


From uncertainty to mystery

Signposts in times of change

Laura Funk

We live in a time of rapid change that brings great uncertainty. Rapid technological advances can be exciting, or they can leave people reeling to

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keep up. Climate change and a growing societal awareness of inequalities also contribute to unease and unrest. Media curates the most extreme events around the world and feeds us this information in a constant stream, contributing to increased anxiety. The church is also facing great change and uncertainty as people have been leaving by the thousands every week and do not appear to be coming back, even before the pandemic exacerbated this trend. Many others have shifted from engaging with

a church community weekly or even more, to attending only monthly, or anonymously and remotely accessing services online, or attending just for special occasions. However, when we gather with other people of faith in community and lean into uncertainty rather than away from it, and when we engage in spiritual practices that renew and enliven us, we can experience a mystical transformation through the Holy Spirit that can guide us into the future, whatever it may bring.

A great rummage sale

The American author Phyllis Tickle compares these vast societal and ecclesial changes to the depth of change that happened during the Reformation. She describes a pattern of the church throwing “a giant rummage sale” every five hundred years or so, looking at our accumulated heritage

and discerning what will be useful to take to the next era and what we can leave behind.¹

Some people might feel invigorated by this sorting process; an excitement can come with spring cleaning. But a rummage sale can also produce anxiety. People argue about the rubric used for discerning what is kept and what is discarded and who has authority to decide. *That doily was lovingly crocheted by Great Grandma as she came over to this country!* one sibling might shout at another. Such sentiments are not uncommon.

During the Reformation, one guiding question for the church was this: Where does our authority lie? Martin Luther's answer was that au-

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thority lies in Scripture alone. He rejected church traditions and the office of the pope as ultimate authorities. His answer has sustained the Protestant Church for over five hundred years. However, our confidence in "Scripture alone" is wavering. The current generation has seen the Bible used to justify sustaining inequalities between people from different backgrounds, skin tones, and sexual orientations. We have come to see that we cannot read it as a "flat"

book where every text carries equal weight. This contributes to our sense of uncertainty: Can we trust this book to guide us in our life of faith? Times of change push the church to discern together again what authority we can trust to guide us in faithfully following Jesus.

In her science fiction novel *A Wind in the Door*, Madeleine L'Engle writes, "It is only when we are fully rooted that we are really able to move."² The crisis in the book involves a medical issue with one character's mitochondria, and other characters travel inside his body to convince the tiny structures to "deepen." The older mitochondria tell the ones who resist the deepening, "Now that I am rooted I am no longer limited by motion. Now I may move anywhere in the universe. I sing with the stars. I dance with the galaxies." When we pursue the quest for a way forward, we need to go deeper than fear and anxiety that the rummage sale might produce

1 Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity Is Changing and Why* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2008), 16. Tickle credits Anglican bishop Mark Dyer for this image.

2 Madeline L'Engle, *A Wind in the Door* (New York: Dell, 1973), 190.

in us. We need to find that which grounds us in a better story. I would like to suggest some road markers, or signposts, that I see pointing the way for us in our own era of uncertainty and change.

Community

The first signpost for our journey through uncertainty is community. The isolation that many of us experienced in the pandemic was a great teacher, a reminder of our deep need for true community. Those who were on the front lines and perhaps the extreme introverts may have been affected in different ways, but for the rest, the plea from those trying to help us manage this crisis was simply to stay home. It sounded simple, but it was certainly not easy. We missed our friends and extended families. We missed our acquaintances and casual connections. We found ways to connect over video calls, but it just wasn't the same. The church has a significant role to play here. We need to be communities of support and accountability—not just as a program for offenders or those who struggle deeply but for everyone.

I had a conversation with someone recently from a large congregation. Another member had recently died, and this member told me that she had sat behind her in the pews for many years. They had exchanged a friendly “Good morning” each Sunday but never more than that. This has to change if we are going to be able to navigate this season of uncertainty with integrity. We need each other in so many ways. Our culture idolizes autonomy and individualism, but these values run contrary to what Jesus worked so hard to teach his first disciples. He gathered them into a diverse, motley crew and taught them to work together. We need

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to learn again to do the same. This keeps us from the isolation of personal silos or internet echo chambers where we just hear the same things. Diversity in community helps us change and grow rather than stagnate and calcify. It helps us discern the voice of God together and move with integrity.

