

Intentionality, Practice, and Vitality

by Diana Butler Bass

Diana Butler Bass is an independent scholar and author. The results of her study on vital mainline churches may be found in three books, two from Alban, [The Practicing Congregation](#) and [From Nomads to Pilgrims](#), and one from Harper, [Christianity for the Rest of Us](#), just released in paperback.

Since the publication of *The Practicing Congregation* 2004, when I first wrote about my research on vital mainline churches, hundreds of clergy groups and church leadership gatherings have invited me to share with them insights on what makes for a good congregation. At every gathering, I include the project key finding: "Congregations that intentionally engage Christian practices are congregations that experience new vitality."

The sentence combines three components: intentionality, practice, and vitality. Further defining them, I point out that intentionality involves choice and taking responsibility for individual and communal spirituality; that practice is not a program, rather it is a meaningful way of life; and that vitality cannot be measured in terms of numbers as it means spiritual health and maturity. A vital congregation is one where all people—including the pastor—are growing members of an organic community of spiritual practice. Inevitably, someone asks: "How does this relate to a Willow Creek strategy for church growth?" Most every pastor knows about Willow Creek and its wildly successful seeker-oriented, market-driven church growth program—and many pastors have labored to re-create such programs in their own churches or denominations.

Until recently, my answer has been, "Not very well. They focus on numbers, on getting people into church and on 'one-size fits all' programs for the spiritual life. That isn't bad for them; it is their path. And it is different from what my team found in small and medium-sized mainline churches. We found the programs don't make Christians. Practices do."

Now, however, I can answer in the words of Bill Hybels, the founding pastor of Willow Creek, as reported on the [Leadership Journal blog](#). After an extensive study of their congregation (and several similar churches), Willow Creek's leaders concluded that participation in programs did not inculcate Christian discipleship and that they had spent "millions of dollars" on programs thinking that they would help people grow—only to find

that there was no real increase in parishioners' love for God or their neighbor.

"We made a mistake," says Hybels. "What we should have done when people crossed the line of faith and became Christians, we should have started telling people and teaching people that they have to take responsibility to become 'self-feeders.' We should have gotten people, taught people, how to read their Bible between services, how to do the spiritual practices much more aggressively on their own."

Notice what Hybels says is missing: intentionality, practice, and vitality. Or, as the Leadership blog put it, "Spiritual growth doesn't happen best by becoming dependent on elaborate church programs but through the age-old spiritual practices of prayer, Bible reading, and relationships. These basic disciplines do not require multi-million dollar facilities and hundreds of staff to manage."

To point this out is not "I told you so." Rather, this is a profound development in North American congregational life. When one of the nation's leading programmatic churches says that programs do not work and that their vision of Christian maturity was "wrong," we best all sit up and take notice.

For almost a decade, the Alban Institute (an institute specializing in consultation and education of denominational and congregational leaders in mainline Christianity) has been gently switching its emphasis from program-oriented and technical fixes for congregations to re-basing vital congregational life on spiritual practices, including prayer, theological reflection, generosity, storytelling, discernment, shaping community, hospitality, and leadership. Drawing insights from mainline churches, progressive evangelical communities, and Jewish synagogues (most often off-the-map and modest congregations), Alban authors have offered diverse wisdom from creative spiritual communities that have grappled successfully with the very issues that Willow Creek is now seeking to address. In a kind of spiritual irony, this modest wisdom may be the very thing that mega-churches like Willow Creek need in order to experience a deeper way of life—the maturity in faith that they admit is eluding thousands of their members.

In all of this, we may well feel the Spirit's tug toward a different kind of congregational cooperation. What if we begin to see other faith communities as pilgrims on a *(cont. on Page 2)*

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journey to God instead of as competitors in a religion marketplace? Can we share with and serve each other as we walk a new—yet very old—road of shaping communal faith as a way of wisdom?

I do not read Bill Hybels' confession as a moment to shout that the emperor has no clothes. Instead, I read it as an invitation to open our collective imaginations—to rethink congregations, form new

relationships, and encourage one another on a journey of transformation. We all, even Willow Creek, need friends along the way.

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A Shining Forth in Dark Days

January 6 is Epiphany. This word, hard to pronounce, and harder to spell, signifies “a shining forth,” “a manifestation,” “a revelation.” Specifically, it signifies a divine light or enlightenment breaking in. Sometimes we use the word (with no capital) to describe the experience of a sudden understanding, an “aha” moment. Epiphany celebrates the manifestation of Christ’s glory to the Gentiles.

The central symbol of Epiphany is the Star. The visual symbol you will see on the altar will be candles, reminding us of the “shining forth” and the “enlightenment” which has come into the world in Jesus Christ. An epiphany banner will greet you in the entryway.

The season following Epiphany places emphasis on the outreaching message of the Gospel to the whole world. The magi represent the peoples of the world.

During this season, I will offer a sermon series dealing with some Hard Questions of Faith.

