

The Practicing Congregation — Imagining a New Old Church

Session and Board of Managers
Session Starter #19

What's on Your Mind? — Why do elders need to obtain
a police records check?

Tori Smit, Team Leader
*The Vine Helpline: Connecting people,
places and programs*
Don Muir, Associate Secretary
General Assembly Office
The Presbyterian Church in Canada
1-800-619-7301

February 2010

The Practicing Congregation – Imagining a New Old Church

The Rev. Dr. Peter Coutts, Minister,
St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, Calgary, Alberta

The Practicing Congregation: Imagining a New Old Church

By Diana Butler Bass

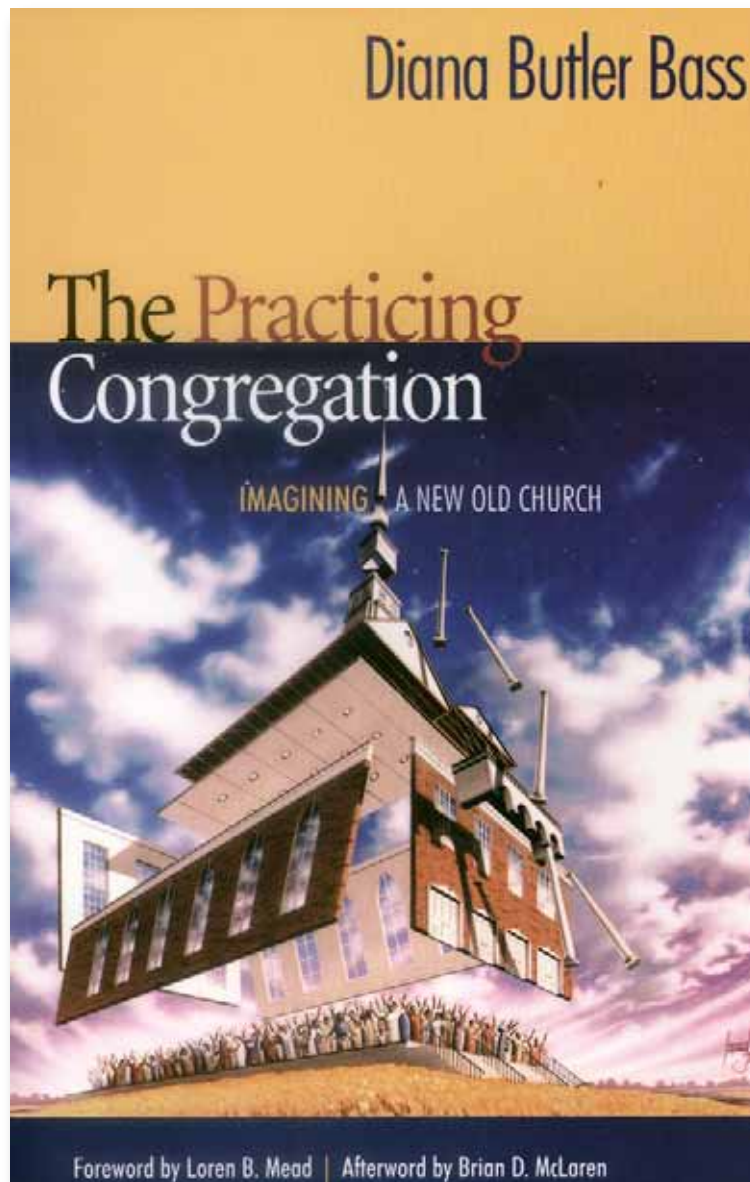
Foreword by Loren B. Mead
Afterword by Brian D. McLaren

Herndon, Virginia: The Alban
Institute © 2004.

126 pages, including footnotes
and discussion questions.

The bookshelves groan under the weight of historical and social science studies that analyze the predicament of mainline denominations in North America. The same bookshelves are crushed under the weight of leadership books promising that their pages will help readers reinvent their congregations. What we seem to be short on, however, are studies describing the nature of mainline congregations that have emerged out of this predicament to become something new and vital for today's age.

