

1 Renewing the Heart of Faith: A Prophetic Convergence of the People of God

Reading the signs of the times becomes even more crucial in a period of transition—exactly where we find ourselves now. On so many fronts, the old assumptions and structures that have long governed are dying, while the new are still begging to be born. The moment calls for fresh visions and dreams that hold the promise of change.

This is especially apparent in the churches. Out of their institutional and spiritual crisis, a new theological convergence is occurring, with new ecumenical relationships being forged. The result is an emerging ground upon which diverse people from previously divided communities are finding a place to stand. Their standing and walking together opens up the possibility of significant and hopeful new configurations for the church's future and its contribution to the wider society.

The Crisis of Religious Institutions

Ironically, the institutions of established religion are in internal crisis just as the real issues of society are being revealed as essentially religious. I speak here of what I most know—the Christian churches—but those from other faith traditions tell a similar story. Virtually all the vertical structures of American Christianity are in great distress.

Mainline American Protestantism is in serious decline. Decreasing membership and budget cutbacks have caused denominational bureaucracies and seminary ad-

ministrations to pull back into survival mode. Risk taking and faith ventures are out; cautious management is in.

There are pastors, teachers, denominational officials, and countless local church members who struggle valiantly for an authentic Christian faith. But they constantly face fearful bureaucracies, sterile curriculums, culturally captive congregations, confused theology, and empty spirituality.

American Catholicism is also in deep conflict. A rigid and repressive hierarchy, emanating from Rome is in direct confrontation with a grassroots hunger for change felt throughout the church. Some of the most creative impulses in American religious life today are found in the Catholic Church. Leading the way are communities of religious women, a strong number of progressive bishops and priests, and, of course, ordinary parish members who draw upon faith for personal and community survival. But the patriarchal hierarchies fear and do not understand the populist impulses that would reshape the church.

The evangelical movement in America has been taken over by its fundamentalist right wing. The Religious Right's extreme nationalist and theocratic agenda bears little resemblance to the gospel. The culture war they have declared on everyone who disagrees with them is alarming to many Americans and genuinely embarrassing to more moderate evangelicals. Many people long for evangelical integrity to re-assert itself.

Perhaps the greatest irony of U.S. church history is that a church created by racial marginalization has arguably made the most distinctive and significant American contribution to world Christianity. The black churches provided a sanctuary for an oppressed people, created our most vibrant spirituality, became the base for the most important social movement in American history, and have served as a conscience to the nation. Yet America's black churches are also facing a dilemma. The failure to reach the alienated young of the nation's cities has created a crisis of confidence and leadership. After a shooting incident during a black church service in Boston, one African-American street pastor remarked, "If the church doesn't go out into the streets, the streets will come into the church." Newer racial and ethnic churches are struggling to force cultural and spiritual identity in a framework of white ecclesiastical control. And a small number of American Indian congregations wrestle with their denominations for respect for native traditions and spirituality.

A Quiet Coming Together

In the midst of this institutional church crisis, a number of new and ecumenical connections are being made between kindred spirits from all the traditional constituencies. A new sense of community is not based on the old vertical structures, but in horizontal relationships and networks.

After years of very limited results from formal ecumenical dialogues, a vital ecu-

menism is emerging between people who have found one another while putting faith into action. A new Christian community has begun to emerge in urban ministry centers, homeless shelters, and soup kitchens; in street protests and jail cells; in racial and ecological battlegrounds; in prayer and Bible study groups; and in diverse experiments in community and spiritual renewal.

Our historical crisis, in all its varied manifestations, is bringing us together. Indeed, a *kairos* moment is creating a new faith-based community of response. Though most apparent around works of mercy and prophetic actions, activism is only its most public expression. Much biblical reflection, prayerful searching, theological conversation, and community building are going on. This shared activity and discernment holds promise for both transcending the old categories that have divided us for so long, and revitalizing the faith traditions from which we have come.

The New Theological Convergence

There is, of course, no fixed creed or dogma that controls this emerging ecumenical community. But there are characteristics, concerns, and points of convergence that describe a new theological common ground.

