

The Power of Commitment

In 2003, Paulist Press published a collection of hands-on, effective strategies to reach and serve the American people. The collection, edited by Paul Wilkes and Marty Minchin, titled "Best Practices from America's Best Churches," looks at:

- * INREACH: Defining Faith Commitments

- * EVANGELIZING: Effectively Connecting with Your Community

- * LAY LEADERSHIP: The Power of the Faithful

- * CHURCH DYNAMICS: Making Ministry Work

- * ON THE EDGE: Radical Church Models

The final Chapter is "The Power of Commitment: It Can Happen Anywhere," by Marjory Zoet Bankson. It describes the life of Seekers Church, at the crossroads of inclusion and commitment at a time when the community was standing on the threshold of moving into our own newly-renovated space.

THE POWER OF COMMITMENT

It Can Happen Anywhere

Marjory Zoet Bankson

The question is often asked, "How can a tiny church accomplish so much?" And our answer is that we can do this "stuff" because we are a tiny church with a culture of call and commitment.

The Seekers Church in Washington, DC, has about seventy-five adults, fifteen children, and no single pastor, though we do have a part-time paid leadership team. We are an offspring of Church of the Saviour, which was founded by Gordon and Mary Cosby right after World War II on the basis of small, highly committed mission groups. We are not interested in a bigger church or a lot of programs. Focus and intentional service are what we want to foster.

We assume that Jesus has a call for every person, not just for clergy, not just for seminarians, but also for everyone. We believe that when people begin to look at their own lives and ask where God is calling them to ministry, enormous change can happen, both for themselves and their communities. Every person who comes to the church is soon invited to think about

what his or her call is and how Seekers can support that.

ROOTS

The Seekers Church was started about twenty-five years ago, just weeks before my husband and I arrived in Washington, DC. We had been reading books about Church of the Saviour by Elizabeth O'Connor with titles such as Call to Commitment (HarperCollins), Journey Inward, Journey Outward (HarperCollins), and Eighth Day of Creation (W Publishing Group), and we looked forward to being in a church that took discipleship seriously. Instead we found a chaotic mix of newly forming communities, each with a distinct mission and a small core of committed members.

About a year before we arrived, Gordon Cosby had come to the conclusion that Church of the Saviour had gotten too big (at 120 members), and that he was not called to administer so many different ministries. A task force was formed to listen for God's leading, and after much prayer and study of biblical precedents they "heard" a call to "cross the Jordan" and claim separate "lands." The New Lands proposal birthed six little churches in the spring and summer of 1976. Later, four more developed and one died, but when we arrived everyone was anxious about which key people would join each small church. Peter and I were afraid we had arrived at a funeral.

Instead, however, we discovered it was a time of real creativity and new life. We stepped into the opening scene of another cycle in the life of Church of the Saviour, which had always valued the fluidity and changing nature of God's call

over preservation of institutional structures. Spreading the leadership among six little churches meant there was more space for emerging gifts in all of them. For those who still wanted Gordon's vision and inspiration, there was a weekly ecumenical worship service in the headquarters building, but belonging, decision-making, and financial responsibility happened in each little church.

SEEKERS

Today, the word "Seeker" is being used as a term for people who are basically unchurched and looking for a home or those who might wander in without any sense of commitment, but that is not our charism. When Seekers Church was formed in 1976, we found inspiration in a book by Robert Greenleaf titled *Servant Leadership* (Paulist Press). Greenleaf says: "Prophets occur in every generation. It is the quality of listening that calls forth prophets. It is Seekers then who make prophets in our midst." We choose to name ourselves Seekers Church because we wanted to be those deep listeners to one another. We wanted to be a place where prophetic alternatives could be nurtured.

Robert Greenleaf was an executive with AT&T, and he brought a fresh perspective to understanding dispersed leadership. He described leaders who did not act like autocrats or celebrities, but who took the servant role of Jesus as a guide that would evoke caring among employees and customers too. Greenleaf's work spoke deeply to Fred Taylor and Sonya Dyer, who were engaged in a mission of Church of the Saviour called FLOC (For Love of Children). Fred and Sonya were ready to offer their leadership to start Seekers, and they wrote the initial call of Seekers to support ministry by every member.

Each of the sister communities birthed by Church of the Saviour in 1976 was formed around a call that gave it a particular identity. Healthcare, housing, intercultural education, job placement, and refugee assistance were some of the defining missions. Seekers Church claimed God's call on our lives in the ordinary structures of our lives (home, work, primary relationships, and citizenship) as the core value to be nurtured and invigorated by creative worship. Because of our roots in FLOC, many Seekers are involved in some form of child advocacy in Washington, DC, or abroad, but the center of our life together is dynamic worship with seasonal liturgies rather than a single mission.

