions are out the window for at least two reasons. We know that unless the new church exhibits certain characteristics it won't be able to hold even those who do go looking for a church through denominational loyalty alone. A young family closely affiliated to the United Church, moving into a new house may seek out the local United Church. But if they don't find a welcoming, caring community which includes children, which offers engaging worship and opportunities for learning about faith and daily life, and which is involved in social care in the community, they will probably go looking elsewhere. Then there are the people whose denominational loyalty is much lower if present at all. 41% of new church members had no church involvement at all in the previous two years.

Why do young adults join a church?

I'd like to switch from Statistics Canada to some real people to illustrate why I think that the mission priority of new church development is to found Christian communities, and furthermore, to found Christian communities of a particular type.

A while ago I did some interviews with adults mostly under the age of 40 who had joined a church in the last year or so. I didn't begin with why they had joined the church, but rather with asking them to tell me about a significant event in their lives. The events they identified were usually fairly traumatic and marked a

I am indebted to recent conversations with Vince Alfano, Bill Lord, Gary Redcliffe, Janet Marshall Eibner, Fred Gosse, Harry Oussoren and Brad Lennon. *Called Into Being: a Practical Guide for New and Developing Congregations* (Centre for Research and Training in New Church Development, 1994) is an excellent resource, referred to in this paper. I also rely on sociological research by Reginald Bibby and Don Posterski for some of my comments in the first section. I refer to two small pieces of research based on focus group interviews and published as occasional papers: "Old Churches, New Christians," and "The Discovery Project: Seeking the Seekers." Parallel development is discussed by Rob Skirving in *Potentials in Print* (December, 1997). The distinction between structured and liminal communities has its origin in the work of anthropologist Victor Turner, particularly in his book *The Ritual Process*. In addition to these acknowledgements I have drawn on the writing, reflection and practice of many colleagues and practitioners in the field of congregational development.

great change, a change which they had come to see as a personal turning point. The experiences of death, divorce, job loss, immigration, moving, alcoholism and many others all created a sense of disorientation, threat, loss and meaninglessness. There were also the more positive experiences of falling in love and birth, but even here the normal pattern of life was disrupted. The event may have been recent or long ago; however, it was a marker in the life of the person, not simply remembered but retold as something which interpreted and gave significance to life in the present. The interesting thing is that these experiences were all interpreted as faith experiences, or experiences of God in some way or another, even though for the most part they were “life” events and not “church” events. The interpretation came somewhat later, not at the time. However, it was these life experiences which one way or another had led these various people to seek out involvement in a congregation.

This may not seem like an earth shattering piece of information. After all we do know that people often seek out the church at times of significant personal transition such as birth, marriage or death. However, I’m talking about something considerably deeper. At the heart of their current very active and engaged participation in a congregation was a spiritual quest founded in a significant life event in which they were able to identify the presence of God without difficulty. Without this quest, all the other factors usually associated with attracting people to a church became irrelevant.

But they weren’t going to join any church at all. They found churches or groups within churches which gave them a particular experience of community. This experience of community was primarily associated

with a feeling of belonging to a group, but it also found expression in lively, engaging worship, in the opportunities for learning and growing spiritually, and in the way in which leadership was exercised. One group said about their congregation’s role in their lives: “It has given me a chance to search and explore; it’s not taken for granted that you know anything. You can start from square one. Belief is not assumed. The whole approach is education based and therefore motivational. They talk to you on an equal basis, like you’re real people.”

Two Types of Churches

As I listened to people describe what they had found in their congregations I began to realize that they were describing a new version and indeed a new vision of church which began with a powerful experience of community. It wasn’t that there was a single model of church which one could describe. The churches to which these people had come were very different: some were very much geared towards ministry with younger adults – more informal worship, lively music, use of drama – while others retained much that we would call formal and traditional. What was common was the opportunity to form strong bonds with others around significant life issues that usually had to do with change, upheaval and quest.

I think that change, upheaval and quest lead to the formation of a different type of congregational structure than that which is dominant in most of our churches today.

