



# **Spiritual Waves**

*Navigating the Currents  
Outside & Inside  
The Church*

Collected Writings of  
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# Spiritual Waves

## ***Navigating the Currents Outside & Inside the Church***

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## LO-TECH SPIRITUALITY IN A HI-TECH AGE

As I was on the treadmill at the Community Center the other day I was struck by the sight a woman on an elliptical machine just in front of me. She was working away on the equipment while talking on a cell phone to someone of importance, I assume. It was interesting to see that the combination of priorities in her life demanded that she multi-task, uncomfortably using an electronic device while completing her daily exercise.

This phenomenon, however, is very common today. Almost invariably when our young adult son returns home at night he is talking on his cell phone as he enters the house, not missing a single minute of possible transmission time. Many people with Bluetooth devices hanging from the ear are speaking out into the air with the initial appearance of talking to themselves, constantly in touch with very important people.

I-Pods provide non-stop entertainment and information for people. Almost unbelievably compact electronic gadgets give people non-stop sound piped directly into their ears.

Emails, instant messaging, text-messaging, web browsing, and more...ALL absorb our attention and energy.

Now, it is possible to be overly-critical of the use of modern electronic devices. They are undeniably a convenience that in many cases have made life easier, more efficient, and more enjoyable at several levels.

And yet...contrasting, lo-tech experiences have their place...and an important place at that. In the first full week of 2008 I had the opportunity for four days at a cabin in Northern Minnesota to do reading, studying, and planning. I appreciated all the modern conveniences in that place (it really is a fully-equipped home, not a rustic cabin), but I also appreciated the option of silence and solitude. Just sitting there in meditation, staring out over the lake, standing outside without any road noise or hubbub, free to think by myself...it was a wonderful gift as I contemplated the opportunities of the year ahead.

I truly believe that as 21st century Americans we have lost the wonder and the joy of silence and solitude. We are constantly bombarded with sound, voices demanding our attention, and an ever-escalating pace of communication which advancing technology simply facilitates. In the end we can become spiritually and emotionally drained just keeping up with all the

stimulation and assumed responsibility we have toward anyone who communicates with us.

I remember the word of a pastor who had been born and raised in rural area who commented that when he first moved into a metropolitan area, walking on downtown streets became an exhausting process. Given his hometown values, he felt it was his duty to greet warmly everyone he met and show genuine concern and try to elicit a response from those he saw on the street. He concluded after awhile that in the city people simply do not have that same sense of responsibility to every human being they encounter. Because of the sheer numbers of casual contacts made in a day it is emotionally impossible to engage everyone eye to eye with the expectation of response.

It seems to me that the expectations game has been ratcheted up because of the technology being used today. Responses to all electronic transmissions are expected by people and it is daunting to keep up with all the avenues of communication imposed on us these days. Email, voice mail, snail mail, instant messaging, text messaging, cell phones, Bluetooths, and several others....all are trapping us into continual communication with no respite.

The philosopher said long ago, "The unreflective life is not worth living." Technology has the tendency to nearly eliminate opportunity in any one day to be reflective.

What is our response? Throw away all our electronic gadgets and gizmos? No...they are still needed to do our work and stay connected in positive ways. BUT...we should make space each day so that our souls have room to breathe.

When I am on the treadmill, I am not there with any electronics, except those necessary to run the treadmill itself (and there is a question, as well...do we really need a machine to help us get the exercise we need?). I use those minutes to pray to my God. I attempt to shut out the images and noise around me to focus on the Divine.

The intentional practice of prayer, reading, and meditation without the aid of noise-producing equipment can keep our souls free from the jangling impact of modern electronics. May God give us the courage and discipline to carve out pockets of silence and solitude for the welfare of our spirits. The words of the Psalmist in the Old Testament have the ring of truth, "Be still and know that I am God."

**February 14, 2008**

## TAPPING THE POWER OF AFFIRMATION

None of us get enough of them. Some people are totally deprived of them. Many of us are not very good at giving them. What are they? Affirmation, appreciation, and recognition. These natural motivators can be so easily expressed if we plan ahead to energize others with these expressions.