Visitors find us on the web (www.seekerschurch.org) or because they have read about Church of the Saviour and are looking for a church in that tradition that specifically values children. In worship, they see handmade bulletin covers, provocative liturgy, and thematic altars. Sometimes a child offers the "word for children." Each week a different person – usually from the congregation – preaches. Sermons can be personal testimony, theological reflection, or community guidance and are available on the web so people who are away can engage in the conversations initiated by these sermons. We do follow the common lectionary, and continuity is maintained by a liturgist from the Celebration Circle mission group, but each week is something of an adventure for all of us.

ONGOING FORMATION

After attending worship or perhaps a family overnight, we encourage people to attend our School of Christian Living on

Tuesday nights. Because preaching comes from many different perspectives and thus does not provide the consistent educational focus of a single preacher, the central teaching function at Seekers is held by the Learners & Teachers mission group. I belong to L&T because I am drawn by my own call to outreach teaching and because I believe that ongoing education is critical for developing a community of conscious people who want to embody God's call in the world.

Part of the work of L&T is to discern what the growing edge of our congregation really is. What is the Holy Spirit doing in the congregation? How do we need to undergird ministry? Deepen our spiritual life? Encourage disciplines? What classes are needed now? Our authority in the wider community comes from doing that work consistently and self-critically over time.

Classes in the school focus on both content and accountability. Teachers are encouraged to make the classes relational to encourage personal application of the concepts and ideas encountered. Assignments introduce the practice of written reflection, something we expect and encourage as an ongoing practice. L&T does not just take anyone who volunteers to teach, although we do take any offer as an indication that call may be stirring in that person. The school is a place for people to exercise emerging gifts or interests and perhaps teach with a mentor as a way of developing new leadership. Since our mission is both to initiate classes and to oversee them, we also provide a shepherd in each class to pray for each member and follow up with those who miss class. That way accountability and commitment are encouraged from the beginning.

We do emphasize the theme of call in many classes, so

newcomers become acquainted with our culture of call, gifts, ministry, and reflection – the journey inward and the journey outward. In each term, we offer a biblical class and one or two other classes – spiritual growth, Christian doctrine, incubating mission, or some creative expression like dance, quilting, or clowning. The school meets on Tuesday evenings, and we provide a simple meal so that people can come right from work, eat together, have a short meditation to help with transition from the workday, and then go to the ninety-minute classes. We expect participants to do assignments and come regularly for the twelve-week term.

That's the first resistance we run into. Attending regularly for twelve weeks seems too long and difficult with all the other obligations that people have. We ask people to just try it, as this is a taste of intentional community. Purposely putting ourselves in a situation that will surely take us, student and teacher alike, beyond our comfort zone is valued as a way of opening ourselves to God's call to challenge unconscious or exploitive cultural patterns. We have learned that people can usually commit to six weeks at a time, so recently we've tried offering two six-week installments instead of one twelve-week class. There has been some shifting in and out at the six-week point and the sense of community is definitely disrupted, but we've discovered that we may have more flexibility than we thought.

In the summer, we usually have one class, shorter terms (three to four weeks), and a brown-bag supper to accommodate travel and vacations. No matter what the season though, we typically have twenty to twenty-five people at the school. That's 30 percent of the congregation!

MISSION GROUPS

The primary structure for spiritual formation at Seekers is commitment to a mission group. We ask people to attend at least two twelve-week sessions in the School of Christian Living before joining a mission group so they have a chance to explore their own call and feel the power of community with a common purpose. After two classes in the school, people can move into a mission group.

A mission group typically has six or eight people who share a common intention for the work described in its call. We've found that if people get into a small group with no specific call, then differences or disagreements can cause the group to founder. Sharing a larger purpose can create space and a reason to work out those differences, although it takes both skill and spiritual maturity to handle conflict in a way that produces growth rather than resentment. It's a bit like being married to the mission!

For the past eighteen years, I have been in Learners & Teachers because that's my call and ministry. I had a teaching background as a high school history teacher, but when I started to teach classes at the School of Christian Living I felt free to combine my interest in biblical studies with creative methods I'd developed in the classroom. Later I decided that I wanted more theological education because of the questions that my mission group kept raising about my call, so I eventually went to seminary. In 1985, I was hired as the first female president of Faith@Work, a relational and ecumenical national ministry. After all these years of speaking to conferences, editing a magazine, and leading

retreats for F@W, I still teach classes regularly at Seekers and coach younger teachers in how to combine theological depth and relational methods. Those weekly meetings of the mission group sustain me in lean times and challenge me in fat years.