January 13 Why do bad things happen to good people? (The problem of evil)

January 20 If Jesus said, ‘No one comes to the Father except by me,’ then does that mean that there is no hope for those outside of Christianity? What about those who are good people but not religious, or devout people following other faiths?

January 27 The Lost Gospels. Who chose what gospels are in and what are out of the New Testament, and where are these lost gospels from? Has truth been suppressed?

Wednesday evenings in January a group of us will meet to discuss the book *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations: Radical Hospitality, Passionate Worship, Intentional Faith Development, Risk-Taking Mission and Service, Extravagant Generosity*. If you’d like to be part of the discussion, tell me so I can get a book for you. We’ll meet in the library at 7. If you can’t be part of the discussion, but would like the book, I’ll get one for you.

Grace and Peace,

Leslie Ann

Pastor Leslie Ann Knight

January birthday wishes to...

- 1st ◦ Si Dudley
- 4th ◦ Inna Brayman
- 6th ◦ Rick Duchaine
- 10th ◦ Paul Shoemaker
- 10th ◦ Laura Maruhashi
- 10th ◦ Carla Corkern Neames
- 18th ◦ Bill Blakney
- 18th ◦ Bob Hughes
- 21st ◦ Beverly Parker
- 21st ◦ Brian Duchaine
- 24th ◦ Jerry Numata



(So sorry if we've missed yours! Please be sure to update the **BIRTHDAY BOOK** in the back of the sanctuary. Thank you, and many more!)

<> *Parents' Night Out* <>

A community service of
Mercer Island United Methodist Church
 7070 SE 24th Street

First Fridays of the month
6:30pm-9:30pm (Open house style)

Games, dinner, and movies for the kids, while parents enjoy their own together time. Ages 3-12 are welcome.

Upcoming dates: **Jan 4** and **Feb 1**
 Reservations are needed. Please call the church office at (206) 232-3044.

Our thanks to Carla Neames and Aleta Toy for this opportunity!

JANUARY MYSTERY PERSON

Congratulations go to Lucia Lupsa who was the first (and only one) to correctly identify December's mystery person: Bonnie Wilson! Her uncle, Bob Coffin, died aboard the USS Arizona in Pearl Harbor.

As we welcome January 2008, a new mystery person comes to mind: This lady member of MIUMC received her pilot's license while she was still attending college.

Can you name this mystery person?

2008 MIUMC Church Council

Chairperson	Diana Blakney
Pastor	Leslie Ann Knight
Secretary	Jim Ogilvie
Lay Member to Annual Conference	Jim Ogilvie
Lay Leader	Mary Furer
Nurture Coordinator	Linda Hodge
<i>Hospitality & Welcoming; Education Nurture; Small Groups And Member Care Nurture</i>	
Worship	Sue Ogilvie
Outreach Coordinators	Bob & Dottie Hughes
<i>Ministries of Compassion, Concern and Advocacy; Regional, National, and Global Outreach</i>	
Finance (Co-Chairs)	Linus Toy Bill Parker
Staff-Parish Chair	Bill Blakney
Trustees Chair	Skip Melberg

Staff-Parish Relations Committee:

Chair: Bill Blakney 2008
 Leslie Ann Knight, pastor
 Mary Furer, lay leader
 Jim Ogilvie, annual conference
 Bev Spiegelberg 2009
 Lori Shoemaker 2009

Board of Trustees:

Chair: Skip Melberg 2010
 Bill Blakney 2008
 Mary Lou Lake 2008
 Ed Cowan 2009
 Bonnie Wilson 2010
 Vic Bode 2010
 Jim Lake 2010
 Jim Maners 2010

Atlantic Street Center

Save the Date! Atlantic Street Center's 98th Annual Dinner, "Open Your Heart to a Child", is Friday, February 8, 6:30-8:30pm, at Mount Zion Baptist Church. Join ASC as they celebrate 98 years of service to the community.

New Class Begins January 9

Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations: Radical Hospitality, Passionate Worship, Intentional Faith Development, Risk-Taking Mission and Service, Extravagant Generosity by Robert Schnase

Bishop Robert Schnase challenges churches to examine their life and ministry and to develop practices that will lead to greater fruitfulness.

The *Five Practices* are basic to the life of a fruitful congregation. If any one practice is missing, the church will not be as effective as it can be. Schnase emphasizes the biblical nature of each practice, and shows how each one has been experienced in the Wesleyan (Methodist) movement. There are also practical stories of how each practice is lived out in congregations in the 21st century.

This is not about “programs” or “church techniques.” It’s about “practicing” our Christian faith together and individually. You’ll find plenty of space for your personal growth, and reflecting on our own faith journeys.

Reading and Discussion. Each person will need a book. Facilitator: Pastor Knight. Wednesday evenings beginning January 9, at 7 p.m. Six sessions. Contact the office for a book, and please read the first chapter before the Jan. 9 meeting.

One of My Own

A long time member and proud grandfather stood at the baptismal font with his family for the baptism of his baby granddaughter. Another infant from another family that was new to the congregation was baptized at the same service. Following the service, the two families intermingled at the front of the church as they took turns having their pictures taken. At one point, the mother from the new family needed to get some things out of her bag, and the grandfather from the other family offered to hold her baby. Other church members were mixing and greeting, and several commented on the grandfather with the baby, and he found himself saying several times, “Oh, this one isn’t mine; I’m just holding him for a minute.”

