

Becoming Christian in a Postmodern World

Context

There are many obstacles that mainline churches must address and resolve before they can begin to be effective at “passing down the faith” to the younger generation of Christians and to those who will be baptized into the church. Many of these obstacles are inherent to the current practices of the church. In addition, there are social obstacles that must be settled. Before I set out to identify these obstacles, let me first seek to identify exactly what it means to “pass down” the Christian tradition.

Anthropologist Irvin Child says that socialization serves to develop behavior within an individual that is acceptable and customary according to the group to which that one belongs.¹ Further, most social scientists agree that there are three fundamental assumptions of the process of socialization: 1) “All perceptions and behaviors are learned in a social context,” that is, within a group that bears its own distinctive culture; 2) “The existence and vitality, over time, of a society or a group within a society depends upon consensus among its members as to an understanding of life and appropriate ways of thinking, feeling and acting;” 3) “Every people transmit their way of life” through a variety of means.² Based on this information, John Westerhoff offers this definition of religious socialization: “*a process consisting of lifelong formal and informal mechanisms, through which persons sustain and transmit their faith (world view, value system) and lifestyle.* This is accomplished through participation in the life of a tradition-bearing community with its rites, rituals, myths, symbols, expressions of beliefs, attitudes and values, organizational patterns, and activities.”³ In common terms, American mainline churches have to learn how to effectively *be* the Christian church so that others will learn what it means to be “Christian” and what it means to be “the church.”

Especially true in the last three centuries, the church has depended on a schooling-instructional model, built on the principles of behavioral science and studies of secular pedagogical

¹ John H. Westerhoff III and Gwen Kennedy Neville, *Generation To Generation: Conversations on Religious Education and Culture* (Philadelphia: United Church Press, 1974) 38.

² *Ibid.*, 39.

³ *Ibid.*, 41.

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methods, to communicate the customs, values and beliefs of the Christian faith.⁴ However, the schooling-instructional model as the primary means for “passing down the faith” is limited in a number of ways in the postmodern world. First, and perhaps foremost, the schooling-instructional model artificially isolates the socialization process from the educational process. As Westerhoff has pointed out, education is an important element of socialization, but by no means a separate process.⁵ “The informal hidden curriculum in our churches is often far more influential than the formal curriculum of our church schools... We can teach about equality in our church schools, but if our language in worship excludes women, if positions of influence and importance are held only by men or those from upper socioeconomic classes, or if particular races are either implicitly or explicitly excluded from membership, a different lesson is learned.”⁶

Furthermore, the schooling-instructional model depends heavily on an instructor-learner relationship, which is no longer helpful in a postmodern world. As Loren B. Mead has noted, clergy are no longer the first point of contact between the church and society, and traditional models of social authority that prescribed automatic esteem to clergy are breaking down.⁷ Many people will never look to the institutional Christian church for answers to their questions and solutions to life’s complexities. As a result, lay people play an increasingly important role in postmodern society as the ones who will represent the church and the Christian tradition through their “everyday” social encounters.

This brings us to a third limitation of the schooling-instruction model; namely, this model tends to focus its efforts, almost exclusively, on children and youth. The church assumes that adults have already “learned” the Christian Tradition and need only to *reproduce* the rites, values, and beliefs of the faith. In many congregations, worship is the only opportunity for adult education and formation, and professional clergy are the only ones involved in planning and performing the liturgical rites. Adults, therefore, have become mere observers of the faith, rather than participants.

⁴ John H. Westerhoff, *Will Our Children Have Faith?* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1976) 8-9.

⁵ Westerhoff and Neville, 38.

⁶ Westerhoff, 18.

⁷ Loren B. Mead, *The Once and Future church: Reinventing the Congregation For A New Mission Frontier* (New York: The Alban Institute, 1991) 32-35.

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Elizabeth Caldwell says, “Adults struggle to make meaning of their lives in a world that grows increasingly more complex and violent. The first goal of religious instruction should be enabling learners to be grounded in a biblical faith that supports their making connections between the content of the faith and the way it is lived in the world.”⁸

In short, for both children and adults, the church has looked to a model of passivity for the learners and expertise for the clergy that isolates both. In most mainline churches, children are removed from worship early in the service, robbing them of the opportunity to observe and participate in the church’s most important socializing rites. In addition, adults are subjected to models of involvement that emphasize passivity and compliance. Clergy feel isolated by the schooling-instructional model because it places on them a tremendous burden to develop curriculum and plan worship services for people who are growing increasingly disinterested in what they offer.