Spiritual Practices

A second signpost for times of uncertainty is returning to spiritual practices that have grounded Christians throughout our entire history. The Ana-

baptist Reformation was called the Radical Reformation. The word *radical* is based in the word for *root*. We need to return to the roots of our faith yet again. This is not the work that many will choose. But for those who want to follow Christ, it is the only way. And people are doing it. They are seek-

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ing out retreats—not business meetings in pretty settings but real soul-searching, silence-listening, God-encountering experiences. People are developing a “rule of life” to guide their daily activities and spiritual growth. They are investing in spiritual friendships and small groups for accountability, seeking out spiritual directors to journey with them, finding

prayer practices that sustain them, and engaging in many other life-giving spiritual practices.

Spiritual practices ground us in the goodness of God. When people find a practice that nurtures their spirit, it is like the roots of a strong tree growing deep toward underground streams. Engaging regularly in spiritual practices connects us to living waters, sustaining and fortifying us for the challenges we are facing. When a friend of mine was struggling in a new place, a wise mentor asked her, “Where can you go that you come back from fuller?” Spiritual practices are the kinds of practices that fill us up when we are empty and help us tap into the waters of life. They are essential for a vibrant life of faith that weathers the storms of uncertainty.

Mystical transformation

In her book *Healing through the Dark Emotions*, Miriam Greenspan teaches that by going through rather than ignoring or pushing away difficult emotions, we allow them to become great teachers of wisdom. Traditionally the word *alchemy* has been used to describe the mythical process of transforming lead into gold. In her book, Greenspan uses this word to describe the process of sitting with our dark emotions of grief, fear, and despair and allowing them to “alchemize” into gratitude, faith, and joy.³ For example, when I sat with my complicated grief about my father’s death, I learned more about relationships. Each relationship is different, and therefore each grief is carried and worked through differently. I learned about factors in my relationship with my father that shaped me to be the

3 Miriam Greenspan, *Healing through the Dark Emotions* (Boston: Shambhala, 2003).

person I am. By intentionally examining these factors, I had the opportunity to choose more consciously how I would live my life going forward. Instead of feeling stuck in my grief, I found that the energy that facing it brought me moved me to a place of deeper understanding. Once it was metabolized, I was enabled to sit with others who were experiencing grief without being triggered back into my own unprocessed emotions. I could be a grounded presence to help them process their own grief.

This same process of facing uncertainty collectively can lead us to deeper understanding of our present age and that which the Holy Spirit wants to birth for the next generations. When we take time and energy to sit with our unease with change and uncertainty, we can allow the Holy Spirit to transform the uncertainty into mystical spirituality. Acknowledging mystical experiences leads us to places of awe and wonder. Sitting in mystery allows us to give up control and the need to know all the answers and gives the Spirit of God space to work.


Metaphors and Parables

Another signpost God gives us comes in the form of metaphors and parables. When Thomas asked Jesus to show the way, instead of giving the disciples a road map, Jesus gives them himself: “I am the way” (John 14:6). The disciples must have been feeling deep uncertainty as Jesus was moving toward his death. He was saying things the disciples did not understand, but instead of offering clarity, Jesus became more mysterious, speaking in deep riddles. Jesus often used parables to get his ideas across, sometimes using unlikely and even startling images like an unjust judge, a persistently unproductive fig tree, and a camel in the eye of a needle. Jesus encouraged his disciples to shift their thinking away from simple formulas. This way of teaching prepares us as Jesus followers to become more comfortable with mystery. Jesus’s parables are powerful teachers. We can also seek out modern parables, poetry, and song lyrics that carry wisdom to guide us in this time.