The other night I had opportunity to experience the Thursday night chapel service at the Adult Rehabilitation Center at the Salvation Army in Minneapolis. I have a friend who is on the staff there who invited me to come down and tour the Center, have dinner, and experience the weekly Thursday night chapel service. So, I entered the facility that night, checked in with the desk, and proceeded to enjoy several hours of very interesting interaction and observation.

The work of the Salvation Army is world renown with a variety of services under the classic formula of "soup, soap, and salvation." In this particular facility there are 130+ men and who are working their way toward sobriety through a combination of work therapy, spiritual direction, and community building. Residents put in a 40-hour work week in the facility which includes the warehouse that receives, sorts, and distributes items that are sent to the thrift stores around the Twin Cities.

In the course of their stay, which may run between six months and one year, there are five levels in the rehabilitation program they complete and then graduate--at which time it is hoped they are ready to resume a new normal life on the outside.

On Thursday nights there is a chapel service featuring music provided by the residents and several heart-warming award ceremonies.

The awards offered begin with a series of community recognitions for excellence. These certificates are given to people who have performed admirably in their work in a number of areas in the facility during the previous week. A loving cup is also awarded to the cleanest room of the week.

Then, a series of promotions from one level to another and final graduation are celebrated. For each of the five levels of progress in the program, those making that achievement are called up front and given a certificate. Almost without signal most of the men in the audience jump up and form a line that encircles the auditorium

and greet each of the recipients in a receiving line, hugging each one of them in affirmation and recognition of their achievement.

This process repeats itself five times and then is topped off with the very moving celebration of the graduates of the program. In this section of the program the graduate is affirmed by three speakers who underscore the character qualities seen in the individual and assure them of their support and love. The final receiving line is formed to encourage the graduate as he completes his work in the program.

As I sat in the audience I was moved by the power of this kind of affirmation and recognition. In this very interesting aggregation of human beings, with wide variance in ages and signs of dissipation from the effects of addiction, there was unity of purpose and a palpable spirit of brotherhood. They were all in the same struggle together and they were loving on each other in a way that prodded them all toward the eventual goal of sobriety.

I thought to myself, "We really don't have regular opportunities to formally celebrate the achievements we reach in life...both large and small. We don't have a weekly chapel service in which we are egging each other on toward success." But...why not?

In our churches, our homes, our businesses, our individual relationships--why not have the same emotional and spiritual impact that the Salvation Army chapel offers? Is it not possible for us to think of creative ways to keep our eyes open for the accomplishments of any one week and then meaningfully celebrate them to affirm good behavior and character?

In America there is such an emphasis on individual responsibility and the need to make it on your own that we can lose sight of the interconnected web of relationships that God has provided for us. This network of friends, family, and people of faith can be a source of encouragement, propelling us toward success and accomplishment.

Too often, however, we fail to express these sentiments and people end up disheartened and unnecessarily trapped in cycles of self-doubt and defeat.

What should we do to promote this kind of appreciation and recognition? Literally and figuratively, we need to form receiving lines for those around us who are achieving some measure of success, hug them, love them, and affirm them. This can be done

every time we have contact with those we are concerned about. These spontaneous ceremonies will respond to the Scriptural call of the writer to the Hebrews, "Stimulate one another unto love and good deeds." It is a simple matter to express profound love and support. We must simply do it.

**March 29, 2008**

## **MARRIAGE—ALREADY DEFINED WELL ENOUGH!**

There is a civil rights steam roller moving across the land which has moral implications that we should at least ponder. The California State Supreme Court recently over-ruled a statewide referendum on same-sex marriage, opening the doors for gay unions to receive official recognition as marriages. This is just the latest high-profile case in an ongoing debate in the land. A sense of inevitability about gay marriage is sinking in all around us.

Some might say, "And why not...can't we just come to an Orange Juice Queen Anita Bryant-style conclusion about gays... 'live and let live?' Why get exercised about this whole thing. After all, how does the marital status of the gay couple down the street threaten anyone else, period. Let them be what they want to be and do what they want to do."

On the surface there seems to be a very humane and reasonable and compassionate ring to that sentiment. It is that kind of easy tolerance that has already granted many of the financial and legal options that civil union legislation across the country has afforded same sex couples. In tandem with those new options has come a more accepting, less antagonistic attitude toward the gay community. Less reactionary, hate-filled, genuinely vile expressions are made in public today than in past years.

