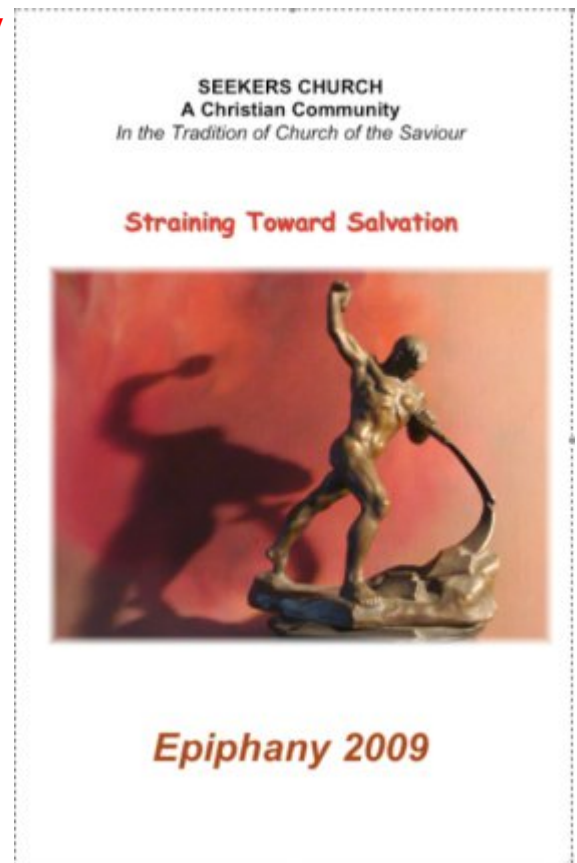


“Called to Celebration Circle”

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January 25, 2009, the Third Sunday
after the Epiphany



The members of Celebration Circle – Peter Bankson, Ken Burton, Sandra Miller, and Deborah Sokolove – spoke about the ways that their personal calls intersect with the call of the mission group, and invited others to join them.

Deborah was the first to speak, as follows:

Because we believe that the Word of God comes to everyone from

time to time, and that some people are called to share what they have heard, we delight in receiving the different ways that many of us have heard that Word each Sunday. This week, the members of Celebration Circle – the mission group that organizes worship and keeps the preaching calendar – would like to tell you a little bit about how each of us has heard a call from God to join this group, whose collective call states

We want to allow God to speak through our work, which includes preparing liturgies for Sunday worship, inviting Seekers and others to preach during worship, coordinating and developing weekly and special services, educating the community for inclusive worship, and preparing the chapel, altar and worship materials.

Being called to allow God to speak through our work is both humbling and exhilarating. I've lost track of how long I've been part of Celebration Circle – about fourteen years, I think – but the work never grows stale. Of course, there are many Wednesday afternoons when I am exhausted from all the other things that fill my life, and I think that I'll never get through another meeting. I drag myself across town, often through heavy traffic, wishing I could just go home.

And then, there I am, walking through the parking lot door, and sitting down with Peter, Sandra, and Ken, ready to worship God, to share our lives, and to plan for another Sunday, another season, another Ash Wednesday or Maundy Thursday or Pentecost or Christmas Eve. We laugh, we argue, we study scripture, we read poetry, we nit-pick one another's writing, we ask ourselves if we believe what we are putting in the mouths of the congregation. And by the time two hours have gone by, somehow, miraculously, I am less tired than I was when I arrived, energized by our authentic engagement with theology, grammar, creativity, logistics, one another, and the Holy Spirit.

Actually, I don't think that we could do our work without the active presence of the Holy Spirit. When I first came to Celebration Circle, I was a pretty new Christian. I didn't know very much about how liturgy works, how to organize a worship service, how to think about hymns, how to arrange the chairs, or any of the other details that we try to think about. All that, I learned from those who were already in the group: Sonya Dyer, Julie Arms, Sheri Bergan, Kate Amoss, and Peter. Over time, Sonya, Julie, Sheri, and Kate heard other calls, and other people joined us, some for a few weeks, others for years. But God's call on the group remains, animating and guiding our work, regardless of whether we are few or many.

