

“Religious Church vs. Spiritual Ministry”

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In 2004, the theologian and writer Diana Butler Bass launched a three-year research study on spiritually vital congregations in mainline Protestant denominations, including the United Church of Christ. Bass spent hundreds of hours attending worship services, programs, and events and talking with church members and clergy at fifty different churches across the country—not evangelical mega churches, but smaller progressive neighborhood churches like Centre Street.

What she found was that the congregations that had successfully emerged from years of slow decline all exhibited a renewed sense of (1) mission and (2) identity. They “preached the gospel, offered hospitality, and paid close attention to worship and the spiritual lives of their congregants.” Their renewed vitality was a direct result of “an intentional and transformative engagement with Christian tradition as embodied in faith practices.”¹

According to the New Testament, spiritual gifts are unique skills or abilities that the Holy Spirit gives to every follower of Jesus—no exceptions—to be used in the work that God gives us here on earth. I’m reminded of Rev. Nadia Bolz Weber’s recent sermon in which she argued that when God gives us a job to do—a ministry, a mission—the Holy Spirit always provides us with the tools that we need to get that job done. Those tools are our spiritual gifts.

Our core scripture this morning is Romans 12:3–8, in which Paul writes about spiritual gifts. I’m going to read these verses to you from the Common English Bible, but also portions from Gene Peterson’s translation, *The Message*.

Starting with verse 3, we read that “God has measured out a portion of faith to each one of you.” What does that mean, that God measures out our faith? Here’s the same verse from *The Message*: “It’s important that you not misinterpret yourselves as people who are bringing this goodness to God. No, God brings it all to you. The only accurate way to understand ourselves is by what God is and by what God does for us, not by what we are and what we do for God.” In other words, our faith comes from God—we cannot manufacture faith on our own.

Verses 4 and 5 tell us that “We have many parts in one body, but the parts don’t all have the same function. In the same way, though there are many of us, we are one body in Christ, and individually we belong to each other.” Or as *The Message* puts it, “Each part of our body gets its

¹ Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity for the Rest of Us: How the Neighborhood Church is Transforming the Faith*, Harper One (2006), p. 7

meaning from the body as a whole, not the other way around . . . Similarly, each of us finds our meaning and function as a part of Christ’s body.”

In verse 6, Paul begins explaining our unique spiritual gifts, saying, “We have different gifts that are consistent with God’s grace that has been given to us.” Or as Peterson translates this passage, “Let’s be what we were each made to be, without comparing ourselves with each other or trying to be something we aren’t.”

Then Paul lists for us four spiritual gifts:

1. If your gift is prophecy, just preach God’s message and nothing else.
2. If your gift is service, devote yourself to helping other people.
3. If your gift is teaching, stick to your teaching.
4. And if your gift is encouragement, devote yourself to giving encouraging guidance to others, but without getting bossy.

Paul makes it clear that these gifts are equal in value. Preaching is no more important, valuable, or worthy than encouraging.

First Corinthians 12:4–5 says basically the same thing: “There are different spiritual gifts but the same Spirit; and there are different ministries and the same Lord.” Then Paul goes on to list the spiritual gifts of wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miracles, prophecy, and so on. In verse 27, he says, “You are the body of Christ and parts of each other.”

We use our spiritual gifts to minister to one another, the church, and other people. Or as Ephesians 4:12 says, “to equip God’s people for the work of serving and building up the body of Christ.” So what does Paul mean when he refers to different ministries? What is a ministry, and is a ministry and a church the same thing?

A church can be defined as a gathering of people with shared theology, ideology, and tradition, though we also use the word *church* to refer to the physical building in which those people do most of their gathering. A *ministry*, in contrast, is a particular type of service that depends on the shared spiritual gifts of the people providing the ministry. A ministry could be something like a food pantry, a music program, or outreach to a particular segment of the local population such as transgender youth or elderly people.

I like the way that a Unitarian Universalist Church in Oregon² defines the word *ministry*, as “our participation in the ongoing creative and restoring activity in the world. The word *ministry* can denote the calling of all people whether as individuals, specific faith communities, or the universal congregation of spiritual seekers.”

² Unitarian Universalist Community Church of Washington County: Hillsboro, Oregon.
<https://uuccwc.org/about-shared-ministry/>

Churches can function without defined ministries, and ministries can function outside of a church. However, churches—particularly small churches—that don’t have clearly defined and organized ministries tend to struggle, and this has become increasingly true in recent years.

So let’s take the next step and look at the connection between the unique spiritual gifts that each of us has, our church, and a shared ministry. On their website, that same church in Oregon says that their “shared ministry lives out the affirmation that all people are called to ministry. As members of a faith community, we are invited to serve together in a spirit of mutuality as partners. Working cooperatively, we strive to discover, develop, use, and support the gifts of each person . . . The complementary nature of our gifts is essential for ministering. We minister as partners.”