In the mission group, we see long-term spiritual formation taking place through the combination of inward and outward practices. In Learners & Teachers, I have a spiritual director, and every week I give her a written report that describes where God is at work in my inward life (prayer, study, dreams, nagging images); my outward journey (work, volunteer efforts, money); and in the community (relationships, initiative, disagreements). She looks for themes over time, asks questions, and sometimes makes suggestions. Her role is to help me see the presence of God and God's call in my daily life. I have stayed in the same mission group even though everyone else has shifted in or out because my call to "outreach teaching" has continued to expand and the group gives me a place to pastor – and receive that from others. I am often gone on the weekends, but I am always at my mission group meeting on Tuesday night because that is my place of accountability, grounding, and growth in the community.

New mission groups are formed when two or three members of Seekers prayerfully discern a particular service they want to offer. A written call is then "sounded" in the congregation and the group develops a common practice (or regular spiritual discipline), which they agree to share. The group meets regularly to pray, share their emerging vision, and discern the gifts they have in the group to carry out this particular mission. At a minimum, each group needs a "pastor-prophet" to hold the call up regularly and a spiritual guide to encourage spiritual development by responding to weekly written reports

and asking questions that may clarify the Spirit's internal work. As specific actions become clear, the group begins to carry out its mission as a "body of Christ." The work of each mission group is largely independent of outside supervision and therefore carries considerable responsibility for its internal health and external activities, including financial obligations. Because of the commitment involved, people usually belong to only one group.

WORK OF MINISTRY

Living as a congregation of mission groups has changed the way that we worship and run our church. We do not have a paid pastor, though we do have a part-time paid staff whose primary job is discernment and coordination, and we keep all members up-to-date through our detailed web site.

Decisions involving the whole church are made by a core group of twenty-four Stewards. In order to encourage accountability to the larger body of the church, each mission group must have at least two Stewards – experienced members who have made a public commitment to care for the whole congregation rather than just one of the mission groups. That circle of Stewards is open to anyone who is willing to make the extra commitment of time, energy, money, and accountability to care for the whole.

The Stewards meet monthly and speak from where they are located in a mission group, so they serve as a representative body in that sense. The agenda for Stewards' meeting is prepared by the three-member staff team (who are also

Stewards). The staff team has no particularly visible role, but they watch for issues or needs in the community that are not currently being handled by mission groups, and we have acknowledged the importance of their leadership and discernment function with a stipend. Currently there are no other paid functions.

My husband, Peter, is on the staff team with two women from the congregation. He lives out the external call of Seekers Church through his work at Communities-in-Schools (CIS), a faith-based organization that has been working to keep marginal children in school for more than thirty years. He is in the national office, making links between local programs and government funding. CIS is a place where he can talk about how God is moving in his life and where people are willing to listen and share their own stories as part of their work environment. Now Peter is working there three days a week to free up time for Seekers, and CIS has been willing to support that too.

Living out of call means connecting the different parts of our lives-work, play, and worship. Peter is in Celebration Circle, the mission group that supports our worship life. He's been named the "imagineer" because of his creative ideas for liturgy and the altar. Also, when a woman preaches, Peter is the regular male liturgist. He "holds the silence" during extended prayer times in worship, and his experience anchors the creativity that comes with different preaching every week. For both of us, weekly mission group meetings keep us grounded in this particular body of Christ, but meeting for worship is an important way for the whole community to celebrate God's presence in our midst.

All Stewards are expected to be in a mission group, but other members of Seekers are free to live out their accountability relationships in a variety of ways. Some meet one-to-one with a spiritual director. Others join a task force without the spiritual disciplines of a mission group for some particular short-term purpose. Others sample community in their classes at the School of Christian Living.

To deepen the inner life of the whole community, there is a monthly gathering of Spiritual Guides that is open to anyone who wants to grow in that direction. Because all the guides have been chosen by consensus in their mission groups, they hold the stories shared in spiritual reports and embody a good deal of trust. The Spiritual Guides function as a peer group around different monthly topics such as developing new leaders for silent retreats, deepening the spiritual life of Stewards, and "What is the difference between therapy and spiritual direction?" Some of the guides also have accountability relationships with people who do not belong to a mission group but nevertheless want to grow in their ability to reflect on where call is taking them.