Diana Butler Bass's book *The Practicing Congregation* is such a book. As she states in her introduction, the book "does not argue that mainline



EQUIPPING FOR . . . Elders

The Practicing Congregation – Imagining a New Old Church (continued)

churches should change. Rather, it argues that mainline churches are changing and have already changed.” She calls this new kind of mainline congregation “the practicing congregation.”

This is not a “how to” book. Rather, it is the story of an emerging trend in mainline congregations that have begun to take seriously creating meaning in their congregational life by choosing to become highly intentional about how they will practice church. Based on a wide survey of a very diverse group of congregations, Bass highlights the nature of this growing cohort of congregations that have become more numerous since about 1990. These congregations are characterized by moderate to liberal theology, a focus on spiritual authenticity, an acceptance of pluralism, a faith life rooted in community, and a discomfort with the culture of the wider society. These congregations, seeking to rediscover their core meaning, have tended to reach back into their tradition to re-traditionalize themselves in a way that brings greater vitality to the congregation. What Bass has found emerging in these practicing congregations is not one common form of church, but rather a rich mosaic of understandings and practices that speak to the particularity and creativity of each individual intentional church. Along the way, Bass sets her findings in the context of an excellent, straightforward overview of the historic experience of the American mainline church in the 20th century and the observations of sociologists of religion over the last generation.

Of particular note is Bass’s helpful description of the function of tradition. She argues for an understanding that brings tradition and change into dialogue, re-appropriating what is valued from our roots in a way that enlivens and is relevant today. For Bass this is substantially the inspiration for these practicing congregations. This is not only a helpful idea for traditional congregations that are considering change, but also a very practical approach. In this regard, Bass is helping us see that there are a number of mainline congregations that are actually putting into practice the idea of “Ancient Future Faith” that has been highlighted more in theory by authors such as Leonard Sweet and Robert Webber. This book also captures in a more general way the impact intentionality can have in the life of a congregation, which is illustrated more specifically by the missional church

movement (being led by The Gospel and Our Culture Network) and publications on intentional spirituality such as the works of Dorothy Bass, Dallas Willard and Craig Dykstra.

Bass makes it very clear that congregations that adopt a practicing habit are not doing this as a church growth strategy. Indeed, these congregations eschew market-driven models of congregational life. Yet she notes that in the focused desire to appreciate and practice a growing authenticity, many of these congregations are experiencing growth as a by-product. It would appear that this intentionality in church life is finding an appeal among some church seekers.

This is a very, very hopeful book. In a readable form, it provides a body of evidence that the mainline church is finding a renewed well-being. It sparks the imagination of the reader for what may be possible in the reader’s own congregation. This is a very important book for clergy and congregational leaders to read and digest. For those who want to go further after reading this book, look to *From Nomads to Pilgrims: Stories from Practicing Congregations* (edited by Bass and published by Alban).

After a few decades of confusion about its very nature, the new mainline church seems to be appearing. This book is highly recommended for anyone who wants to understand its look and would like to join the pilgrimage.

Peter Coutts, for the Centre for Clergy Care and Congregational Health © 2006

Please note: All rights reserved. May be copied and distributed for educational purposes only.

Publication by media should cite the Centre.

For any other requested use, please contact the Centre at clergy.care@utoronto.ca.

Session and Board of Managers

Session Starter #19

Don Muir, Associate Secretary, General Assembly Office

Prayer

God of amazing grace, we give thanks for your promised presence and your extravagant love. We have gathered in your holy name with a sincere desire to serve you well. We are humbled by the realization that you have placed this congregation in our care. May the decisions we make plant seeds of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control in all our ministries. In the name of our saviour we pray. Amen.

Introduction

If a board of managers is elected by the congregation, the session will work closely with it to ensure that all aspects of the financial affairs of the congregation are managed in keeping with directives of the courts of the church.

Book of Forms, 113.6.4

Scripture

For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.

Romans 12:4-5

A Brief Commentary

Paul does not promote the message of “self-esteem at all cost” that permeates so much of our society. Instead, he instructs Christians in Rome not to think too highly of themselves but to live together in genuine humility. Why? Paul reasoned that each person is a child of God filled with a certain measure of faith granted by God. Consequently, we are not all the same and we are called to a variety of functions within the church. All those functions are interwoven so we become one body united in Christ.