I have alluded to the fact that Western cultures and American society, in particular, are in the midst of dramatic transition. Primary among the changes taking place in America is the lack of systemic social support for mainline Protestant Christianity. John Westerhoff identifies “an ecology of institutions,” six social institutions that were, at one point, deliberately engaged in religious socialization, and are no longer. First, there is no longer community support of mainline Christian values and practices as “right,” which is evidenced by the courtroom oath that, at one time but no longer, required one to swear on the Bible. Second, the family is no longer assumed to be a place of stability and religious transmission. Third, public schools no longer endorse organized prayer or include religious education in their curriculum. Fourth, the church is no longer the center of communal activity, and therefore only one of many places where people are being socialized. Fifth, religious periodicals are no longer in wide circulation, especially among children and those outside the church. Sixth, the church school is left to do alone what six institutions did together, and is failing.⁹

⁸ Jack L. Seymour, *Mapping Christian Education: Approaches to Congregational Learning* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997) 79.

⁹ John H. Westerhoff, III, *Will Our Children Have Faith* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing; Toronto: Anglican Book Centre, 2000) 10-12.

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In addition to reduced social support of mainline Christianity, Diana Butler Bass identifies a rise of individual authority and spiritual multiplicity in America. “American culture has switched from a univocal (a relatively unified set of external authorities) to being a multivocal (“of many voices”) religious society in which the individual is the final arbiter of truth.”¹⁰ The disestablishment movement of the 1960s and 1970s aimed to protect the minority voices within American society and religion, and also concluded that religious and ethical choices are inherently personal. Because of support for lesser heard religious communities and traditions, coupled with continual technological advancements broadening the exposure of Americans to other cultures, Protestant Christianity became one of any number of spiritual options from around the world.

In light of these changes, one might conclude that the primary aim for the American mainline church is to enter into competition with the other religious voices present in society. In response to this, Vincent J. Miller describes the “commodification of religion” in America.¹¹ According to Miller, commodification is the direct result of consumerism. Unlike some others, Miller proposes that consumerism is not a set of ideologies, rather “it is primarily a way of relating to beliefs—a *set of habits of interpretation and use*—that renders the ‘content’ of beliefs and values less important.”¹² Individuals in consumer cultures “nourish ourselves on food from nowhere and dress in clothes made by no one,” meaning that persons tend to be uninformed about the source and purpose of cultural commodities. Religious “traditions are fragmented into discrete, free-floating signifiers abstracted from their interconnections with other doctrines, symbols, and practices... This abstraction of elements from their traditions weakens their ability to impact the concrete practice of daily life.”¹³

The decline of social support for mainline Christianity, the social presence of multiple faith traditions and religious “commodification” all contribute to the decline among mainline churches. In the postmodern world, young people are socialized in a variety of ways, with myriad religious

¹⁰ Diana Butler Bass, *The Practicing Congregation: Imagining A New Old church* (The Alban Institute, 2004) 25.

¹¹ Vincent J. Miller, *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith in a Consumer Culture* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group Inc, 2004).

¹² *Ibid.*, 1.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 3.

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options. Adults no longer feel obligated to the church by social or religious systems, and, by the truckload, are exercising their new right to look beyond Christianity for spiritual answers to the complexities of the world. Religious commodification assigns little value to a person's knowledge of the doctrine or practices associated with religious experience, so even long-time church members' knowledge of the Christian faith grows shallow. Observing the changes in American religion, "sociologists now speak of the 'decline of religious monopolies' or of 'religious deregulation' in which religious belief and practice remain strong, but traditional religious authorities and institutions lose their power to influence both society at large and their own believers."¹⁴

These are the challenges to which the American Mainline Christian church must respond. Going forward, these will be the questions mainline churches must address: How will the church become an effective vessel for the good news in Jesus Christ—representing the Christian tradition faithfully to society? Will the church continue to depend on ineffective means of Christian education, or look to a more holistic practice of Christian socialization? Will the church passively accept any persons who choose Christianity from the smorgasbord of American religion, and willfully release those who do not? Finally, how will the church honor and affirm the dignity of other religious traditions while renewing a commitment to the journey of *this* faith community?

