

An Intentional Ministry

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The people of God are a pilgrim people, a people on the move within the stream of history following a call from beyond history. The institutional form and witness of this people on pilgrimage will be shaped at any given point on the church's journey by the present historical context of its life and by the transcendent reference which provides its identity.

The church as the people of God will be in a constant state of tension, needing always to reflect faithfully the intention of the One who calls it into being and needing always to be in touch with the contemporary world in which its mission is executed. The very nature of the church's existence in history means that it is never finished with this task of finding its own shape. Faithfulness to the Lord of the church and insightful understanding of the time keep changes coming.

In going about this task we must first recognize that, just as the landscape of the world through which we are passing is changing, so the nuances of our message and our institutional structures must be open to change, to development. We have the given of the scriptural witness to God's revelation in Israel and in Jesus Christ, and that remains the norm by which our institutional forms and our witness are to be determined and judged. But our understanding of the biblical witness is not static; it is a growing, developing understanding. Movement through history corrects us at some points, expands our insight into the tradition at others, and demands of us an ongoing translation of the biblical proclamation. The movement of history calls forth new forms of institutional structure and new shapes of corporate life.

The first requirement for the church that wishes to be faithful to its transcendent call and to be significantly engaged with the contemporary world is to hammer out an identity arising out of the intersection of the gospel and the present horizon. The search for that identity must be intentional and executed through a

serious wrestling with the biblical witness, with the cumulative store of the tradition, and with an in-depth understanding of contemporary society.

At Christ Community Church we created an identity statement at the onset of the 1980s. We had begun the 1970s with an intentional posture and a clearly defined sense of identity and mission. We had experienced a genuine spiritual renewal and explosive growth. As the 1980s approached, a small group met over a period of months to reflect on where we were and what our context of ministry and the contemporary horizon were calling us to be. The box accompanying this article presents the essence of that statement.

A decade later I can say that that statement indeed shaped us and, in large degree, expressed and formed the identity that our life was to become. A decade has passed, however, and neither we nor the world in which we carry out our ministry is the same. Position papers on various aspects of our corporate life and structure have been written in the meantime, but it is time for a major review as we enter the 1990s.

The task now is to view the identity statement in light of the present state of the world and American society and, more specifically, the concrete setting of our ministry. Are there sociological trends or international developments or community concerns that will call for new emphasis, new structures, an adjustment of basic congregational posture?

If the initial work on a congregational identity statement is carefully done, the basic document will probably not need to be altered, but the manner of its concrete application will change. What once was affirmed may even need to be opposed and vice versa.

Let me illustrate. *Habits of the Heart*, a book by Robert Bellah et al. that appeared in 1985, was hailed as the most significant sociological analysis of American society to appear in decades. The title comes from Alexis de Toqueville, who studied American democracy and who in the 1830s published his *Democracy in America*. De Toqueville much admired what he observed here but warned of some aspects of our culture that disturbed him. He saw our individualism as potentially isolating Americans from one another.

In *Habits of the Heart* the authors fear that this individualism may have grown cancerous. They wonder if the protective social shields remain by which a free society may sustain itself. They point to the flight of people to enclaves in which "self-interested individuals join together to maximize individual good." The lifestyle enclave is a group of sympathetic people who spend their leisure time together in an atmosphere of acceptance, happiness, and love.

In such a society the desire to be successful may tempt the church to forget its transcendent calling and to become simply one more enclave of like-minded individuals giving a spiritual legitimization to an essentially selfish existence. In a

recent national sampling of Roman Catholic opinion, the two things most desired were “personal and accessible priests” and “warmer, more personal parishes.” The authors comment,

The salience of these needs for personal intimacy in American religious life suggests why the local church, like other voluntary communities, indeed like the contemporary family, is so fragile, requires so much energy to keep it going, and has so faint a hold on commitment when such needs are not met.

In *The Public Church*, published in 1981, Martin Marty recognized the legitimate place of the church as community. He writes, “In the Church the possibility of mutual support and bonding, so needed in an impersonal world, lives on.” But he points out as well the weakness of the church’s voluntary character: “People are aware that they can choose a particular church, reject all churches, or switch between them should one or another inconvenience participants or challenge their cherished ways of life.”

A 1978 Gallup poll reveals that 80 percent of Americans agreed that “an individual should arrive at his or her own religious beliefs independent of any churches or synagogues.” Yet, traditionally, it has been precisely the church or synagogue that formed religious beliefs. If the society to which we are called to witness in large measure sees the determination of religious beliefs as a personal responsibility and prerogative, is it any wonder that many mainline churches, which hold historical and corporate beliefs, are in trouble?

How should we react? Will we succumb to the methods of a consumer society? Must the local congregations compete like so many religious supermarkets? Must the pastor become an entrepreneur of religion? Will the church forget its transcendent calling and prostitute itself by pandering to popular taste? Should we forget our identity statement and simply seek to discover what works, what brings success? The answer to these questions is a resounding no, but the temptation is strong and many have succumbed to it.

It is not enough, however, to sit smugly by with declining membership, salving our wounds with the claim that we have been faithful. We live in a time of unprecedented spiritual hunger and openness to transcendence. There is an immense longing for God, for reality, and there is a widespread network of people engaged in a quest for a new world and the transformation of society. The label *New Age* has been given this amorphous movement, and within its ranks there is to be found a broad spectrum of beliefs and practices, some serious, some bizarre. Whatever variety of forms and beliefs may be manifested, one characteristic is shared: a large-scale rejection of the traditional, institutional forms of religion.