Objectively it can't be denied that the gay community has accomplished large portions of their agenda throughout these last thirty years. It appears that toleration of life-style is not enough and full endorsement of same sex marriage is the ultimate goal.

The attitude projected by many on this and other innovations that fly in the face of traditional thinking is based on the idea that society evolves and improves over time and certain refinements are achieved that genuinely are improvements. Never mind that thousands of years of human history have generally maintained a taboo on homosexual activity that has marginalized it.

The conventional wisdom today is that finally in the 21st century we have arrived at a level of sophistication and urbaneness that

recognizes the narrow parochial patterns of the past. If we are simply willing to shed our old-fashioned notions, we are told, we can enter into a liberation in our thinking that will genuinely transform society.

Well, can we in one generation turn back the understood patterns of thousands of years of human history with confidence that we are on the right side of an issue? Even if we were willing to tolerate varied sexual orientation and practice and endeavored to treat everyone civilly regardless of sexuality; would we still be required to affirm and endorse a re-definition of the institution of marriage to satisfy a political movement's demands?

Society has a right to sanction and give special privileges to those institutions deemed necessary for its health and survival. The institution of marriage, long held to be the relationship between a man and a woman for the purposes of establishing a stable nurturing environment for the raising of children and the passing on of societal values to the next generation is deserving of this kind of support.

To call any other arrangement marriage is an unnecessary and illogical redefinition that flies in the face of the experience of thousands of years of human history.

Scriptural evidence for what is right and proper in this regard is clear. The description of marriage says, "For this reason a man will leave his parents and cleave to his wife." The simple, direct definition underscores natural law and the normal arrangement that is meant to be.

Those opposing this position will point out the failure of traditional marriage and nuclear family; the anecdotal examples of the loving environment that stable, gay couples offer for children growing up; and the unfairness of two people who love each other not to receive the same tax and legal benefits of a heterosexual couple.

All of these arguments however fall short in countering the evidence that the most successful formula for the strength of the next generation of children involve stable households with mother, father, and siblings making it together. No other substitute arrangement accomplishes the task.

There are other provisions that government can devise, short of granting the designation of marriage, that will meet the practical



objectives of gay couples. These can be defended on political and moral grounds.

The institution of marriage, however, must be protected and strengthened. No broadening of its definition will be a benefit. An anything-goes-standard where marriage can be any two people (or three or more people or animals) of any description joining together will further erode an institution that needs to be fortified and not redefined.

In the process, people of faith can contribute to a productive public discussion by rationally arguing that traditional biblical standards regarding marriage are not some ancient throw back to a previous age...they really are the dynamic, vital prescriptions for a healthy future, securing the best possible preparation of the emerging generations.

**July 3, 2008**

## **CONSTANTS IN A CHANGING LANDSCAPE**

CHANGE! has been the mantra repeated all throughout this presidential election season. Americans are dissatisfied with what has developed in the status quo...with the uncertainty on the international front, the fraying of the social fabric, and the scary downward spiral in the financial markets. It appears that change is the answer...in whatever direction that will pull us onto to new ground.

Whereas change may seem to be the logical and universal good when things look tough around us...we should not be so quick to embrace change in all forms as a necessarily good thing. In fact, from the standpoint of developing spiritual foundations in the lives of individuals and families, it could be argued that what has changed in the last forty years in American life has not been to the good.

- There are fewer intact nuclear families where the most stable environment exists for passing on values to the next generation.
  
- There is a systematic disintegration of social interaction within families with far fewer meals being shared together as individual households are divided by multiple work schedules, athletic competition, expanded extra-curricular activities, health club memberships, and electronic distractions of cell phones, internet, and ipods.

□ There is a diluted understanding of sexual relationships in the wake of the 60's revolution that lowered barriers against sex outside of marriage. The development of AIDS and other STD's has put a damper on totally indiscriminate sexual activity and yet the common standard of what is considered acceptable has shifted dramatically.

□ There is a real reduction in the percentage of people who gather together in groups in weekly worship...reflecting the apparent sense that they are free as independent agents to craft their own informal menu of spiritual expression beyond any group experience.

Oh, we could catalog several other changes that have developed in the past years in our national life. These trends are sometimes described as part of a moral free-fall that is upon us. It is what led the hymn writer many years ago to pen, "Change and decay in all around I see, O, Thou who changest not, abide with me."