As a way of illustrating in advance the contrast I want to show, I’ve brought with me two stoles. A stole is a symbolic article of clothing which designates the wearer as having an official function in worship. It’s often worn by clergy at the eucharist. This first stole was given to me when I was ordained over twenty five years ago. You can see that it is exquisitely embroidered

At the heart of their current very active and engaged participation in a congregation was a spiritual quest founded in a significant life event in which they were able to identify the presence of God without difficulty.

with traditional symbols. The Tudor rose, for example, goes back into medieval times as a symbol for Mary. Anglican clergy have been wearing stoles like this for hundreds of years, and so it evokes a church redolent with continuity and tradition. The second stole is quite a contrast. It was given to me to mark twenty five years of ordination. Its inspiration is a recent Trinidad carnival, and in particular the mas band (masquerade) of Peter Minshall called "The Song of Creation." You can see that at the ends the artist, who was a Stratford designer (Laurie Richardson) has created the effect of mud and muck and ooze. At the top is the great multicoloured whirlwind of the Holy Spirit. As the Spirit interacts with the primal muck all these creatures in the middle emerge: plants, sea urchins, dolphins, zebras, humans, comets. To further express the joyfulness of the Creator, the artist has worked outside the straight lines of the traditional stole. It's quite energetic and conveys a dynamic sense of movement. Just by looking at these two stoles you can appreciate the very different visual and symbolic effects they create. What types of worship are appropriate to each? What types of community would find the symbols on these two stoles meaningful and expressive of their character?

The dominant type of structure in our congregations is closest to the first stole (even if the visual symbols it uses are more modern). This type of congregation could be described as settled and hierarchical. People have titles which signify their role, and they achieve status from holding official positions. For example the clergy derive at least some of their status from academic institutions. They have their degrees listed after their name in public places and their certificates of training and education are displayed in their offices. Distinctive clothing, such as the Geneva gown or the gowns worn by

choirs, carries with it a sense of hierarchy and tradition. Organizations and roles in this kind of church are often defined by sex: there are UCW's and men's groups. The sense of belonging comes from knowing one part of this organization well; you only need to function in this one part, and your primary loyalty is given to the leader and members of this group. Learning and education in a church like this is about understanding the organization, its beliefs and rituals. It is a complex organization. To understand it completely and function within it effectively as a leader requires experience and a capacity for technical knowledge. I am describing at this point a congregation which sees itself as part of a larger system, the United Church of Canada for example, or the World Council of Churches. (It was said of an effective staff person I knew at the World Council of Churches that he had black belt in bureaucracy.)

A large amount of energy and attention is expended in this type of congregation on property and building issues. After all, it intends to be around for a long time and wants to develop and manage its physical resources well. I would say that this type of church also seeks to avoid or lessen pain. To find some support for this assertion we need look no further than the level of financial commitment the historic Protestant churches in Canada ask of their membership. For the most part the givings of members do not involve personal hardship and could not be described as sacrificial. The world view that this type of church engenders is that the world is essentially secular; the church exists as sacred space where the rituals of worship and life stages are acted out, and the activities of membership, learning and caring for others, take place.

The other type of congregation, illustrated by the second stole, exhibits some of the more intense associations which are often conjured by this

multifaceted term community' Instead of being settled it conveys the feeling of being in transition and of movement. Things are happening, and the whole community is involved and affected. There is a sense of equality amongst participants; people are on a first name basis, and role and official status don't hold much importance in the functioning of this congregation. There is a certain anonymity that takes the place of being known within the system, and this anonymity is often reflected in the dress code and liturgical clothing of members and leaders.

One of the most powerful examples of symbolic clothing was when the present pope adopted a simple white cassock as his trademark. He was saying to the masses of the world, "I am one with you." (One may argue that there has come to be a discrepancy between the symbol and the reality, but that doesn't alter the point that John Paul achieved a remarkable change in the mass perception of the Roman Catholic church with this one simple garment.)

Sex ceases to be a determining factor for how and where participation is allowed, and in some cases age distinctions are dropped as well. Wisdom is valued more than technical knowledge: it is more important for example to speak wisely about the power of love than to discourse knowledgeably about the doctrine of the Trinity. Similarly, simplicity is seen as a virtue, and there is a desire to know the whole picture instead of just one part. In this type of congregation, the role of the leader is more prominent, and the leader usually has charismatic qualities. The level of obedience required of members is higher and a greater level of pain is accepted for the greater good. Members typically make sacrificial gifts of their time and resources on behalf of the goals of the community. The focus is more on the

importance of relationships than it is on the building in which the people meet. The world is seen as essentially sacred and personal, inhabited and directed by a numinous power.

To illustrate some features of this second type of church I'll tell the true story of a small rural congregation. Since we're meeting in a rural church and many of you are from rural settings, you may find this story has some resonance with your experience.