It will be biblical without being fundamentalist. The practice of action and reflection with a biblical focus is now widespread. A new generation of biblical teachers and practitioners defies the old doctrinal categorizations of conservative and liberal that still dominate most of our theological schools. Now the primary concern is to discover the meaning of the Word of God in our present moment—to allow it to change our lives and our history.

It will be spiritual without being withdrawn from the world. There is a growing intuition, even outside the religious community, that our most important political and cultural problems have a spiritual core. A new politics and a new spirituality will go hand and hand; one is not really possible without the other. A consciousness of the spiritual resources required to sustain persons and communities in the struggle for social transformation is also growing. More and more people find themselves drinking at the wells of each other's spiritual traditions, and engaging in a deep and common quest to root their lives in God.

This theological convergence will be rooted in action, without losing its reflective power. We've learned both that faith without works is dead and that overwork can lead to idolatry and a loss of faith. Faith becomes alive in action; subsequent reflection on the action further clarifies faith's meaning. The life of faith is the inward and outward journey, contemplation and action.

It will be evangelical without being sectarian or self-righteous. By evangelical, I mean a centeredness on Jesus and his radical proclamation of the reign of God. The gospel values of the Sermon on the Mount are finding fresh meaning and application.

To be faithful to the way of Jesus does not require disrespecting other believers and

non-believers. There are church-based activists who believe Christian obedience welcomes mutual collaboration in a pluralistic society, and who oppose any effort to translate the precepts of certain religious constituencies into theocratic control. At the same time, they insist that focusing on the enormous implications of discipleship is absolutely essential, even at those "politically correct" seminaries where the name of Jesus has all but disappeared.

It will be catholic, but not just Roman. That is to say, the diversity and integrity of the whole church will be greatly respected, as will the importance of interfaith dialogue that recognizes the particularities of each tradition. Indeed, the new theological convergence lives at the crossroads of the whole church, and of the world's concerns. The exploration of the churches' many spiritual treasures and traditions is one of its richest characteristics and greatest contributions. Perhaps the best image of this new ecumenical community is that of a deep, flowing river, fed by many streams.

It will be political without being ideological. Predictable and partisan politics are anathema to authentic prophetic witness. For much too long, evangelicals have been the Republican Party at prayer, liberals have been easily confused with the left wing of the Democratic Party, and even grassroots religious peace and justice activists have not always distinguished themselves from the politics of other secular and solidarity movements. That may be one of the most important things that is changing. A truly religious, moral, and ethical perspective has much to contribute to shaping a new kind of politics, and we must make the nature of that contribution increasingly clear.

It will bring a theological dimension to political discussions and social problems. By revealing the essential theological character of racism, sexism, poverty, environmental destruction, violence, abortion, sexuality, and family, the religious community could help deepen the public dialogue and response. In creating diversity, practicing equality, demonstrating justice, re-connecting with the Earth, helping to resolve conflicts, seeking a consistent ethic of life, and nurturing covenantal relationships, faith communities could make a decisive contribution and provide leadership by example. Faith communities must strive to be and do what they envision for the larger society.

This common ground will be rooted in the sufferings and hopes of poor and marginalized people. At the heart of Christian faith is incarnation—God becoming flesh among the poor and the outcast. Indeed, the cry of the poor has helped to bring us all together.

We have been converted to a more radical faith through relationship with the children of God who are oppressed by the social crisis that defines the modern world. The reality of the poor must continue to shape the new visions and dreams that we hope to help birth. In fact, the possibility of a new partnership of the middle-class and the poor, born of faith and for the sake of justice, has the potential to transform the political landscape.

Those who stand on this new ground will try to live out a faith that is both personal and social, based in community and ecumenical in spirit, deeply rooted and open to

change. This faith will actively engage the world and yet seek not to conform to it. It will hold forth alternative visions of racial, economic, gender, and environmental justice, and insist on the essential connection between spiritual and social transformation, between politics and spirituality.