Purpose

In responding to the challenges and questions that exist in the 21st century, it is essential that American mainline churches clearly define the purpose of Christian education and understand its need to "pass down the faith." Going forward, the seminal duty of church education will be to construct a practical theology that combines action and reflection, tradition and innovation, faith and religion. John Westerhoff says that liberation theology provides the best avenue by which the church can fulfill this purpose. "Liberation theology makes possible the long-avoided and essential unification of neo-orthodoxy's concern for the historic Christian tradition with liberalism's concern

¹⁴ Ibid., 7.

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for justice and the social order.”¹⁵ In this spirit, then, the church’s primary task in the 21st century is to create a liberating theology that grows out of the historic Christian tradition, nurtures faith development in all the interactions and events within the community and enlivens a vocation of service between the people of the church and the world.

Religion and faith are not synonymous. “Faith is deeply personal, dynamic, ultimate. Religion, however, is faith’s expression.”¹⁶ According to Westerhoff, religion is composed of rituals, documents, institutions and moral codes. Religion is important. However, religion is not the end that Christian education desires. Teaching religion is the means by which the church can develop faith in its people. However, in the postmodern world persons feel little obligation to the Protestant Mainline church and teaching rote religious practices and traditions will not suffice. “There is a great difference between learning about the Bible and living as a disciple of Jesus Christ. We are not saved by our knowledge, our beliefs, or our worship in the church; just as we are not saved by our actions or our religion. We are saved by the anguish and love of God, and to live according to that truth is to have faith.”¹⁷ The American Mainline church has come to a point in history at which it must critically evaluate its *religion* in order to determine the traditions, practices and beliefs that will equip 21st century Christians to respond faithfully to a diverse, complex world.

Historian Wilfred Cantwell Smith says that religion is a “complex interaction” of one’s community, personality, environment and transcendent reality.¹⁸ “A religion is learned when one comes to know the heritage of those who went before and the meanings that inspired them. Yet, religion takes on a unique character because of the contexts and the communities in which we participate, and the personalities that we have.”¹⁹ Religion, then, is both inherently personal and inherently communal. For this reason, American mainline churches must maximize opportunities for Christian socialization in two ways: 1) by building communities that are theologically clear, intentionally diverse and small enough to create meaningful interactions between persons; 2) by

¹⁵ Westerhoff, 29.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 22-23.

¹⁸ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Towards A World Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981).

¹⁹ Seymour, 17.

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acting in a way that transmits innovative forms of the historic tradition, fosters faith development and joins in God's work for peace and justice.

Practices

Community Building

“In a significant community the people share a common memory or tradition, common understandings and ways of life, and common goals and purposes.”²⁰ In the postmodern, consumer world, religious symbols are extracted from their wider system of practices and beliefs, and persons have been isolated from the communities who share those practices and beliefs. In response, American mainline churches must build communities that honor the dignity of persons, but hold persons together with bonds of commonality. In order for this to happen, faith communities must reach what Westerhoff calls a “unity in essentials.” Westerhoff says that diversity regarding political affiliation or philanthropic involvement is acceptable, but “a faith community must agree on what it believes.”²¹ Westerhoff suggests that faith communities compose a statement of faith by which the community will be guided in regard to doctrine, biblical interpretation and pastoral authority. Only when a community has a clear sense of its guiding principles and beliefs can it employ the diversity within the community to its advantage.

In fact, diversity can greatly strengthen a faith community in the 21st century. “When the Christian church is divided by race, social, or economic status, nationality or ethnic origin, true Christian community is again outside our grasp.”²² In the 21st century, the world is at the fingertips of most Americans, so communities that do not reflect the diversity of the world not only appear strange and inauthentic, very often they are seen as the result of racism, sexism, ageism and other prejudices that ought not to be associated with practices of the Christian church. Not only should there be diversity among persons, churches should represent a diversity of gifts. Such diversity calls for members of the church to contribute their gifts and skills in service of the whole church, and

²⁰ Westerhoff, 52.

²¹ Westerhoff, 52.

²² Westerhoff, 54.

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demands that the unique gifts of each person be received as a necessary component for the success of the community.