This rural congregation had declined to an average attendance of six aged members. By mutual agreement this group decided that if one more of their number died they would close the church. Around that time a new minister was appointed to the parish, presumably to give it a fitting burial. As he got to know the neighbourhood, he observed that the population was increasing, and that many people drove past the little country church on their way to worship elsewhere. Could some of these people be attracted to worship here, he wondered out loud to the small remnant in the church? He knew some of these people; members of the present congregation had contacts in the community. He suggested they try a radical experiment: a totally modern and casual liturgy and a new church interior. The remnant thought it over and said, "What have we got to lose?"

They took out the pews, in fact all of the old furniture, installed an altar in the centre of the space and devised a very modern service with much lay leadership and participation. They used the informal network of the rural community to let people know what they were doing, and soon the congregation began to increase. In two years the average attendance was sixty. There were other signs of vitality in addition to the renewed worship. The congregation sponsored one of their number to work in Tanzania; and they developed a relationship with a training

He suggested they try a radical experiment: a totally modern and casual liturgy and a new church interior. The remnant thought it over and said, "What have we got to lose?"

...people are caught up in a common vision and prepared to make sacrifices of themselves, loyalty to community overrides many of the distinctions which exist in our society, and dynamic new relationships become possible.

centre for native ministry. Relations with the community increased: harvest festival became a major community celebration, reflecting the economy of the area. And during Advent the church's tacky, stand-up figures of Mary and Joseph made their way through the village, stopping each night on someone's lawn, and to be the chosen lawn was a considerable honour in this French-Canadian ethos.

The style of the congregation was very democratic and collegial, and this style included children. Once, when the congregation was contemplating the designs for a new stained glass window, an eight year old inquired, "Do I get a vote?" After a bit of consultation, the answer was, "Yes." "Well, I think this window is too far out for this church." By general agreement he was right, but no one else had had the courage to say so. The youngest voting member in the congregation was four.

There were more chapters in the history of this congregation, but I tell this part of their story to illustrate how a community, facing death, experiences a resurrection into a changed body: a body where the boundaries between sacred and secular (church and neighbourhood) are broken down, where the wisdom of a child is honoured, where members set off on adventures involving personal risk and financial sacrifice, where worship is immediate and participatory, where the building with all of its symbolic pews and plaques is transformed for radically new purposes. One can only imagine that the minister had a certain infectious, free spirited charisma to be the catalyst for all this transformation.

You may have certain reactions to the descriptions of these two types of congregations. Perhaps you began by thinking that the settled and hierarchical congregation deserves to die a speedy death because of its oppressive, structured nature and its preoccupation with its own survival. But then as the description

proceeded perhaps you thought there were some good things about it after all: at its best it connects past and present; it respects individuals and mediates power and decision making; connections with other parts of the church are important; it sounds like it's in there for the long haul even though it may not demand too much from its members.

On the other hand, the intensity of the second model sounds very attractive: people are caught up in a common vision and prepared to make sacrifices of themselves, loyalty to community overrides many of the distinctions which exist in our society, and dynamic new relationships become possible. There is also a deep desire to relate faith to existential issues of daily living. But then we start to realize that there are some potential dangers. There is a sense of immediacy, but will it last? Can we trust the leader to respect the members? The leader seems to have more undifferentiated power than in the hierarchical model. Don't we need to have sound teaching with a tradition behind it as well as sacred wisdom?

What I have described are two magnetic poles which hold in tension the dynamics of every congregation (indeed, one could argue, the dynamics of every organization). Neither one of them is the ideal congregation. They both have their strengths and weaknesses. Furthermore, there are very few if any pure types of either pole. Most of our congregations are somewhere on the spectrum between the two, exhibiting in their lives the competing forces of these two types. (What congregation does not have some conflict around music or the involvement of children in worship? These two issues are often where the competing forces are played out.) However, I think it is the second pole which we need to pay attention to at the present especially as we consider the founding of new

congregations, and that is for two reasons.

The first reason is that a significant percentage of our population presently seeks this kind of community for their spiritual home. The second reason is that a new church development requires the vision, passion, risk and commitment which is characteristic of what I will call the liminal community.

Liminal Communities

If we were to start up a church for all the United Church folk in a new neighbourhood, we would probably want to have one which was pretty much like what we've already got with all its committees and organizations, but with younger people in it. In fact, if there are some strong United Church folk who are part of a new church development this is often what they try to make happen. However, I've said that new church development should have a preferential option for the unchurched or those who have very little church memory. I think that we need to go further than these categories and see what actually motivates people to seek out a spiritual community. In my view this motivation is a significant event or crisis in their lives. It may have taken place years ago, or it may be immediate, but the effect is that the event or crisis has been life changing and life defining. Sometimes events take a long time to unfold. For example, people will often speak of the experience of death not in terms of a day, but of a year. The important aspect of a significant event is that it has been an upheaval in the person's life. It has raised questions which weren't there before; it has questioned assumptions; it has exploded certainties; it has destroyed patterns of behaviour and connections with people.