WORSHIP

Worship is the place where we all come together. We use the common lectionary because we want to remember that we are part of the wider church of Jesus Christ. We are not just a handmade church doing whatever we feel like doing. We ask that each person who is preaching be attentive to the lectionary scripture and to speak for fifteen minutes so that we have time for reflections from the congregation. Because everyone has been working with the same scriptures during the week,

sometimes the response simply highlights another part of the readings than one that the preacher used. Sometimes we take issue with the preacher's interpretation, but more often the response affirms and perhaps extends what the preacher has offered.

Although we have a number of people who have been through seminary, that is not a prerequisite for preaching at Seekers. Celebration Circle does look for a sense of God's revelation in those who volunteer to preach, but it does not seek to control the content (though guidelines and coaching are available). It is a powerful experience to speak from experience, relating it to scripture. Quite often, after people have preached two or three times, they began to say, "Hmmm, I want to do more with Bible study." A number of our people have gone to seminary after preaching or teaching at Seekers. We are fortunate that there are several seminaries nearby where people can take classes.

Our commitment to seeking and living out God's call also requires that we be committed to failure. If we did not feel free to fail, we would not feel free to take risks on a lot of things we do. Our church structure does not have in place someone wagging his or her finger at us if it doesn't come out like we originally intended or if we do not reach the goals we set for ourselves. This freedom has allowed us tremendous learning. Frankly, a lot of times someone will start with a really good idea and a sense of a call from God, but once she is in the middle of it, things change, heading off in directions we never imagined. Then we just have to just let go! It is important for us to let go of things that no longer have the breath of life in them so that we are not always spending energy trying to keep things alive when God is moving elsewhere. We need that kind of energy to take on the things

that really work.

One example of this emerging direction of call is that for twenty-five years we thought we needed a choir. We wanted a choir. We had a monthly "singalong," but no one felt called to initiate a choir. Then a group formed to offer music in worship-choose hymns, provide some live music, and choose a recorded prelude. The group struggled with the requirements of being a mission group (particularly the accountability of regular attendance and doing spiritual reports). They struggled with what it means to work with their musical gifts and what that means to be offering their gifts to God. This is taking them into a very different set of understandings than just being a church choir. It's going to be interesting to see how this comes out.

Another way that Seekers supports living out of call is the Growing Edge Fund. Anyone can submit a proposal to the three voluntary directors. It's designed to give people money to explore something or try something out that may or may not be a calling. This oftentimes results in far-reaching evangelism work. We recently gave money to a young woman to develop some of her photographic talents and abilities. Cynthia has a passion for understanding what God is doing with women working the land in the Midwest. She has done some wonderful photo essays that explain their commitment to sustainable agriculture, and we are glad to be a part of her effort. She has put her roots down spiritually with us, but she is gone a lot. She makes a little money for herself doing dental hygiene, and then she is off on another photographic project in some distant place. Two or three of us stay in touch on a regular basis, and we celebrate when she comes home. This is just one example of a person who was called to a prophetic ministry by Seekers.

Almost everyone in our congregation has a story like Cynthia's. We have a young man who quit his job with a large shipping firm and is now doing quite well running a foundation that provides inoculations to children in Russia. Things like that come out of call. We do not have to plan. We believe that if we hold each other accountable to keep pressing the edges so that God's love can show through our transparencies, we will attend to the lost, the least, and the lonely ones that Jesus included at God's banquet table.

BIBLICAL MODEL

Seekers Church is a place of constant formation. Recently I felt led to release my "full-time position with Faith@Work so a younger person could step in. Now my mission group is asking, "Where are you being called?" Because of what I understand of God's claim on our lives, I trust that some new call will develop. Right now I'm still writing and speaking, but I don't have to be responsible for the ministry of F@W. I am here to listen for God's next call, and the mission group structure helps me do that.

This model of committing to seeking and living out God's call is actually a very old biblical model. Jesus called twelve very unlikely, ordinary men. We know there were women who traveled with them as well. Jesus invited them to make a commitment to God and to each other for those at the margins of society. That call, and their willingness to be shaped by it, is still changing the world.

At Seekers, we take the invitation to answer God's call seriously, and we know that empowers people to be the hands and feet of Christ in the world. This is the model we live from. It is a model that will work in any church but you have to create a climate for it, where everybody must be encouraged to think in terms of call. It can happen anywhere.

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Paul Wilkes and Marty Minchin, eds. "Best Practices from America's Best Churches." (New York: Paulist Press, 2003) (pp 253-269)