The members of that church are intentionally sharing in a ministry to one another and their greater community, recognizing that they are *all* called to identify, develop, and use their own spiritual gifts.

Remember those fifty churches that Diana Butler Bass visited, while researching church vitality? The primary difference between (1) the churches that had experienced a renewed sense of vitality and (2) those that remained in a slow, persistent pattern of decline had to do with religion vs. spirituality. The churches in the second group were dedicated to political practices of charity, justice, and social concern—but from a basically secular position. Aside from worship services, their activities didn’t differ significantly from those of any number of secular institutions—social service agencies, educational institutions, community service groups, and so on. They were engaged in worthy activities, but they paid little or no attention to people’s spiritual lives. As Bass puts it, “They simply assumed that people were Christians, and that they knew how to be, think, and pray like Christians.”

In contrast, the leadership of the churches with renewed vitality realized that “the primary job of church is to be a spiritual community that forms people in faith.”³ The leadership at those churches maintained a progressive vision and commitment to justice, but they grounded that work in a new sense of spirituality focused on traditional Christian practices of Bible study, prayer, and worship. Again, their vitality resulted from linking their sense of identity to a new emphasis on spiritual practice and Christian tradition.

I’ve spent the past fourteen months reading everything I could get my hands on—books, articles, research studies, and blog posts—about what is happening with Christianity and Christian churches in the 21st century. I’ve listened to podcasts, taken online courses, and attended online seminars and conferences. I’ve learned, based on research data from various sources, that despite

³ Bass, p. 42.

what most Americans now say—that they consider themselves spiritual but not religious—they’re actually looking for both, and they’re not finding spirituality to be a primary focus at many mainline churches.

In the past ten years, the United Church of Christ has shrunk by 551 churches—an average of one church per week. In a recent interview, UCC President John Dorhauer commented that UCC churches tend to focus on their heads rather than on their hearts. He went on to explain that we do a great job of working on justice issues, addressing issues of poverty and hunger, advocating on behalf of immigrants, and so on. But too often, our churches are filled with congregants who don’t have regular spiritual practices, don’t come together specifically for prayer, and place more value on their level of education than on their unique spiritual gifts. It’s like we’ve built a beautiful church building on sand, rather than the bedrock of individual and group spiritual practices and disciplines.

And yet Dorhauer agrees with Diana Butler Bass — Christianity is not dying. More and more churches are being revitalized by a renewed focus on learning what it really means to be a follower of Jesus, incorporating into their lives traditional spiritual practices, and building their ministries on *that* firm foundation. These churches are meeting the needs of people who are looking for a blend of religion and spirituality—people searching for “a God-centered, prayer-centered church as opposed to a program- and belief-centered church.”

I recently heard an interview with Karen Georgia Thompson, the new President and General Minister of the UCC. In that interview, she quoted Rev. Brian McLaren, who once wrote that when a church body can’t bring themselves to let go of the traditional model of church, rather than actively seeking to discern the Holy Spirit’s call for their future, they’re “managing their decline.”

In the May issue of *The Christian Century*, Julian DeShazier⁴—in a similar vein—reminds his readers of the advice that Wayne Gretzky’s father once gave him, to “skate to where the puck is going, not to where it has been.” DeShazier goes on to write, “Churches are notoriously late to the party. . . We spend way too much time looking backward.” Like McLaren, DeShazier believes that churches that struggle to hold on to the 20th-century church model, rather than responding to the realities of Christianity in the 21st century, are managing their own decline. “We need congregations,” he writes, “that address realities with the boldness and faithfulness of the One whom we claim inspires us.”

In her message last week, Bonnie Beiswenger challenged us to do exactly the same thing. As she said, “We *know* that it is *not* enough to be passive disciples—not enough to just attend a weekly service, donate money to the church, say our prayers, and call it done. That’s safe . . . [but] active

⁴ Julian DeShazier, “The Well-Credentialed Pastor,” *The Christian Century* (May 2023): 34.

apostleship requires more of us.” Bonnie told us not to be afraid of change, but instead to “believe with all our hearts that the Holy Spirit is leading us on a new adventure into the future.” As Bonnie wrote, “The spark of the Holy Spirit lives in each and every one of us, and that spark will surely guide us.”

As Diana Butler Bass wrote, “The primary job of church is to be a spiritual community that forms people in faith.” Everything else that we do should build on that foundation, because that’s what the world needs us to be—a spiritual community that forms people in faith. Spiritual gifts, spiritual paths and journeys, spiritual disciplines and practices—and each of us playing our own unique role in this body of Christ, working together to build a ministry that takes full advantage of what each of us has to contribute. That’s a shared ministry—and that’s a church that’s looking forward and embracing the challenges and opportunities of Christianity in the 21st century.

That’s God’s church.

Amen.