If we were living in a stable, unchanging world, these significant events and crises would occur mostly in the realm of birth, coming of age, marriage, change in social

status, sickness and death. We still have all of those life changes, but we have a lot more to contend with as well. The instability of our economy, the vast changes in our social services and education, a high level of demographic change including immigration, shifting values usually connected to generational cohort, and many other factors all combine to produce people who experience job loss, redundancy, loss of meaningful connection with other people, and personal, family and social insecurity. These conditions are common. They produce different responses.

One normal response is to experience dislocation and to feel as if you are in the wilderness. This is an uncomfortable place to be and most of us try to avoid it; but often it is unavoidable. It is an in-between state, a liminal condition, like being on the threshold of a doorway and not being sure what is on the other side. All of the daily mechanisms for getting through life and all of the symbols through which life gained meaning are thrown into doubt. It's what Robert Bridges describes as the neutral zone in his book *Transitions: Making Sense of Life's Changes*:

The neutral zone is a time of inner reorientation. It is the phase of the transition process that the modern world pays least attention to. Treating ourselves like appliances that can be unplugged and plugged in again at will or cars that stop and start with the twist of a key, we have forgotten the importance of fallow time and winter and rests in music. We have abandoned a whole system of dealing with the neutral zone through ritual, and we have tried to deal with personal change as though it were a matter of some kind of readjustment. In so doing, we have lost any way of making sense out of the lostness and the

... new church development should have a preferential option for the unchurched or those who have very little church memory.

confusion that we encounter when we have gone through disengagement or disenchantment or disidentification. We are like Alice at the bottom of the rabbit hole, muttering, *It'll be no use their putting their heads down and saying, 'Come up again, dear! I shall only look up and say Who am I, then? Tell me that first, and then, if I like being that person, I'll come up: if not, I'll stay down here till I'm somebody else – but, oh dear!' cried Alice, with a sudden burst of tears, "I do wish they would put their heads down! I am so very tired of being all alone here!"* (p 130-1)

It is lonely, and being in the neutral zone can lead to a person seeking out or at least being open to exploring a place and a group of people who take this liminal condition seriously. To take it seriously means forming a community such as I described above.

Another response to being faced with the neutral zone is a macho self-sufficiency. But even that is not always impenetrable. I asked an executive from a large newspaper who was volunteering at an *Out of the Cold* program why he came, when he didn't have any connection to the church let alone the people who were coming for food and shelter? He replied, "This is the one place during the week where I feel I have contact with real human beings. I work in a very cynical environment." And who were those "real human beings?" They were people who had experienced catastrophic loss.

We may think that the church's role is to offer personal, pastoral care to people who go through traumatic transitions. Certainly there is a time when people need support and a safe environment. But there is also the distinct possibility

for a tremendous release of energy as the result of this process of inner reorientation. The challenge for a liminal community is to provide channels through which this energy can flow, and we can be assured these channels will not include being put on the property committee.

I am not speaking about everyone in our society being in a liminal state. I'm not even suggesting that those who are will find their way into a church community. I do think that the experience of transition is widespread enough and furthermore has at its heart a quest for meaning and reorientation that we need to see such people as the primary group with whom we do new church development. And we can only do this if adopt a congregational model closer to liminal community than to structured hierarchy, for in a structured hierarchy you won't find the space or the energy for asking those questions and seeking those immediate relationships which are basic to a human existence which is under reconstruction.

Liminal Communities in the Life Cycle

Let me turn to the second reason for paying attention to the liminal dimension of a congregation, which is that a new church development requires vision, passion, risk and commitment. If we look at the two poles of structure and liminality we will realize that one is describing a congregation, or we might say, any organization, at its birth and early stages. How do organizations get started? Usually out of significant transitions, founded by and focussed through passionate individuals who have a strong vision, and who gather about them committed people who form strong bonds and attachments, both to the vision and to each other. The liminal community is immediate, exciting, risky. But will it survive? We all know that organizations which do survive

develop structure, differentiation of role, stability, resources and so on. Eventually the spirit which gave rise to the outfit in the first place may be smothered and lost by all this development, and the organization may collapse under its own weight having lost its reason for being. Congregations and other organizations have a life cycle, and there are different issues for each stage. I think we need to understand the issues of the beginning of the life cycle more fully when we are speaking of new church development and not rush into the later stages (where we may be more comfortable) before we are ready.