That sentiment raises the question...if there is a changeless God...what are those things in us as human beings that are constant...those dimensions that do not change?

There are those among us who would say that this is a silly question. Their claim is that society is ever-changing; social evolution is a reality; trying to discover universal constants is an exercise in futility because you will never find them. And yet, common sense and experience underscores **some core realities that simply do not change:**

□ **Human beings have a moral sense.** We have an inborn conscience that can be informed, uninformed, or seared. There is a sense of the rightness and wrongness of things that finds its way even into the political discussions of the day.

□ **Human beings are prone to error.** Without direction or inner motivation, our default setting is to be self-serving and competitive in relationship to others and in the process we will disregard the truth and pursue our own welfare above others. This results in varying degrees of alienation from the rest of the community and from God Himself.

□ **Human beings respond to love.** We are drawn to those who will love us even with our faults. We tend to positively reciprocate loving expressions made to us. This is in keeping with the fact that we are relational beings are the core.

□ **Human beings need a source of truth and love beyond themselves.** In the democracy of human relationships, there is no way for the need for love in life to be realized without a divine source for it. No one person or religious organization can claim to offer a merely human source. The Christian understanding is that the unconditional love offered by God through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, the spiritual presence of the Holy Spirit, and the truth of Holy Scripture provides the Divine Source necessary to meet the unchanging needs of human beings.

Through this objective, beyond-human resource, people are able to inform their consciences, curb their self-serving impulses, express and respond to genuine love, and develop a relational connection to the Divine.

These are the unchanging dimensions of human experience that have held true throughout history. They will remain constant as time rolls on regardless of the ups and downs of our economy or national life. For each of us the change that needs to take place is to align our thinking and behavior in light of these undeviating truths.

The hymn writer does give us a Divine glimmer of hope..."Change and decay in all around I see. O, Thou who changest not...abide with me!"

**October 16, 2009**

## **CONNECTING THE SPIRITUALLY DIS-CONNECTED**

I was chatting the other day with a young man I met at a speaking engagement last year. He and I had developed a warm relationship as I had mentored him from long distance for a few months following my visit to his town. Yet, I had not heard from him in a long time and decided to call him.

He greeted me warmly on the phone and then proceeded to tell me that he had not returned some of my previous phone calls because he had, as he put it, "backslidden so far down and was guilty of such terribly things I was not deserving of anyone's attention." I was relieved to find out that he was back on track in his spiritual life and was happy to relate how good things were going for him now.

My young friend's experience is similar to many people who have had some kind of spiritual connection in life and yet have gone

through periods of personal failure and defeat. They are down so low that they don't think that any other human being, let alone God, should be bothered with them...they are spiritually worthless.

For this reason there are many who may have had positive experiences in their childhood or youth with the Church and yet have fallen away because they don't think their state of mind and heart and personal behavior conforms well enough to all those Church folks now. They are separated spiritually and psychologically from those who they think will be judgmental and are in a different realm because they are on the "inside track."

Well, let me suggest the following to give perspective for all of us on either side of the backslider's dilemma:

**1. Spiritual life is not lived in a linear fashion.** The life of faith is filled with stops and starts and a few retreats. This is true of those who have dropped out of formal religious activities in the faith community as well as those who go to church every Sunday. The ideal notion of an always upwardly mobile meteoric rise in spirituality is never realized by any of us this side of heaven. We all have ups and downs.

**2. The feelings of disconnectedness and "backslidenness" are evidences of an active conscience.** We should not be distraught when we get strange and discomfoting feelings when we are not performing according to what we know to be true and right. This is the inner working of God to let us know that something needs to change. It really is proof to the one who is in a spiritually down cycle that God indeed is interested in them.

**3. Feelings of guilt and shame need to be separated.** The tendency for modern westerners is to attempt to expunge both guilt and shame from the individual. We can be led to believe from early on in life that we are little darlings with an innately pure character. We simply need to unleash our inherent goodness. We are not really guilty of anything and therefore need not be burdened with the shame of poor performance. Those notions about guilt, however, are disproved by experience. We are guilty of many things throughout life. What the life of faith offers us, however, is to become free of the shame that oftentimes is imposed on those who are guilty. A sense of worthlessness, similar to the expression of my young friend, develops. Because of failure we believe that no one could possibly be interested in us. The Christian message is that God values human beings so much that our souls were worthy of Jesus himself sacrificing his life and

shedding his blood to spiritually reunite us guilty ones to God. God does not shame us; He loves us even though we are guilty.

