

The road to the future runs through the past

Reviving an ancient faith journey

Robert E. Webber

Churches in North America are feeling the effects of vast cultural changes. With increasing secularization, the concept of a Christianized society has undergone a long, slow, hard death, and Christians live amid principalities and powers in an increasingly alien culture. Postmodernism asserts that no single metanarrative can speak to an understanding of the world, and the resulting

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relativism of belief and practice surrounds us. Since 9/11, an awareness of personal vulnerability has opened many to spirituality, mostly of a New Age variety. The church's future depends on its ability to come to terms with these changes in our postmodern, secular-but-still-spiritual society, while bearing witness to its conviction that it has an authentic spirituality and a unique story, a true interpretation of existence.

In this climate of change and challenge, several models or forms of church coexist. Some churches, shaped by their response to World War 2, continue to serve the idea of a

Christianized society. Their approach to ministry is that of caretakers. Pastors keep the machinery going. These churches practice mass evangelism. Worship is sermon-driven. Spirituality is keeping the rules. Education is the accumulation of knowledge. Youth work is program after program. Some of these traditional churches flourish, but many are in decline.

Other churches have been shaped by the revolution of the 1960s. They are innovative, follow the business model, and use slick marketing. Their pastors are their CEOs. Worship is primarily music-driven—half an hour of contemporary song followed by a sermon. Spirituality focuses on the therapeutic,

stressing that a Christian can live the good life. Evangelism is seeker-oriented. Education is Christianity 101. Youth work happens around retreats. This pragmatic model has challenged the established church. Using church growth principles these megachurches flourished in the '80s and '90s. Now their future is uncertain.

Newer churches bump up against the relativism of postmodernity. They embrace a missional self-understanding. Their approach to ministry is shaped by the servanthood of Jesus. Worship moves toward the ancient emphasis on Word and Table. Spirituality also seeks to revive older traditions. Evangelism is a journey into faith and discipleship. Education focuses not on the accumulation of facts but on spiritual formation. Youth work concentrates on prayer, Bible study, and social concerns. Twenty-somethings predominate in the emerging church; these start-up groups are featured on web-sites.

These emerging churches seek to work with cultural change. Seeing the impact of globalization, they strive to be multicultural and multigenerational. Breaking with an evolutionary philosophy of history, they affirm that the road to the future runs through the past. Questioning the religious rationalism of the Enlightenment and its impact on forms of ministry, these churches embrace mystery. Repudiating the isolation of individualism, they seek the experience of Christian community.

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Recognizing the effects of technological change, they foster an interactive approach to Christian faith, worship, and formation.

The journey to Jesus

Because I am convinced that the church must replace superficial evangelism with a discipleship that forms new believers and

incorporates them fully into the life of the church, I have adapted a third-century model of evangelism and Christian formation into a process called Journey to Jesus.¹ I assume that our culture is primarily pagan, that Christian witness in this context cannot take for granted that people understand the Christian faith. The spiritual path I have laid out happens in the church and is especially connected to worship. Like the early church pattern, it

includes a time to evangelize, then to disciple, then to spiritually form, and finally to assimilate into the church. It is based on a study of biblical texts that deal with Christian formation, and it includes life-changing rituals in which participants renounce evil and embrace the transforming power of Jesus Christ.

This process assumes, as the early church did, that we live among the principalities and powers. It teaches that Christ, by his death and resurrection, has overcome the powers of evil and will at the end of history rescue creation from the clutches of evil. As envisioned by Isaiah and in the revelation to John, Christ's shalom will rest over the entire created order. In the meantime, in its worship and in its way of life, the church is called to witness to the overthrow of the powers. The church is therefore the womb in which new Christians are conceived, birthed, and guided into a lifelong relationship with God. The process is a long obedience in the same direction.

The four stages of the process use the language of *seeker*, *hearer*, *kneeler*, and *faithful*, all terms used in the early church. I believe the church best marks this process of birth and growth and maturation with rituals. I have adapted the rituals to fit the believers tradition of faith formation. However, I have maintained the sequence of the early church, which practiced adult baptism as the culmination of the process.