Of course, most of you know that I now have a PhD in liturgy, but that came after I had been in Celebration Circle for a long time. Indeed, I believe that I could never have done that work without the group's support, encouragement, and guidance. And, first, there was the call from God. Like Jonah in today's reading from Hebrew Scripture, and the fishermen in today's Gospel message, I had no idea what God had in store for me when I first heard that call. I certainly didn't feel very well equipped, very knowledgeable, or even that I had any talent for leading worship, for writing prayers, or for what I have now learned to call "theological thinking." What I did know is that I love worship, that I feel carried by the community when we pray and sing together, that I hear the voice of God in the voices of the congregation, and that somehow it was my task to help make all that happen for others.

So, here I am, fourteen years later, still hearing that call, still knowing that it is my task to allow God to speak through the work that I do together with others who are called "to energize and structure the worship life of the Seekers Church."

Peter spoke next:

The Scripture lessons for this week all seem to me to point toward change, an entirely appropriate focus for this week in this land. We'd like to know ourselves as a people of change, and one place where we can be open to change and help each other recognize change as it happens is when we gather here in worship.

We are, at the core, a worshiping community. The call of Seekers Church says:

Our call is to be a "Seekers community" which comes together in weekly worship rooted in the Biblical faith, with shared leadership; and disperses with a common commitment to understand and implement Christian servanthood in the structures in which we live our lives.

We gather for worship and scatter to serve.

And when I say scatter, I mean all over! I hear so many wonderful stories of different ones of us hearing and heeding God's call. We share those stories in mission group meetings and coffee hour and other gatherings like the men's mini-retreat here yesterday. I long for some way that more of us could know more of these stories without turning our sharing into something that looks or feels like bragging. But that's another story.

When we talk about our life together we often mention three dimensions of our faith journey, the inner journey of prayer, reflection and meditation; the community journey of celebration and supplication, of compassion and support; and the outer journey of Christian servanthood, of journeying with Jesus to bring some measure of Good News into the world around us. The intersection of these often happens in worship.

We scatter to serve but gather to worship. And it is Celebration Circle that holds the task of energizing and structuring this time that we spend together in worship. I see this time as 'liminal' time: a time when we gather together

from our scattered places of living and serving; a time when we experience our life together through singing and praying and sharing our reflections and our pain and our hope; a time when we encourage each other to return to the place where God is calling us to understand and implement Christian servanthood.

God's call on me is to support and nurture the life of Seekers Church, and help us grow into God's emerging vision for us as one small part of the Body of Christ. Worshiping together is one of the principal places where our lives connect, so Celebration Circle is an important place to live into that call. In particular, the part of the call of Celebration Circle that intersects most vividly with God's call on me as an individual states "We believe worship is a way to connect our individual and corporate lives, ministries and gifts to God's power. We believe the community gathers to worship and celebrate and to be empowered for the daily living of the gospel message." Being part of Celebration Circle also gives me places where I can let the 'imagineer" inside me out of the basement, helping us with our bulletin covers, and altar table installations and liturgies. It's a place of creativity and accountability for me.

Often during worship there is a particular moment when I experience that still point when we know ourselves as a Body. We've come together during our gathering time downstairs, then shared our joys and concerns here in the sanctuary, praying and singing and hearing Scripture, and sharing our responses and reflections. Then, toward the end of our worship, the liturgist invites us to share announcements, and we turn again and begin to look toward all those places where God is calling us, those ordinary structures of our lives – work; family and primary relationships; and citizenship; as well as special structures for service and witness. At that moment I see us entering that liminal space, turning the corner, heading for the door, reassuring each other that we'll be in touch, and

returning to the challenge to grow into God's emerging vision for us as one small part of the Body of Christ.

Celebration Circle is a place where I can help support and nurture our life together in those three dimensions I mentioned earlier: the inner dimension of prayer, meditation and reflection; the community journey of worshiping God and celebrating our life together; and the outer journey of our response to God's call in all the surprisingly varied structures of our lives. One place where we can help each other recognize change as it happens is when we gather here in worship... even when it happens one person at a time.

It's felt like the right place for me since 1982.