The new ground has yet to be named. But it draws evangelicals with a compassionate heart and a social conscience. It brings together mainline Protestants who desire spiritual revival and justice. It invites Catholics who seek a spirituality for social change. It includes African-American, Latino, Asian and American Indian faith communities that will help shape a more pluralistic and just society. No seminary represents this new theological center, but one can find evidence of it at almost every one. No national church embodies it, but the new ground is emerging in virtually every denomination and constituency.

At this point, naming the common theological ground is less important than naming ourselves as standing on it. It is a network, not an institution, a movement in many places, not a new denomination, an extended community for the sake of the church's renewal, not a substitute for it.

Covenantal Relationships

While this progressive religious network is getting connected in many local communities, some people and groups have yet to find each other. The future tries in crossing ecumenical, racial, and regional lines to knit ourselves together. Catholic peace activists need to connect with black churches in common causes. Evangelicals need to pray with mainline Protestants about how to minister to the inner city. Local churches need to come together for community organizing projects. Weary activists need to find quiet refreshment in monastic communities. White Christians need to listen to black preachers and Protestant ministers need spiritual direction from Catholic sisters. For too long, we have been churches behind walls; now the walls are coming down.

We need to recognize, respect, and build on our great ecclesiastical diversity. We are local parishes and congregations, intentional communities and house churches, Bible study and prayer groups, houses of hospitality and monastic communities, projects for justice and ministries for spiritual renewal. This new ground provides a foundation that supports many different structures; our tree has many branches. That is a real strength and a protection from narrow thinking.

But we do need to find each other and build up our networks for support and action. That is the biggest task ahead of us. At the heart of our networks will be covenantal relationships established across constituency lines—relationships that have binding authority in our lives. Political convenience, mutual use, or institutional self-interest won't bring us together; new friendships based on a real spiritual companionship will. The courage to enter into such covenantal relationships and remain faithful to them will be an essential quality of leadership in the days ahead.

An Alternative to the Religious Right

Conservatives have tapped into a genuine energy for a new discussion about basic moral values in the public debate. But that longing is much wider than the narrow interpretations of moral values offered by the evangelical right wing. Their extremism suggests that the only alternatives are to be totally secular or a religious bigot. Fortunately, those are not the only choices. A moral vacuum is waiting to be filled.

We seek a prophetic biblical perspective that is progressive rather than repressive; inclusive and respectful of pluralism instead of exclusive and sectarian. It will speak the language of both social justice and personal responsibility. In economics, it will take us beyond the "bottom line" of profit and the stagnation of bureaucracy to an economic ethic rooted in the religious requirements of community.

On the environment, this biblical perspective transcends old notions of exploitation, stewardship, and protection and proposes a theology of relationship. In foreign relations, it puts human rights over national self-interest and seeks alternatives to war as a solution. It sees racism and sexism as spiritual as well as social sins, and calls for repentance. And it will insist on the vital connection between politics and morality. It will be open to broad collaboration and could provide a social reservoir of prophetic imagination.

Examples of prophetic religion abound. Bread for the World has become an effective Christian citizens movement against hunger. Pax Christi is a growing national and international Catholic peace and justice network. Witness For Peace is an interfaith initiative seeking reconciliation in war-torn Central America and elsewhere. Evangelicals for Social Action links evangelism and justice. SCUPE, a network of seminarians, pastors, and church workers, now convenes the largest "urban congress" in the nation.

Street ministers, deployed from black churches such as the Azusa Christian Community in Dorchester, Massachusetts, daily confront the challenge of reaching alienated inner-city youth. *Tikkun*, a progressive Jewish magazine, plays a similar role in its own religious community as our *Sojourners* magazine and network plays in the Christian community—a connection point and catalyst for a new movement. In cities and rural areas across the country, the number of faith-based ventures and coalitions to heal and rebuild local communities is beyond counting.

A Place to Stand—A Mission to Carry Out

The new theological convergence offers the possibility of free, safe, creative, and holy space—both healing and prophetic. From that space, new visions could surely come. From all the corners of the churches' life, a new and ecumenical community could boldly proclaim the reign of God in this world. That is our purpose. To demonstrate the power of the gospel in the midst of a great social crisis is our vocation. Our goal