Reflection

Sometimes conflicts arise between the elders of the session and the members of the board of managers. No one will be surprised by that statement. This conflict can sometimes be described as a power struggle. Often the struggle is over money.

A pattern frequently repeated goes something like this. The elders come up with a vision for the congregation. “Let’s hire a part-time youth worker and establish exciting programs for the young people of our church and community,” they say. A request for \$2,000 a month is forwarded to the board of managers. The members of the board reply, “Nice idea, but there is no money to pay for it.”

Beneath the surface bubbles another, often unspoken, struggle. This struggle is over the question: Who is in charge?

Section 109.1 of the *Book of Forms* clearly states that the session is responsible for the supervision and oversight of all associations connected with the congregation. In other words, the session is endowed with authority - even over the board of managers. But before the elders begin to think too highly of themselves, it is wise to remember how imperative it is to serve in harmony with the board. The session and board have different tasks, although a great many of them overlap. As section 113.6.4 states, the session will work closely with the board. Once again an image of being one body, united in Christ, comes to mind.

Discussion

1. Talk about a time where there was conflict between the session and the board of managers?
2. How was the conflict resolved?
3. What steps can the session and board take to work more closely together?

What's On Your Mind?

Why do elders need to obtain a police records check?

"I've been a member of this congregation for 35 years. I've taught Sunday school, sung in choirs and visited in more homes than I can remember. Why do I need a police records check*? Everyone knows who I am and what I'm like. All of a sudden I'm being treated like a criminal."

Quite a few elders have thought or said something like this. I understand the sentiment expressed and how some elders might feel that obtaining a police records check is a nuisance or even an insult. There are, however, some good reasons why the church makes this requirement.

1. Making our churches safe places

The General Assembly, in 2005, approved *Leading with Care: A Policy for Ensuring a Climate of Safety for Children, Youth and Vulnerable Adults in The Presbyterian Church in Canada*. As the title suggests, the chief purpose of this policy is to help our churches be safe places for everyone, especially the more vulnerable in our midst.

Churches are made safer when we take steps to reduce the risk of people being hurt. For example, the policy indicates that the door to a Sunday school room must be left open or have a window in it so those in the room can be seen by those passing by. Another measure that makes our churches safer is to ask those who engage in high-risk situations to obtain a police records check. One of the hopes is that the check serves as a deterrent. Anyone with a record of assaulting young people, for example, would be deterred from offering to lead your youth group. Page 21 of the policy provides a guide to measure risk factors in your congregation. By honestly completing this guide, you will know who needs to obtain the check.

2. Elders and high-risk situations

Elders often find themselves in one-on-one situations. You might be visiting a person at home or in a hospital room. Being alone with someone in a private, unsupervised place is considered by the policy to be a high-risk situation. Therefore, elders, or anyone else in high-risk situations, need to have a police records check.

3. Being examples to the flock

Since others in the congregation may be required to obtain a police records check, the elders ought to lead by example and obtain them first.

4. Fulfilling vows

At their ordination, elders vow to submit themselves to all legal oversight of the courts of the church. Therefore, elders are to comply with this General Assembly policy.

5. Non-church groups require them

In most instances, you can't coach a baseball team or lead a Girl Guide group without first obtaining a police records check. If those outside the church care enough about the vulnerable to protect them in this way, how much more should the church do so?

May God bless you as you work to ensure your congregation is a safe and welcoming community of faith.

Blessings,
Don Muir
Associate Secretary
General Assembly Office

* "Police Records Check" is a general term. In your municipality, another term may be used such as "Volunteer Screening Check."

What's on your mind?

Do you have a question about the polity of our church? Are you confused by something that happened at session, presbytery, synod, or General Assembly? Puzzling over a section of the *Book of Forms*?

Send your questions to The Rev. Don Muir and he will strive to answer them in future issues of *Equipping for . . . Elders* in a manner that maintains confidentiality and seeks to be helpful to the church at large.

Contact Don at: dmuir@presbyterian.ca
50 Wynford Dr., Toronto, Ontario M3C 1J7
416-441-1111, ext. 223 or 1-800-619-7301, ext. 223