**4. Those on the "inside" of the religious establishment must take the divine lead and refuse to shame those who stumble along the way.** The history of the Church is filled with examples of people who have been demeaned and humiliated because they have not remained faithful to either the behavior or the rites of the Church. Reunion with members of the Church becomes a very uncomfortable and sometimes impossible process when the wayward individual is met with scorn and shame. God's accepting character, illustrated by the father in the famous story of the return of the Prodigal Son, is the spirit that all of us need to grasp in relation to those who may be considering a return to the faith community.

With humility of heart, each one of us who continue in the disciplines of regular connection with people faith can reach out in genuine love and interest in those who are currently disconnected. In so doing, followers of Jesus will express the spirit of the crucified Lord, as we celebrate his passion through these days.

**April 9, 2009**

## **A SERMON FROM A NIGERIAN POLICEMAN**

On my 13th trip to Nigeria in November 2008, on our drive from Lagos to Ibadan, the driver of the bus we had rented was stopped for a traffic violation. He proceeded through an intersection that had a police officer directing that traffic stop from our lane.

We were immediately descended upon by an officer who forced himself into the front seat and told us to move on and park up ahead. There were no good places to park along this road, however, and so the driver went a couple of blocks before the officer began to bitterly complain, "Why do you keep driving? The other officers are going to assume you are kidnapping me."

Within a minute, two motorcycles with four other officers arrived on the scene. They all approached the van, quickly entering into the argument.

Our driver pleaded with the arresting officer to just let us go because we were already late for the program where I was to speak and we needed to keep going to make it on time. Rev. Maurice, who was traveling with me, kept repeating, "We are men of God going to a conference in Ibadan and we need to get Bishop Timothy there on time."

The officer kept insisting that we go back to the police station with them to adjudicate the matter. Our driver repeated, "I plead with you, please let us go. We simply need to get to Ibadan."

Then the policeman became very angry. He said, "Why do you always respond so selfishly. You keep on repeating, 'We have to go to Ibadan, We have to go to Ibadan.' Don't you realize there are some other peoples' interests here. Now you are guilty of a violation and justice needs to be done. Look, you are a man of faith, right? Then you know that all things work together for good. It is going to be okay. How do you know that it is not God's will for you to be going through this right now? Just take a U-turn here and head back to the station."

We returned to the police compound. I stayed in the car as my African friends went out to negotiate with a half dozen officers. After 10 minutes, the driver came back and said that we were free to go. Well....not exactly free...it cost about 50 US dollars to be released by the officer.

It was an interesting stroll through the Nigerian halls of municipal justice. What caught my attention, of course, was the invoking of the religion card in this situation. When chastening our driver, the officer gave an interesting mini-sermon, posing three questions:

- 1. Why are you so selfish?**
- 2. Why don't you simply have faith that all will work out okay?**
- 3. Why don't you see that maybe this situation is the intention of God?**

At one level the whole scenario is laughable. On the streets of Lagos there are so many traffic law violations that it is impossible for law enforcement to effectively control everything. We just happened to be in a local situation next to a police station with a concentration of officers to pounce on us. Further, the religious arguments the officer used on us could very well have been rationale in the faith-oriented culture of Nigeria to coerce cooperation with the authorities and exact the \$50 penalty they were looking for.

On another level, though, our arresting officer's sermon does offer all of us some food for thought:

**Why are you so selfish?** Far too often, selfish motivations underlie human behavior. Whether it be self-preservation or self-promotion, human beings' default setting is self-interest. In every problem we face we can ask ourselves seriously, "Am I being selfish in this situation or am I operating with a higher motivation?"

**Why don't you simply have faith that all will work out okay?** Here, the policeman actually introduces scripture into the discussion. Romans 8:28--"All things work together for good to them that love God." Though this verse is interpreted almost as a cliché in Christian conversation, there is a deep truth here. People of faith have trust in the caring hand of a God who may not prevent every crisis from happening, but will assist us in the process of picking up the pieces in the wake of difficulty.