In order for diverse, theologically united churches to be maximally significant in the faith formation of their members, these communities must also intentionally limit their size in order to create meaningful interactions between the members. Often, there is a need for large judicatory bodies that function in organizational roles, and every local church makes an important contribution to the global body of Christ. “However, for this greater community to have reality and meaning, we need to interact within the intimacy of a closely knit community in which fellowship and care for each other can be experienced, and in which the struggles of faith and life can be shared.”²³

Community Action

The actions of and interactions within a church can be classified into three categories: rites and rituals, interpersonal relations and social service. In all three types of community action persons learn what it means to be an individual Christian and what is required to be a contributing member of the local and global Christian body. In order to maximize the transmission of a religious tradition that fosters meaningful faith development, every action of a faith community must be intentionally and skillfully paired with a time for reflection by a theologically clear, diverse, relationally connected community.

Liturgical events are the central actions of every church. In a faith community, liturgical rituals tell us who we are in relation to God and how we ought to relate to the world around us. Moreover, “cultic life sustains and transmits the community’s understandings and ways.”²⁴ As the world changes, and our lives with it, our liturgical symbols and stories also change shape and meaning. Diana Butler Bass calls this process “fluid retraditioning.” Butler Bass says, “religion is a reconstructed form of tradition within modernity that appeals to a ‘core lineage’ of believing, experiences, and practices based upon the experiences of ‘past witnesses’ which emphasizes both continuity and change.”²⁵ Butler Bass notes a distinction between customs and traditions in her

²³ Westerhoff, 53.

²⁴ Westerhoff, 54.

²⁵ Bass, 42.

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analysis. “Custom refers to what people do, actions in accordance with precedent; tradition refers to that which accompanies the action. Customs may (and often must) change, whereas traditions are forms of belief and practice that are understood to have longer historical grounding linked to some more ancient and universal source of authority and meaning.”²⁶ In short, in order for American mainline churches to effectively “pass down the faith,” we must learn to be liturgical artists— weaving historically proven traditions into new and meaningful forms.

John Westerhoff says, “Persons learn first enactively through their experience... it is therefore especially important to acknowledge that the most significant and fundamental form of learning is experience. Later a person may ‘image’ that experience, and even later conceptualize it. But we begin by experiencing life in a community which seeks the good of others, then we learn the story of the Good Samaritan...”²⁷ The memories adults recall of being shouted at by Sunday school teachers when they were children are more often the barriers to their return to the church than any theological or doctrinal disagreement. Young African American children who visit all-white churches with their schoolmates implicitly learn the churches in which their families are and are not welcome. For this reason, our communities must not only be diverse yet united, members and leaders of American mainline churches must intentionally act out the love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control to which we are called.²⁸

Finally, faith formation requires communities to join God’s work for peace and justice in the world. Westerhoff says, “To know God is to join in [God’s] history-making, and thus we need both to explore the nature and character of our individual and corporate actions in the world as aspects of our faith community’s life and to make these actions a significant part of our educational ministry.”²⁹ Daniel S. Schipani calls for three areas of growth in Christian service to the world: growth in the vision of the living God; growth in the virtue of Christ; growth in the vocation of the Holy Spirit.³⁰ The Bible repeatedly demonstrates God’s care for the poor and the marginalized. Thus, growth in

²⁶ Bass, 39.

²⁷ Westerhoff, 63.

²⁸ Galatians 5:22-23

²⁹ Westerhoff, 64-65.

³⁰ Ibid., 30-31.

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the vision of the living God means learning to identify oppressive systems in the world and to recognize the people being oppressed with a sense of concern that inspires solidarity. As we learn to see the world as God does, a mindset develops based on values such as love, kindness, peace, justice and generosity. These are the virtues that under gird the Christian life and reflect a person's growth in the virtue of Christ. Seeing the world's oppressed with a godly sense of concern and a desire for love, peace, justice and the like, one hears the call to join the Holy Spirit in liberating action with the oppressed. Schipani calls this action the vocation of the Holy Spirit and says, "vocation is the focusing of our lives in the service of God, in the love of neighbor, and in the care of the nonhuman world as well."³¹

The postmodern world, with its consumerist tendencies, global communication, competing religious symbols and staggering examples of human oppression will not support many of the current practices of American Mainline churches. This world demands informed faith communities who integrate belief and action, education and practice. For the Christian faith to be passed down, Christian churches in the United States must become the primary agents by which people are equipped to respond to this complex world. Church leaders must be aware of the fact that persons cannot be fully equipped without hearing the stories of faithful ancestors, watching and participating in the sacred rituals, sharing their lives in a community of committed friends and fellow believers and committing to action that lifts the burden of the oppressed around the world.

³¹ Seymour, 31.