One observer of the congregational life cycle I talked to was particularly interested in the movement from initial enthusiasm to the stage of stability and organization, and was surprised by the depth and degree of depression which seemed to accompany this transition. For example, following the enormous outburst of energy involved in a building project came exhaustion, burn out and conflict, not to mention the mortgage. It's not simply that the building takes a lot of work, which it does, but that the community was moving from one way of being into another which is almost totally opposite. Is this why we joined? could be a legitimate and energy draining question. Have we moved from a dynamic, exciting transition-oriented community where the emphasis is on human relationships, on involving, energetic worship, on learning about the meaning of this new faith to our daily lives, and on acts of compassion in the neighbourhood, to a church where the main work is to raise money, to get people to sit on committees, and to organize and administer our life? My suggestion is that we need to recognize the initial attraction a new church development has for people. It is a community which responds to their own deep needs by its very nature, and if we

alter its character dramatically it will lose the spirit and the people which animated its early life.

We should pause for a moment and remember the type of church that was born at the festival of Pentecost we celebrated last Sunday. Where was it on the spectrum? Wind, fire, an outburst of language, a rush to conversion and baptism all sound pretty liminal to me. And of course the key event around which the church formed was the passion, death and resurrection of a man in whom God was uniquely present. Again, all pretty liminal, unpredictable stuff. And every time the church has lapsed into a stage of its life where organizational and structural issues command the lion's share of attention, the unpredictable Spirit has a way of breaking out.

My summary is that we need both immediacy and tradition, both spirit and organization, both liminality and structure. There are dangers on both ends of this spectrum. We all know about the ossification which sets in when an organization loses its initial spirit. On the other end some churches which value the experiences of Pentecost, resist their next stage of development by continually seeking fresh outbreaks of the Spirit in their life, sometimes with desperation, so that they and their members don't mature and grow. But where are we? My suggestion is that we've had lots of experience with the organizational development side of things, but haven't paid enough attention to the Spirit which starts it all off.

I'd like to address two topics which are important for being open to the Spirit in new church development: location and leaders .

...we've had lots of experience with the organizational development side of things, but haven't paid enough attention to the Spirit which starts it all off.

...whether we are thinking of building a new building, adapting an old one, or making use of someone else's space, means a foundational decision about how we intend to connect with people and how we define ourselves.

Location and models

We all know the mating cry of the real estate agent in response to what sells: location, location, location. And this cry is often taken up by people looking at why churches are or are not attracting people. Certainly church buildings and congregations need to be where people are. But is it where people live in homes, so that the church is another house on the block? Or is it where people congregate for work, learning, shopping or leisure, so that the church is part of the marketplace and activity of social and communal interaction? Or is it a sanctuary tucked away in the woods, distant from both home and market? To choose one of these options, whether we are thinking of building a new building, adapting an old one, or making use of someone else's space, means a foundational decision about how we intend to connect with people and how we define ourselves. There is no one ideal model, but let me offer a few comments on some of the models which do exist and which ones might bear more exploration

The mega church:

This model has created a lot of interest, both for its size and for its ability to attract large numbers of unchurched adults, especially through "seeker" services. I think we are in awe of the power of some of the other mega phenomena from south of the border which make their way into Canada and the challenge they have presented to our methods of marketing. There are people who dream of creating mega churches, and we do have some examples in Canada, usually in the Pentecostal tradition, unless we include large Roman Catholic parishes.

There are two things about mega churches. They didn't start as mega churches. They started small and with a charismatic, often maverick leader. Secondly, we may be impressed by the

large numbers of people who come to church services, but there is also a very intentional infrastructure of small groups meeting around all sorts of tasks, learning, issues and outreach; so much so that the proper designation of this kind of church is probably "meta" church rather than "mega" church. Although there are things we can learn from these churches about connecting authentically with unchurched people (especially around leadership), I don't think we can adopt the whole model as a church development strategy for a historic Protestant denomination such as the United Church of Canada. Mavericks are uncomfortable in denominational structures, and the structures are uncomfortable with them. Canadians are less likely than Americans to join small groups. Churches that put a lot of organizational effort into developing small group ministry in Canada usually find it's an uphill battle. The churches which have had some success with small group ministry find that the next step, of turning group participants into leaders of new groups, is next to impossible. Perhaps what we need is the space and permission for these groups to form more spontaneously and for shorter periods of time.