Evangelize the seeker. The first step in the journey to Jesus is to bring a person to the place of initial conversion. Sociologist Rodney Stark argues that early Christianity grew largely because of conversions that took place in the context of immediate social networks of family, friendship, working relationships, and neighborhood witness.² The statistics of the American Church Growth Institute testify to the ongoing power of this relational approach to bringing people to faith. Seventy-nine percent of people the institute surveyed came to faith through interaction with a friend or relative.³ One-on-one mentoring relationships can provide opportunity to talk about Gospel stories presenting who Jesus is, what he did, and how his death and resurrection are the source for transforming life. Mentors may bring seekers to church, where the hospitality of God's people and the proclamation of Christ in worship intensify their interest in faith.

When seekers are ready to follow Jesus, they make a public confession of faith, which includes a rite of renunciation of the powers of evil and affirmation of allegiance to Jesus as Lord.

Disciple the hearer. At the 1999 International Consultation on Discipleship in Eastbourne, England, more than 450 Christian leaders from around the world met to address the problem of conversions that fail. They bemoaned the fact that the church seems to be a mile wide but an inch deep. They urged congregations to develop ways to disciple new Christians. The second step in the journey to Jesus helps new converts learn what it means to be a disciple: what does it mean to be the church; what does it mean to be at worship; how does one pray with Scripture?

At the end of this stage, when new Christians are ready, they celebrate the rite of covenant. As in the early church, this rite is a commitment to proceed to baptism. Candidates step forward to reaffirm faith in Christ by writing their names in the book of the covenant. The whole community looks on and celebrates by singing “Alleluia” as each candidate’s name is recorded.

Spiritually form the kneeler. For the next six weeks, the candidate—now known as a kneeler—prepares for baptism by learning how to deal with the principalities and powers. To live in baptism is to identify with the death and resurrection of Jesus. The Christian answer to the powers is to live in our baptism, daily dying to sin and rising to the new life of the Spirit which is in Christ. During this period, candidates learn the Apostles’ Creed and the Lord’s Prayer. Through these primary sources, one learns the content of belief and to whom and how to pray.

The ritual that follows this instruction is baptism, the rite *par excellence* of conversion. In this rite one renounces the powers of evil and submits to a new identity, is baptized into Christ to live on in the pattern of death and resurrection.

Assimilate the faithful. When the converted have been baptized, what remains of their initial discipleship journey is incorporation into the full life of the church. A seven-week study of biblical passages is geared to helping new members discover their calling

to work, to the care of creation, to the poor and needy. They also discover their gifts and offer them to the life of the church.

This stage has no one-time rite of passage. Instead the rite of communion offers continuous nourishment. At the Table, God meets believers again and again to confirm their faith in truth and to nourish them with the body and blood of Christ. The initial journey to Jesus has been completed. Converts are ready to be involved in the church, continuing to grow even as they now mentor others in the faith.

Concluding thoughts

The six-month process I have summarized may begin and end at any time, but some may find it meaningful to order it around the Christian year. On Pentecost Sunday, commission the evangelists of your community to make a connection with one person in their social network, and begin the conversation described in part one. On the first Sunday of Advent, celebrate the rite of conversion. Then lead new converts through the next stage during Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany. On the first Sunday of Lent, celebrate the rite of covenant. During Lent, introduce new converts to the discipline of spirituality summarized in part three. Baptize them at the great Easter vigil on Saturday night of Holy Week, or in the Easter Sunday service. During the seven weeks of Easter assimilate new converts into the full life of the church.

The journey to Jesus model is not a quick fix. Getting started may require a small group of committed people who go through the process themselves, and then begin to invite unchurched people into it, until it expands to include the whole church and those beyond it in the process of discipleship. This paradigm is new, but it draws on early church resources, because we too live in a world that is pagan. This model has the potential to revolutionize the twenty-first-century church, as it did the church of the Roman world almost two thousand years ago.

Notes

¹ For a more detailed explanation of this process, read Robert E. Webber, *The Journey to Jesus* (Nashville: Abingdon Pr., 2001); and *Ancient-Future Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Bks., 2003). Booklets to guide each of the four stages—*Follow Me! Be My Disciple! Walk in the Spirit!* and *Find Your Gift!*—are available for use by mentors or in small groups. A video training workshop, *The Journey to Jesus Video*, is also available. These resources can be ordered on-line at: www.ancientfutureworship.com. Questions

and comments may be directed to rwebber@northern.seminary.edu.

² *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Pr., 1996).

³ The remainder came to faith through a pastor (6 percent); Sunday school (5 percent); walk-ins (3 percent); outreach programs (3 percent); special needs (2 percent); visitation (1 percent); crusades (0.5 percent).

About the author

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