**Why don't you see that maybe this situation is the intention of God?** Now, our peace officer dabbles in the great theological debate of all time. Is everything that happens part of a divine intention? Does God control every behavior, or is there genuine self-determination on the part of human beings? For most Christians there is a degree of mystery on this question which defies totally clear definition. Generally, however, no matter which end of the spectrum you maintain on this issue, Christians argue along with the Nigerian policeman that God has the power to influence and direct the affairs of humankind. At any one point in time it may not be possible for us to dogmatically claim that God is doing one thing or another--but we must be open to the possibility of divine intervention.

Regardless of the motive behind the sermonette we received from the Nigerian traffic cop, he raised some appropriate questions we could all well ask in the course of our daily lives. What is our motivation and what is God's part in what is happening? May God help us be at least that reflective as we process the experiences of our lives!

**November 2008**

## **MAKE WAY FOR THE VISIONARY!**

As I was clicking around the web to get information about one of our associated churches the other day, I noticed that I could download the new pastor's 100-day plan. I thought instantly how great it was that a pastor was entering into a new ministry with some substantive ideas of where the Church should go. In talking with him later I discovered that he had wisely listened to people through his candidating process and was confident of certain things that could be done immediately upon starting his ministry.

Sadly this kind of visionary leadership is not always evident in local churches. Many congregations languish without clear direction for the future. The lack of vision is sometimes the problem of pastors and leaders. They lack conviction on what needs to be done and are willing to pursue the status quo no matter how dead-ended it may be.

On the other hand, the people of a congregation can squelch strategic impulses by not fanning the flames of the would-be visionary. Thoughts come to mind, "Here we go again. Pastor X tried this kind of thing twenty years ago and nothing came of it then." Or...."What a corny approach...just very thinly-veiled sloganeering without any substance." Or..."I am so tired of stating and restating mission, vision, values, and all that stuff."

We must always keep in mind, though, that it is precisely "all that stuff" that is a source of energy for a leader. It may not be a revolutionarily new statement of mission or vision...but it is meaningful to the leader, even so.

I remember many years ago the president of my denomination compiled the mission statements of churches from all over the nation. As I read them over, my cynicism set in. I thought, "Every one of those is just a restatement of the Great Commission anyway. Plus, some of them are so wordy and even awkward in the way they are stated." And yet each of them was energizing the work of pastors and leaders in a local church. If it was fueling the fires of genuine ministry it was accomplishing an essential task.

Every leader has the tough responsibility of making the timeless, ancient mission of the Church come alive to a local congregation. It must first strike fire with the leader before it can be passionately communicated to people. In the process, leaders must be careful to arrive at visionary direction that is consistent with the personality of the congregation--as the pastor I saw referenced on the web the other day took pains to do.

Equally important, however, is that the congregation needs to lovingly and enthusiastically embrace the strategic vision that leadership provides, no matter how common sense, obvious, simple, or already-tried it may seem. These formulations motivate leaders with energy to move things forward. Also, in a real sense, vision of any kind should be appreciated because of its rarity. It is indeed necessary to make way for the visionary!

**September 2008**

## **CELEBRATE ALL THE TIME!**

The last couple of months of the year is a non-stop series of annual celebrations. Both national and sacred calendars mark days that give rise to special gatherings...All Saints Day, Veterans Day, Thanksgiving, Western Christmas, New Year's Day, Orthodox Christmas. All of this keeps us hopping for two solid months of special programs.



Much has been written and spoken about the busyness of this time of year. Preachers and pundits have decried the emotional energy that it drains, the financial wealth that is expended, the grams of fat consumed, and the time-consuming schedule that runs almost non-stop.

There is a certain rhythm to these annual cycles, however, that offers a welcome change of pace. Once January hits, there is the opportunity for cool rest and reflection, recuperating from the frenetic activity of the previous couple of months. It's all good.

But in a larger sense, I would argue that a *spirit of celebration* should not be infused only in this holiday season. There is a special-ness to every day and every week in the life of a believer and a local assembly. **There really is something substantial to celebrate all the time!**

It does not require a lot of extra programming, but it can involve a lightness of spirit when the realities of God's goodness and provision for us are clearly highlighted. For instance...

