

**SLD10.20.06 30<sup>th</sup> Ordinary Functional Structures**  
**EPC**  
**Luke 6:17-31**  
**Jill Oglesby Evans**

**“Functional Structures – What’s the Point?”**

For the past couple months we’ve been exploring together the research of Christian Schwarz, whose study of over 1000 congregations led to the conclusion that all churches, to be healthy and growing, must be reasonably strong in eight essential qualities. These qualities are listed in your bulletins, along with two cartoons – one showing what life is like in a church that has not yet developed strength in all eight qualities and one showing what life is like in a church that has.

Too many of us experience life in *this* church more like the first cartoon, and look with longing at the second church, with its ease of movement, its joy of ministry; its billowing sails filled with the life-giving breath of the Holy Spirit. This is why we keep plumbing the insights and working the principles of Natural Church Development – because in it this body of wisdom we perceive a call to this church that many of us are already beginning to experience. It’s God’s call and it’s saying the same thing God’s been saying to God’s children since God created us: get whole, get real, and share what you’ve got.

For two thousand years people have been coming to Jesus for assistance with this same call of God. In today’s text a great crowd of people, some of whom knew Jesus and some of whom didn’t, showed up to hear Jesus and be...what...healed of their diseases. Those whose bodies were failing them, those whose minds were troubled with unclean spirits, those who were broken

and hurting and sad came to Jesus to be cured. Everybody reaching out and trying to touch Jesus because people could sense the power coming out from him and they wanted more of it because they knew it would heal them.

Which is why people have always come to Jesus. Deep down under that's why people come to church. To touch Jesus' power so we can be healed. We could even say that's why God birthed the church through Paul in the first place, so people could still crowd around the resurrected body of Christ to touch its power and be healed. The way Schwarz says it is that "a healthy congregation will be so full of those who have themselves touched Jesus that the power of Jesus will radiate from it and attract more persons hungry for healing."<sup>1</sup>

'Course Jesus didn't just come to heal his followers, much as that's what most of us reach for. To that crowd pressing in on him in Judea he had other lessons to teach, weird stuff like how the poor and the hungry and the sad would end up with the last laugh because theirs was the Kingdom of God. And how those who are feeling pretty full of themselves these days better watch out because they've already gotten *their* reward.

Didn't make much sense then; doesn't now, to the crowd seeking healing - at least according the values of outer culture or inner cravings. But then, Jesus wasn't talking about outer culture or inner cravings; he was talking about the Kingdom of God. He was all for the crowd getting saved, healed, becoming whole. But then they needed to get real, get humble, recognize their sin and the way God's Kingdom works, and give it away, share what they've got.

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<sup>1</sup>The Rev. Michael A. King, "Functional Structures",  
<http://www.netreach.net/~pandoraus/smmc/sermon/funcst.htm>.

For folks then and now who might not be getting what he's trying to say, Jesus boils it down to a few simple rules of thumb for post-healing behavior: Love your enemies, don't judge 'cause you don't really know what you're talking about, and share your stuff. Or, for your basic cross stitch wall hanging: do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

And that was it – what Jesus was trying to get across to that healing-hungry crowd - get whole, get real, and share what you've got - the way of discipleship, the Great Ends of the church, and the ultimate objective of Schwarz's eight qualities of healthy growing churches - the exhibition of the Kingdom of God.

Now, toward that end, the quality we're going to look at today is what Schwarz calls "Functional Structures." In the event the term makes you yawn already, be comforted to know that you aren't the only one. "Functional Structures." Sounds pretty dry, like a class in church administration. But you might be surprised how strongly people feel about the structures of their church. Some people in churches today are so attached to traditional structures that they can't imagine things being done any other way, while others feel that church structures are fundamentally irrelevant to its spiritual enterprises. What Schwarz calls "spiritualists" tend to be skeptical of structures...while those from a more technocratic perspective mistake certain structures for the very essence of the church of Jesus Christ. <sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Implementation Guide to Natural Church Development, Christian Schwarz, ChurchSmart Resources, St. Charles, Illinois, 1998. p. 75.

Which are we here at Emory Church? Well, as with most controvertible points, a little of each. But I don't imagine that anyone here would argue with the observation that most of the structures of this congregation, as of most churches, were shaped in a different era, a time when there was less mobility, when people had fewer options for church, when families lived closer together and attendance in the same congregation by multiple generations was common; when women did not work outside the home nor were ordained inside the church. So it's reasonable to ask whether our historical structures here at Emory Church remain functional or need change in order for us to carry out our mission.

Schwarz advises that, before deciding whether a church's structures remain helpful, it's important to be clear about what particular mission the structures are *meant* to support.

A year or two ago, this church arrived at what we call an Identity Statement, just a few sentences meant to convey to people *outside* our community who we are and what we're like. It's printed on the front of the worship bulletin each week – let's find it and read it together:

*Emory Presbyterian Church is an intimate, caring and active faith community seeking God's will. We strive to engage the heart, mind and spirit of all those who worship with us. Wherever you are on your spiritual journey, we invite you to travel along with us.*

I figure that sums us up pretty well – at least the “us” we want to present to people outside the church.

But what about those of us on the *inside* of this faith community? What exactly is *our* mission? In what particular way is God calling us here at Emory Church to get whole, get real, and share what we've got?

There are two fertile sources that reveal the answer to that question: one is our covenant statement; the other is our personal spiritual gifts.

Each week Emory's covenant statement is printed in the bulletin. Today we'll be reading it together as our Affirmation of Faith. A lot of effort was invested in making that statement an accurate expression of the mission of this community of faith, of our corporate sense of call. Take a glance at it now.