I don't think we should discredit the mega or meta church experience. It's good for a denomination to have a few mavericks and some experiments! I just don't think it is a model which will have a wide acceptance.

Closer to the ethos of the UCC is the idea of a large church with the resources to offer diverse and quality programming. This is the impetus for groups of neighbourhood churches linked by geography to consider giving up some of their congregational identity and resources in order to find a new, expanded ministry. The possible physical configurations range from a single multipurpose building in the marketplace,

to a diverse organization which uses a variety of buildings and venues – owned, rented, commercial, domestic, sacred and secular. I think this second form offers creative possibilities which allow for both diversity and change and therefore responsiveness to people's needs for creating community.

New church development:

There is still the need for starting up new churches where none exist, such as in new suburbs, towns or new inner city developments. The excellent resource, *Called Into Being*, written by Claire Woodbury and Yvonne Stewart is based on research in this area. I would simply add the reflections of a few people who were involved in starting up a congregation, in particular their experience of plateaux. At a certain point, say about fifty in worship, there comes a pull from the new church members for the leader to spend more time with them and less time in seeking new people. There are various ways of understanding this phenomenon, but one is that strong, intense relationships are developing which are characteristic of the liminal phase in community development. Similarly, at a later stage, perhaps one hundred and twenty in worship, there is another crisis point, as people realize they don't know everyone anymore. In other words, the key motivation for joining this new church – to be part of a community founded on I-Thou relationships – is being threatened. It's not just the participants who are being threatened; at a certain level the leadership feels as if it's losing control because they too have reached a saturation point.

There are ways of dealing with these crises; it takes well defined leadership to communicate and realize a vision of community which includes but goes beyond what can more easily be experienced in small group settings. (For

most people the small, intimate group is the group which gathers for worship and community life on a Sunday morning.) It's not just small group dynamics, but the intensity of a liminal community which is at work here. Do we look at the challenge of creating congregations beyond these plateaux, or do we just accept the pastoral size (sixty to one hundred and fifty) as inevitable? I suggest that the optimum size ought to be in mind from the beginning and from that vision will flow certain consequences with regard to staffing and facilities at the very least. Does it make sense to expend the enormous and draining effort necessary to build a permanent facility for only two hundred to two hundred and fifty people? Our landscape is dotted with churches built in the fifties and sixties for this number of people. They are mostly in residential neighbourhoods and signal by their location and size that their ministry is primarily connected to life in the home. We are obviously comfortable with this model and continue to replicate it, but we see many examples of these forty year old churches which are either no longer viable or else have too many people for their facilities. Where the demographic situation warrants, I think we need to invest in larger enterprises in more public locations. These churches will not only be for larger numbers of people, but they will have a ministry which connects with arts, culture, business and public life.

It will take a team of leaders, not just one, leading and forming many groups of fifty or so, if the plateaux are to be exceeded. Furthermore, these leaders will need a vision of ministry which encompasses the many activities and interests of our society.

Part of the intensity and excitement of a new church comes from being counter cultural. If what I suggest is correct, that new churches are for people who do not already belong and who are experiencing

It will take a team of leaders...

Surely it's time for ecumenical cooperation in the planning of new church development...

or have experienced a significant and life changing upheaval, then these churches both ought to be, and have the opportunity to be, significantly different from the culture surrounding them. The personal experience of transition is one in which old values are discarded and new ones sought out. One of the things which attracted the media executive was the experience once a week of people being treated as worthwhile in themselves, rather than as objects of marketing and advertising. To build a community around values such as respect and egalitarian relationships with all participants in a community won't be for everyone, but it will be very powerful and challenging for those who do associate themselves and find meaning from their participation.

Another implication of taking this approach to new church development is that denomination recedes into the background. The decline of congregational allegiance is a fact of our society and characterizes many participants in our churches already. Surely it's time for ecumenical cooperation in the planning of new church development, particularly since resources are scarce. We will probably continue to found and refound churches which are part of denominational structures, but the day of having one of each for every neighbourhood is over. Can we focus on founding counter cultural Christian communities and trust our sisters and brothers in Christ to do the same? Can we move towards planning for a Christian presence in a given area?

Parallel development:

This model is worth our attention. It is particularly appropriate when the building and infrastructure is in a place where there exists the possibility of new ministry, but the present congregation can't undertake that ministry. There is resistance in the United Church to this

model, because after all it is the *United Church*, the thought of having more than one congregation is – well – not united. (You could argue that sharing space with an ethnic congregation is a notable and common exception.) The Anglicans on the other hand with their fighting over prayer books in the past, sometimes fell into parallel development simply as a means of keeping the peace. However, there are great possibilities and benefits to this model.