□ **The inflection of the voice of those leading worship** can and should be upbeat and positive in every service. When ushering people into genuine worship, a fresh consideration of the nature of our God and his love for us should enlivening the faces and expressions of all.

□ **The power of the word of God should so grip the preacher or teacher** that their passion overflows in what they share. As one mentor once said, "We must never approach a sermon or lesson emotionally neutral...it needs to stir our souls before it moves the masses."

□ **The daily expressions of faith in our people** are worthy of public acclaim, as well. Sharing stories of how God has met the needs of individuals and families, how adversity has been overcome, how redemptive relationships have been formed to share Christ's love, how God's healing power in many ways has been realized...all lift the spirit of everyone in corporate celebration!

All of these expressions must be planned for and sprinkled generously through the year in our regular services. May God give us spiritual eyes to identify all that can be celebrated all the time!

**November 2008**

## TIS A GIFT TO BE SIMPLE

In a recent online Christianity Today release, Pastor Walt Kallestad of the Community of Joy Church in Arizona, commented on major changes that have taken place in recent years in his ministry. I took special interest in his story since Pastor Kallestad was one of our keynote speakers at MCMA's fall program in 2001. At the time he was known as a Lutheran Bill Hybels...applying seeker sensitive philosophies in building his local congregation.

Shortly after his MCMA appearance, Kallestad went through coronary bypass surgery. Upon his return to church after that operation, a stunning reality hit him powerfully as he sat with his wife in the pew: ***Our ministry has turned into a fine-tuned, highly programmed, polished hour of professional entertainment.*** This conviction struck him so much that he began to weep at the thought of it.

Over the next months his convictions were turned into action. He communicated to his governing Board that the Lord had convinced him that they had been pursuing an improper model for ministry and that he would not continue on as pastor in good conscience if it did not change; he offered to resign if the Board disagreed with his convictions.

In the intervening years, major changes have been made. Several professional staff members have been laid off; programs have been curtailed or revised; and response from people has been all over the board. Church attendance dropped from 12,000 to 8,000 almost immediately; reduced technical quality of the services was off-putting to many. Pastor Kallestad rehearsed the many negative criticisms he received from a number of people who were convinced he was driving the church into the ground.

In the end, the testimony from Community of Joy is that there is a more genuine, authentic expression of worship and Christian discipleship today. There are fewer cookie-cutter programs, more informal one-on-one mentoring relationships, more spontaneity in worship than before and the Pastor is confident that they are on the right track.

Similar conclusions were arrived at in Willow Creek's ministry under Bill Hybels, as reported here about a year ago. What does it mean for the vast majority of us in smaller churches seeking to move with confidence into the future? **The fundamentals of effective ministry do not require huge multiple staffs, multi-million dollar budgets, or the aping of nationally-renown**

**ministries.** *God expects us to be faithful by leading people to a relationship with God and helping them to become more like Jesus day by day.*

That can and should be done in the simple ways that these big ministries are trying to recapture in their larger settings. Simplicity in a smaller context still must be done with effectiveness but it can be done in a way that mobilizes individuals in genuine discipleship that produces spiritual maturity just as deep as a church in any other setting. May God bless us as we aim to build this kind of simple authenticity in each of our ministries.

**February 2009**

## **ANALYSIS THAT AVOIDS PARALYSIS**

In the rhythm of American Church life, we are approaching the end of the school year at which time the mind naturally goes to a review of what has transpired since the Labor Day start-up of the general programming of the local congregation. How can you arrive at some evaluation of how well you have done? Let me suggest that the ideas that **Herb Miller**, one of classic consultant Lyle Schaller's associates, offered in his 1990 book *The Vital Congregation*, still are helpful.

In that little book, Mr. Miller outlined the characteristics true of congregations whose vitality was testified to by both those inside and outside of the church:

1. Leadership model and communicate hope and expectancy about the future.
2. The pastor-people ministry team spiritually nurture people in worship services.
3. The pastor-people ministry team create a climate of Christian love and acceptance.
4. The pastor-people ministry team involve large numbers of members in carrying out the ministry.
5. The pastor-people ministry team encourage people outside the church to experience a life-changing connection with Jesus Christ.
6. The pastor-people ministry team enthusiastically receive and assimilate new people into the church life.