Certainly it is naive to think we can simply do away with forms and structures. But here, too, we must not grow defensive and, with some panic, frantically shore

up the traditional forms we have inherited and now oversee. Why is so much of contemporary society spiritually hungry but largely without interest in the institutional church? To what extent are the criticisms valid? Is there some dismantling that needs to occur, some deaths in order that the new may spring forth? It is easier to raise the questions than to give the answers, but the questions must be heard.

Let me point to one more mark of contemporary American society that demands our consideration as we determine our posture for the 1990s. In 1971 Dean Kelly wrote *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing*. I remember taking his book into the pulpit and declaring that if Kelly was right, Christ Community was in trouble because all the things that characterized the conservative church in his description were the things we had set ourselves against. He was right. Nearly two decades later, the socially conservative attitudes he foresaw have increased. There is a conservative tide which has about it a mean streak, an adversarial air that militates against the openness, freedom, and civility which the gospel of grace creates.

Again here, if it is simply success in externals that we seek, we had better tailor our message to this conservative tide, exploiting people's fears and dishing out simplistic answers to complex problems. But here is an instance in which the church must simply set itself against popular demand no matter what the cost. For God's sake and for the sake of society's health, the church needs to find a voice that is "both civil and committed," to borrow a phrase from Martin Marty.

The above discussion is illustrative of the kind of hard thinking, reflection, and wrestling that must characterize the church whether on the denominational, regional, or local level. And it must be done not simply because the turn of the calendar has brought us into the 1990s, but as an ongoing process. Only thus will we be intentional in our ministry, self-consciously faithful to the God who calls us into being and fully cognizant of the changing panorama of the society to which we bear witness and in which we live out concretely the life of the kingdom.

Christ Community Identity Statement:

Christ Community is theologically self-conscious; it is catholic, evangelical, and Reformed. It is firmly rooted in the historic Christian tradition: catholic in that it seeks to express the one, holy, and apostolic faith symbolized in the Apostles' Creed; evangelical in that it believes that God's supreme revelation and the good news of God's grace appeared in Jesus Christ—"Our message is that God was making friends of all persons through Christ"; Reformed in that its articulation of the faith finds its authority in the Scriptures and is never finished, but rather needs constant reformation and new translation, that it may be understood afresh in every age.

Believing in God's eternal purposes of love for the whole created order, ours is a theology of grace. Grace is the heart of our theology, and this church is a community of persons who have received God's grace in Christ and who extend that grace to one another in Jesus' name.

Believing in the sovereignty of God in the totality of the created order and in the lordship of Christ in the full range of human existence, we are seeking to bring the whole of life under the aegis of God's gracious rule—fashioning here a center for creative Christian living, enabling a fully human existence. Consequently, we are committed to creating and maintaining here

—A place where we live out the conviction that God's cause is the human cause, where the quality of our lives is ever more enhanced and the fullest realization of our human potential is enabled.

—A place where all persons can find a point of entry, experience unconditional grace and total acceptance whatever their history, wherever they find themselves on the spectrum of Christian experience; where those who are broken may find refuge and healing and those who are moving toward wholeness may experience Christ in their strength.

—A place where the tone quality of grace creates a non-threatening atmosphere where all persons will be encouraged to live on the growing edge, stretching, probing, deepening knowledge and faith.

—A place where we experience community, have a sense of belonging, find a home together; where the blending of traditions results in a rich and full expression of the Christian tradition and where the grace of God reconciles us into one body in which every barrier that separates and isolates persons is transcended.

—A place where persons are motivated, discovered, affirmed, and equipped; their gifts identified and strengthened for mission, making tangible the grace of God locally and throughout the world.

—A place where the majesty of God and the mystery of life is honored; where many answers remain elusive, but where life's great questions are heard and acknowledged; where persons learn to live the questions and to enjoy the journey, resting in the all-embracing grace of God.

—A place for the intersection of the Word of God and the world, of the Christian tradition and contemporary culture.

—A place where theological reflection happens in the setting of the Christian community where the ministry of grace is taking place.

—A place where the Christian tradition is translated into the idiom of contemporary culture, giving it voice to speak meaningfully in the pluralistic society of our day.

—A place where controversial issues—ethical, social, and political—find a forum for discussion enabling persons to understand the issues and to live out a faithful response as people of God.

We must determine to be true to that which we believe God is calling us to be, whether that means harmony with the religio-cultural flow or not. We will adjust our program and mission with the dynamic movement of history, not in order necessarily to be successful in institutional terms, but in order to be faithful to what God is calling us to be and to be effective in mediating the grace of God to the world. Thus having a sense of who we are and a commitment to share the gospel in all of its dimensions, we will be open to the world and flexible in our life and mode of ministry in order to be instruments in God's hand for the humanization of society to God's glory.

We commit ourselves to be alive and alert to what the movements and trends of society and church are. It will be incumbent upon us as well to evaluate ourselves annually as to the effectiveness of our ministry in terms of what we see happening in the world at large. A strong sense of identity and confidence in the grace that has set us free to be God's servants will enable us to be open to our world and to enter vitally into dialogue with the world, being ready through engagement of world religions, political and economic ideologies, scientific and technological development, and the evolution of social customs and mores, to go back to the Scriptures, seeking new understanding in the light of new knowledge. In so doing, we will seek to translate the faith for our day, being faithful to God's supreme witness, Jesus Christ.