Simply put, parallel development is the intentional starting of a second “cultural group” or congregation within the same church. This congregation may have its beginning in a number of ways: a new form of worship, learning groups, an outreach project, evangelism with an ethnic group of new immigrants. If it survives birth, then it will have continuity and will develop three or more of these enduring forms of congregational life: community, worship, learning, pastoral care, evangelism and social justice.

With parallel development there is the opportunity for reaching entirely new people who cannot be integrated into the existing congregation because of its cultural norms. For example, an aging congregation or one happy with a traditional style of worship would have great difficulty integrating people who are put off by formality and ritual. Yet these people might be willing to join something new, designed with their needs in mind. However, there is a deeper level involved than the mere provision of diversity. What parallel development really offers is the possibility of a liminal community being hosted by a more stable, developed congregation. The resources so important to longevity – buildings, tradition, communications, experienced staff and connection with the wider church – are all in place, and with good will can be shared with the new group.

The reality of course is that good will doesn't happen automatically or overnight! And "experienced staff" from the existing congregation probably don't have the time or the right kind of experience to lead this new volatile group. Parallel development needs to be intentional. There is the need for leaders who have the gifts of imagination to start something new which will connect with the strong life changing experiences of another group of people. A second task of leadership is to build bridges between the two very different congregations, because parallel development is also intentional about creating conflict. All sorts of conflicts will arise: sharing of resources, paying for fair shares, allocation of space, and the behaviour of children. What's underlying these mundane issues is the living together of two very different congregations at different stages of their development and with different cultures and values. But there are also potential benefits for the host congregation as well, particularly if it is in some decline. Here is new life and energy, even if it seems a bit foreign and threatening at times. The task is to seek to maintain the integrity of each distinct identity, but also to build bridges through encouraging cross cultural immersion experiences between the two congregations.

My view is that the key to successful parallel development is that the new congregation somehow gives new expression to the symbols, myths and rituals of the old. Sometimes we need to dig deep to find the common ground, and digging deep is a worth while activity for both groups. My experience has been with a very modern, creative form of worship existing side by side with one of the more formal worship experiences available in the city of Toronto. What are the connections? Eucharistic celebration and a love of music are perhaps the common ground and the reasons why the more ecstatic, Dionysian

expression of worship is seen as acceptable and even enriching by those whose natural home is with the Apollonian and cerebral. I'm not sure that we can expect the appreciation to extend in the other direction as well, at least not for a very long time. Those who have raised children may recognize a pattern here.

It's not just one group tolerating another. For parallel development to work, or to develop fully, the leadership of each group has to be able to see itself as one point on this continuum of structure and liminality, and to see that the other group is on the continuum as well, giving greater depth and complexity to the whole. Or to use Jungian terminology, one group functions as the shadow for the other, bringing a wholeness not otherwise possible. There are examples of this dimension to parallel development with ethnic congregations. I know of two ethnic congregations, one Anglo Saxon and the other Chinese, who worship in the same building. It began as a living together from convenience – the original white congregation unable to sustain itself. As time went on, the Chinese congregation put into practice one of its key cultural values, which is respect and care for the elders, by developing concerted pastoral care. However, they also included the members of the Anglo Saxon congregation who were becoming elderly and infirm in their pastoral activity. The new relationships have been enormously beneficial for both groups.

Leadership

There have been many interesting and helpful books written on the subject of leadership, and we can learn from other fields for our topic of new church development. But let's learn from a few people who have been there or worked personally with those who have. "Know yourself and be open to the Spirit," was

...the key to successful parallel development is that the new congregation somehow gives new expression to the symbols, myths and rituals of the old.

...what is valued most is authenticity, energy, holding the big picture, and connecting with people at a deep level in I – Thou relationships.

the way one community developer put it, reflecting back on the unpredictable turns his life had taken. Being secure in yourself after having gone through some significant transitions will bring the wisdom necessary to guide and give some boundaries to a liminal community. Because relationships are dominant in this type, and there is little regard for Robert's or any other's rules, it is important that the leader embody a solid commitment to a vision for the church. Liminal leaders exhibit a certain attractive charisma, a strong sympathy for and understanding of the liminal experience; but they have to have emerged on the other side, chastened perhaps, but with a new spiritual strength, authenticity and integrity.