Monday morning the grandfather called the pastor at the church office and said he wanted to see him right away. The pastor assumed the worst, thinking somehow the long-term member was upset about something from the day before. When the grandfather arrived at the church office, he told the pastor, “I want to change my will to include the church, and I want to talk to you about how to do that.” The pastor was stunned and couldn’t help asking about what brought the grandfather to this decision. The older man’s eyes grew moist as he said, “Yesterday I realized something while I was holding that other baby, the one from the family that just joined the church. I kept telling people that wasn’t my child, but then it dawned on me that it was part of my family, part of my church family, and that I have a responsibility for that little boy just like I have for my own granddaughter. I’ve been a member of this church for more than forty years, and in God’s eyes I’m a grandfather to more than just my own. I’ve taken care of my own children with my will, but I realized I also need to provide for the children of the church. So I want to divide my estate to leave a part to the church as if the church were one of my children.”

Those who practice Extravagant Generosity have a God-given vision and faith to plant seeds for trees whose shade they will never see.

(From *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*, by Robert Schnase, Bishop, Missouri Conference, The United Methodist Church. Published by Abingdon Press, 2007, pp. 107-108. Reprinted with permission.)

Emergency Feeding Program

Non-perishable foods carried to the altar during our worship offering are distributed by the Emergency Feeding Program of Seattle & King County. The theme this month is *Souper Bowl Sundays!* January’s foods of the month are 10-oz Cans of Vegetarian Vegetable Soup. Tackle the problem of hunger in our community with your donations. Or, \$15 to buy a whole case of soup to help keep our hungry neighbors warm and fed in this chilly season. From all those who receive this comfort food, thank you for giving!

(More info can be found at: www.emergencyfeeding.org .)

January 2008

Except for Worship & unless otherwise noted: Groups meet in the Fellowship Hall for 1-hour

Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
		1 <i>NEW YEAR'S DAY</i>	2 7-9pm Beit Messiah	3 6:30am Men's Prayer 10a-12p Twins Group	4 6:30pm Parents' Night Out	5 9:30am-3pm Beit Messiah
6 9:30am Chancel Choir 10am Sunday School 11am Worship w/ Communion 7pm Adult 12-Step	7	8 8a-12p BSF Women 9:30am Men's Prayer 10am Women's Prayer* 7pm Finance Comm Mtg	9 7pm Bible Study 7-9pm Beit Messiah 7pm Cub Scout Troop	10 6:30am Men's Prayer 10a-12p Twins Group	11	12 9:30am-3pm Beit Messiah
13 9:30am Chancel Choir 10am Sunday School 11am Worship 7pm Adult 12-Step	14	15 8a-12p BSF Women 9:30am Men's Prayer 10am Women's Prayer* 4pm Girl Scout Troop 7pm Ad Council Mtg	16 7pm Bible Study 7-9pm Beit Messiah	17 6:30am Men's Prayer 10a-12p Twins Group	18	19 9:30am-3pm Beit Messiah
20 9:30am Chancel Choir 11am Worship 7pm Adult 12-Step	21 <i>Martin Luther King Jr. Day</i>	22 8a-12p BSF Women 9:30am Men's Prayer 10am Women's Prayer* 7pm Sons of Norway	23 7pm Bible Study 7-9pm Beit Messiah	24 6:30am Men's Prayer 10a-12p Twins Group	25	26 9:30am-3pm Beit Messiah
27 9:30am Chancel Choir 10am Sunday School 11am Worship 7pm Adult 12-Step	28	29 8a-12p BSF Women 9:30am Men's Prayer 10am Women's Prayer* 4pm Girl Scout Troop	30 7pm Bible Study 7-9pm Beit Messiah	31		

MIUMC Tel: (206) 232-3044 Fax: (206) 236-2281 miumc@hotmail.com

Church Office Hours: Monday – Friday 9am-1pm

BSF Women: Fellowship Hall, *Both Levels*
Beit Messiah: Sanctuary & Fellowship Hall
Bible Study: Fellowship Hall, *Lower Level*

Cub Scout Troop: *Lower Level*, Room 3
Men's Prayer: Fellowship Hall Library
*Women's Prayer @ *Irene Fleming's*



“Passing It On” Online

Join our online newsletter list.

E-mail miumc@hotmail.com to receive an online version of our newsletter.

Passing It On

Pastor: Rev. Dr. Leslie Ann Knight

Editor: Brian Wilson, church office manager

Please deliver any submissions you may have for the upcoming newsletter to the church office (preferably via email) by the 20th of the month prior. So, that’s 1/20 for publication in the February newsletter. Thank you kindly!



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Doers of the word



Happy New Year !!

To all family and friends of Mercer Island United Methodist Church: we would like to wish you all a happy, healthy, prosperous, and blessed New Year in 2008!