Ecumenism

A final signpost I have observed is greater cooperation across conference and denominational boundaries. Some people have become much more open to gleaning wisdom from a plurality of denominations and faith traditions. This is a mark of the future church. Whereas the church was fragmented into many denominations during the Reformation, the Holy Spirit is inviting us to unite again. Dialogue and active cooperation are

happening at many levels: interpersonal, informal, and formal discussions about what we hold in common as well as respect for and even celebration of differences. Congregations are sharing buildings, resources, even staff between denominations and beyond. They are building relationships and



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learning from each other, looking across the fences that used to divide and learning from each other's ways of living out Christian faith.

The mass exodus of members from congregational life leaves the institutional church in a precarious position. There are not enough volunteers to run the long-standing programs and sit on established committees. There are not enough donations to pay the staff and heat the buildings. And if the church was just a country club, this might be the

end of it. But it is not. The church does not belong to the executive ministers or national directors or joint councils or executive boards or cardinals or popes or any other structure. The church is the bride of Christ. Jesus promised his disciples that he would never leave or forsake his followers. He promised them a Comforter, an Advocate, a Guide to walk alongside them and lead them deeper into the Way.

The age of the Holy Spirit

Tickle outlines her understanding of this new age, explaining that for about two thousand years before Jesus, the Israelites had a particular understanding of God in the "age of Yahweh." Then Jesus came and ushered in deeper understandings and teachings about who God is and how we understand the Divine Mystery. Tickle goes on to talk about new stirrings she has observed, from the beginnings of a strong charismatic movement about one hundred years ago in North America that has blossomed throughout South and Central America and many countries in Africa and Asia. She has observed a strong movement of the Holy Spirit in leading the people of God. These observations lead her to declare that we are now entering the age of the Holy Spirit.⁴

4 Tickle, *Great Emergence*, 82.

In the age of the Holy Spirit, God is leading the church away from certainty into mystery. We need to leave the fishing boats of our worldly understandings and individualism on the shoreline behind us and follow the Spirit as she leads us. Following the Spirit will take self-discipline. Following the Spirit will require leaving our propensity for power and structures that hinder the Spirit's movement. Following the Spirit will mean listening to the prophets among us who call us to seek justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God. They call us to love our neighbors and open our eyes to seeing beyond the people who are just like us to expanding our horizons, embracing diversity. Prophets call us to care for creation and take risks to speak truth to power. Following the Spirit entails cultivating the gifts the Spirit gives. As the body of Christ, we need to work together and learn from each other. This collaboration will get messy as people try different things. Some things will work, and some will not. We need to be courageous and try, nevertheless.

The Holy Spirit is at work, gathering people, gifting people. We are singing and living a new church into being! It is a church that leans into rather than shying away from uncertainty, moving through it and allowing the process of alchemy that fosters embracing mystery; one that gets

excited about new ways of thinking and being; one that experiments and fails and offers grace; one that plays because we know that engaging in play is important in building community and learning new things and following Jesus.

We can trust the Holy Spirit to lead us in this work. Trusting the Spirit means divesting ourselves of authority and traditional structures. Trusting the Spirit means leaning into mystery. Trusting the Spirit means seeking the way of

Trusting the Spirit means divesting ourselves of authority and traditional structures. Trusting the Spirit means leaning into mystery. Trusting the Spirit means seeking the way of Love.

Love. John teaches that those who practice love know God (1 John 4). Love is from God, and those who love know God. We are made to love and be loved. Practicing love can lead us toward a new way of being the church together. Jesus tells Pharisees in Matthew 22 that the greatest commandment is love. This love is two-fold: love of God and love of neighbor. This is the love that we must turn to in the midst of uncertainty. It is the only way forward for true disciples of Christ. We must root ourselves in

the kind of love Jesus taught us. It is only then that we will find our way into the next era.

About the author

Laura Funk has had an active practice in spiritual direction with Butterfly Journeys for over a decade. She was invited to be the volunteer spiritual director in residence for Mennonite Church Manitoba in 2021 for one year. She grew up in the Mennonite Church, actively participated in an ecumenical congregation for seventeen years, and then returned to membership in the Mennonite Church. She and her Roman Catholic life partner enjoy exploring nature through walks in their neighborhood and further afield. She also just may have some doilies from her great grandmother.