Being open to the Spirit means among other things having a highly developed intuition and trusting it. It also means moving laterally, letting experiences from one part of your life influence and throw up new unexpected possibilities for other parts. My friend had taken a Spanish course on a bit of a whim, he wasn't too sure why. But he fell in love with the language and culture and then some years later surprisingly found himself being asked to lead a new Spanish speaking congregation.

Liminal leaders may be primarily community developers, but a good part of developing community has to do with connecting with people quickly at a deep level and communicating a vision relevant to their lives. And the vision is to form a Christian community, not to develop a cult dependent on a charismatic but needy individual. Obviously, the way forward is to spend time developing leaders, but this task is very different from filling in the yearly holes on standing committees in more stable congregations. This is leadership development at the early stages of a community's life, when what is valued most is authenticity, energy, holding the big picture, and connecting with people at

a deep level in I – Thou relationships. The community may need someone to keep the books, but the accountant won't have the same authority in the new church that the treasurer often carries at a later more stable stage in the congregational life cycle. So, we see the need for a new kind of leadership development related to the emotional processes of the new congregation.

The second point about leadership development comes from observations made by one of my interviewees. He said one of the chief problems facing new churches was their desire to do too much, to develop all the programs and structures of a large mature church. This desire was often driven by a few people in the congregation who did in fact have a United Church background. His conclusion was that it would be better to concentrate on a few programs such as worship and something involving children. My own experience in parallel development has been that we concentrated solely on worship and refused to take on any other activity except planning the liturgy. We would have eight planners and about 50 people involved in making music, doing drama, baking bread, creating art and so on. It was enough to do for a group of volunteers. But over time some of the other activities developed naturally with no official support or sanction: a children's program, community building events and parties, lay-led pastoral care, a connection with a women's shelter. The key to it all though was the example set by the liturgical planning team which always begins its meetings with bible study and some reflection on what the Christian faith means for our lives.

A third point about leadership. The kind of Christian communities I am describing will be created by committed, energetic lay leaders who are excited about the Christian faith and its

expression in community and are ready to put their energies into creating something new which can carry and support the wealth of personal meaning they are finding. There is obviously a role for ordered ministry, but the potential danger with ordered ministry personnel is that they will not totally understand the power of what is going on because they have been trained elsewhere, and have had their own enthusiastic, challenging growth spurt elsewhere. This elsewhere is normally a theological school or training centre. To put it bluntly the future centre for theological studies and training related to congregational development is the congregation. It is here that the energy and enthusiasm will be developed and expressed, it is here that leaders will emerge, it is here that the greatest potential for learning how to lead congregations will take place. (I point to a radical experiment in theological education a few years ago in the Diocese St Jean Longueuil on the south shore of Montreal. Due to a number of factors – a shortage of clergy, a belief in lay leadership, a desire to give leadership to women, the need for a radical parish revitalization in the face of the secularization of Quebec – each parish was given over to the leadership of four lay people – liturgist, pastoral care, educator and administrator. A unique program of theological studies was designed to train and support these leaders. Note that the main work was in the parish, and that the learning flowed from that experience.)

There is an economic crisis which is forcing us to rethink our ideas of training leadership. New church startups are expensive investments with lots of front end loading. They require highly competent, mature staff, and they won't begin to be self-sufficient for many years. We can't always afford the personnel costs of paying full time staff let alone finding money for building. Some of the other

models I have described, particularly parallel development, can be more modest in their leadership demands and can rely largely or at least in part on the efforts of supported and accountable volunteers. It's less expensive to provide the relevant support, accountability, theological reflection and training for volunteers in a congregational setting than it is to use our present staffing model. It's time at least for a few experiments.

One final point about leadership. Have you noticed how people who are thoroughly competent in their work and home lives often become deskilled in the church setting? I think this is partly due to the effect the settled, developed and professional structures of a mature congregation have on newcomers. Yet competent people, who are on the ground floor of starting a new congregation, are energized by the experience of connecting their new faith and daily life; they can use their competencies and are ripe for learning.

Conclusion

Without being comprehensive, I've tried to say a few things about new church development. It's not primarily for present membership. It's like the first Christian communities: liminal groups for liminal people, all energized and directed by the powerful Spirit which blows where it will. It's new territory, and therefore let's try some experiments and new models in both congregational form and the development of leadership, and let's be open for some surprises along the way.

© Potentials 1998

Paul MacLean is a consultant for the development of ministry and congregations. Contact him at paulmaclean@rogers.com.