Sandra was the next to speak:

On any given day I resonate with different parts of the call of Celebration Circle. I started out writing several days ago but yesterday as I sat down to edit what I wrote I started out by reading our call and lo and behold I felt something else move inside me. So today I want to tell you about how I am moved by this line: "We believe worship is a way to connect our individual and corporate lives, ministries and gifts to God's power."

God's power is beyond my understanding and yet I experience it every day through the love I give and receive in this small expression of the Body of Christ, and more intimately in Celebration Circle. I came needing to belong, needing to contribute and I was welcome here in Christ's name just as I was – you all were Christ and I was Simon and Andrew, James and John. God's power worked through you and now I too am Christ calling out to Simon and Andrew, James and John.

I call through my love of words, the wildness of my creative

vision and my love of collaborative work as I provide a piece of the foundation of our worship life. I call to all who walk through our doors hoping that what I have offered allows the connections to each other, to the Seekers community, to the ministries where we live out our lives and above all, to God's love and power to be forged. I call in the prayers I write and I call as I hold everyone present and away in prayer when I humbly act as God's instrument as liturgist.

I am so grateful to have been called back to God, called to Christ, called to Seekers and called to Celebration Circle .

And Ken closed with:

I find some personal resonance with most of the components of the call of Celebration Circle but the one that I would like to highlight is the central one: Celebration Circle is called "to energize and structure the worship life of Seekers Church."

During my teen years I would sometimes design and lead a worship service that concluded a Sunday evening family program at my church. As a young adult, I gravitated towards the Episcopal Church in part because of its strong liturgical grounding. In later years, I went in another direction, becoming a Quaker, worshipping in silence, but even there, I sometimes sat at the head of meeting, signaling the end of the silence with a handshake and facilitating the announcements that followed. All of this history led me to Celebration Circle. This particular mission group is the place where my gifts most closely overlap with the call of the group.

As many of you know, I was, for a number of years, a member of Learners and Teachers, our mission group that is responsible for the School of Christian Living. In that group I served as

moderator and as host for the dinner that precedes the Tuesday evening classes, a role in which I developed a reputation as something of a ham. But gradually, over a period of many months, I came to feel disconnected from L&T and from its call. I soon realized that the message here was about Ken, not about L&T, but it took a lot longer to see what Ken needed to do about it.

As you probably know, Celebration Circle usually tries to provide a liturgist of the opposite gender from the preacher. This arises from our commitments to shared leadership and to gender balance, and from our conviction that, in the Holy One, there is truly neither male nor female. If a member of Celebration Circle of the opposite gender from the preacher is not available to serve as liturgist on a particular Sunday, the mission groups may ask a Seeker who is not in the group to take this role. These were the circumstances that led to my being ask to serve as liturgist one Sunday in September, 2005, and that experience led to my exploring with Celebration Circle a few months later.

I should hasten to add that my personal route to Celebration Circle is only one such path. In the past there have been members of the group who have served as liturgist only occasionally. Seekers with strong visual imaginations, a gift not given to me, who can help us translate scripture and liturgical themes into bulletin covers and altar installations are much coveted by the mission group, as are writers who can help with the crafting of the liturgies that we develop afresh for each liturgical season. Finally, and perhaps most important, our work as a mission group is grounded in prayer. While we each exercise our own gifts, we do so with the clear understanding that alone we are not adequate, as individuals or as group, to the task to which we are called. We are each actively engaged in prayer for one another and for the work of the mission of the group. Joining us in that life of prayer is one of the greatest gifts that a new member could bring to

Celebration Circle.

Celebration Circle meets every Wednesday evening for two hours in the Skylight Room. There is more information about the mission group, it's call and its work, in the bulletin insert. If you would like to talk about our work, or if you are interested in exploring whether there might be some connection between God's call on your life and the call of Celebration Circle, please be in touch with me or with Sandra or Deborah or Peter.

Not all of us are called, like Jonah, to prophesy in Nineveh or, like Simon and Andrew and James and John, to give up our means of making a living in order to respond to call. But each of us is called to offer our unique gifts in the world and in the church. Celebration Circle may, for you, be a means of answering that call. Please consider joining us.

Amen.