7. The pastor-people ministry team provides Sunday School and other small groups that offer Bible Study and spiritual growth opportunities and meet many spiritual and social needs.
8. The pastor-people ministry team teach members how to nurture a life of prayer.
9. The pastor-people ministry team develop sacrificial stewardship of financial, time, and talent resources.
10. The pastor-people team reach out to help heal the hurts and meet the needs of people in the church, the community, and across the world.

Ten points on a checklist! Let this be the focus of a discussion among your leadership this spring. How are you doing in each of these categories? What can you do in preparation for the next fall's school year of ministry to strategize to be more effective in each of these areas? God bless you as you do some helpful, non-paralyzing analysis in the months ahead!

**April 2009**

## **AFTER 25 YEARS: THE AGONY & THE ECSTASY**

I have just experienced a great milestone in my life! As of July 1, 2009, I have been Executive Director of our Association for 25 years. How has church ministry changed in the last quarter century? It involves plusses and minuses--agony and ecstasy! The agony that I have observed includes:

**Cafeteria-Style Christianity**--We have seen a huge increase in American-style pick-and-choose approaches to discipleship. The selectivity that individuals exercise is expressed not only in the kind of response offered to the growth-producing ministry options that a local church presents, but also in that many people go to more than one church to seek different services to meet their needs. This tends to dilute commitment to one church as an interdependent Body.

**Distracting Interests**--Entertainment, school activities, workaholism, and a multitude of organized athletic leagues have wildly expanded through these years, absorbing the time and energy of young and old alike.

**Low-Commitment Levels**--Whereas traditionally ministry responsibilities for church workers were entered into with a pledge to serve through an entire year (or more!), tasks are established for a

much shorter term...months or even weeks at a time...to accommodate the expanded number of distractions that stretch people in the average week. The willingness to submit to training and continuing education for ministry has been limited by the same dynamics.

**Expanding Biblical Illiteracy**--The church public, let alone the general public, maintains a discouraging lack of biblical knowledge and understanding. This has resulted from diluted curriculum, fewer hours in formal instruction, and less biblical content in worship services than there once was.

Positively, the ecstasy of the current Church scene includes:

**Relational vs. Mechanical Ministry**--The ministry mindset today involves a greater realization that all ministry is relational. Previously, many church technicians believed that discipleship and spiritual growth happened when we led people to jump through mechanical, programmatic hoops. Today there is a wider belief that every person must be engaged individually and drawn toward growth in a relational, long-term manner. Ministry producing spiritual growth is a long-range commitment over time. A move toward simplicity in local church structures and forms with less reliance on one-size-fits-all programming is gaining popularity.

**Technological Potentialities**--The tools that are available today to communicate between individuals are amazing. Text messaging, emailing, social networking internet sites, blogs, websites, easy-to-produce print publications, computer programs of all types, video projectors in every meeting space--all of these and many more are transforming the way ministry is done today. There is tremendous potential in all of this to enhance relationships in ministry.

**Missionality and Outward Orientation**--A call to seriously reconsider the mission of the church and make all activities of the local church subservient to that mission is afoot today. This includes the common sense notion that what drives the church should not be tradition or simple self-preservation--it must be concern for the souls both within the body and outside of the body in the wider community who need to be reached for time and eternity.

May God help us to minimize the agony and maximize the ecstasy as we go forward in the next 25 years in the ministry of the Church!

**July 2009**

## ***Spiritual Waves: Navigating the Currents Outside & Inside the Church***

Spiritual interest is rising on all sides in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. A heightened interest in values, spirituality, and authenticity has created active pursuit of higher things. Author Timothy Johnson explores movements and issues of the day in a way that applies time-tested truth to current concerns. His perspective includes both the interests of those outside of the Church, as he writes a column for the general public in his local newspaper, as well as the day-to-day challenges of those inside the Church, given his responsibility as director of an inter-church training network. In *Spiritual Waves*, enjoy his insight on the challenge of technology, social change, the definition of marriage, the need for interpersonal affirmation, and classic spiritual questions that everyone faces. Also in this volume, see practical help for those involved in the organizational effort of local churches to meet the spiritual needs of everyone in the community. Whether you are actively involved in a church or more passively exploring spiritual issues, you will find something to stimulate your mind and heart as you read *Spiritual Waves*.

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