The second source that reveals the particular way God calling us here at Emory to exhibit the Kingdom of God is intimately linked to the unique and particular set of each of our own spiritual gifts. Some of you took advantage of the recent spiritual gift inventory offered at our Wed. evening program – anyone still wishing to take it, let me know. Others of you are already confident that you know through experience what your spiritual gifts are and are not. In either case, understanding and respecting our personal spiritual gifts are essential to the integrity of answering God's particular call to this church. For if our covenant statement speaks to God's call to this *corporate* body of Christ, our personal gifts determine how God calls us as *individual members* of that body.

So to assess the efficiency or relevance of our current functional structures, we've really got to hold before the eyes of our hearts both our corporate covenant statement *and* our personal spiritual gifts. And when you do that, what do you think? Do the current structures and programs of this church help you fulfill our mission? Do our structures, traditions, programs and routine activities here genuinely support the particular ways God calls us to "get whole, get real and share what we've got?"

It's an important question to keep asking ourselves because, as Schwarz says, "we should continually aim at extending those structures which serve our overall goals, while changing or even dismantling those structures that only seem to be a barrier to realizing our mission."<sup>3</sup>

This is a flexible and responsive view of church structure that seems to echo the wisdom of what's called the "Missional Emerging Church" movement, one of whose principles is that the structures and "programs of a church should be allowed to rise and fall based on the energy and imagination of the people running them, not according to some disembodied vision plan."<sup>4</sup>

Kind of a radical idea for a traditional church like this one, huh. Or maybe not, since part of our tradition is always to be open to being reformed. It's not that anything goes as to which structures and programs we continue to embrace at this church, but, surely by now we know in our bones that we can trust the Holy Spirit's process of ever *re-forming* us.

And what I observe in this church is that we generally are of a size and spirit that we're actually pretty nimble on our feet in letting God re-form us around new ideas and challenges that are grounded in our faith and mission.

Let me give you some recent examples. According to our covenant, one of our goals is to reach out, share our faith and welcome others into our fellowship. But along with all their other duties and responsibilities, our elders were having a hard time doing that on Sunday mornings. So the idea emerged of starting an "Ushers Guild," and Doug, Stewart, Bill, Dave and Scott stepped

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 79.

<sup>4</sup> "Emergence: The Art of Missional Innovation," Troy Bronsink, <http://troybronsink.typepad.com/churchasart>, September, 2006.

forward to open and close the church on Sunday mornings, recruit ushers, count the offering, and all kinds of other practical Worship day duties. It's an experiment, really, and only time will tell whether this new structure will sustain itself, whether others will come forward to serve after these men's year-long commitment is up. But so far our new Ushers Guild has provided the steady blessing of a comfortable sanctuary, a warm welcome to our visitors, trustworthy management of our offerings, and a great relief to our active elders.

Here's another example of allowing the re-formation ourselves around new ideas and challenges. A major way we meet our Covenant challenge of cultivating fellowship and sharing faith and study is through our Wednesday Night Supper and Program. Yet, as many of you know, a couple of months ago we were wondering whether to continue this tradition which requires so much planning and preparation and clean up. So we talked about it. What resulted was to me a paradigm of spiritual integrity: those who were weary stepped down, and those who were energized stepped up, and the Wednesday Night Supper carries on with new life. But the operative principle remains: should energy and imagination flag again, the Spirit could be telling us to let this particular structure go. If so, it'll be interesting to see what other structures emerge to cultivate fellowship, faith and study.

Speaking of other structures that cultivate fellowship, faith and study, we heard last week about the importance of holistic small groups. Already our hats are off to the various PW circles, the men's prayer group and the young women who meet regularly for coffee. Not incidentally, I'd like to take a moment here

publicly to apologize for my remarks last week about the young women's group. In a bid to be humorous, I crossed the line into humor at the expense of others, causing embarrassment and hurt to people I care very much about, and I am genuinely sorry.

On a lighter note, in our increasingly nimble and responsive little church, still other small groups are emerging. A new book group focusing on spirituality met for the first time last week and will meet again on Tues., Nov. 28<sup>th</sup>. You heard Judy's announcement about another group structured around hand crafts such as quilting and knitting, to be offered in love to others in need. Prayer, books, common interests, it doesn't really matter what brings people in the church together in these, may I say, functional structures (and yes, Bennett, from whom I got permission to say this, you *may* start one around poker). The aim always is to help people experience intimate community, practical help and intensive spiritual interaction.

Another example of a timely re-forming response to a recent challenge: In our Covenant we pledge to "minister faithfully to the poor, lonely, sick and those in need" both inside and outside the church. Well, regarding ministering to people *inside* the church, does anyone besides those who actually *do* the work, have any idea how much is accomplished behind the scenes by "C" is for Caring? Or, for that matter, how much certain individuals in this ministry take on? So much important ministry vested in so few people about which so few others know.

Fact of the matter is, there just aren't as many people available for this important work as there were 20 years ago. Yet the work of "C" is for Caring strikes at the very heart of the Covenant to which each of us commit. The Covenant endures but the structure clearly needs revision. And so, the new leadership of Church Life is currently working hard both to understand the landscape of "C" is for Caring's work, which is vast, *and* actively to expand its resources and people power.

There's another significant change in structure we can all anticipate at the end of 2007 when our long-time, faithful and beloved church administrator, Glenda Osborne, intends to retire. When I find myself hyperventilating about this eventuality, I remind myself about this church's nimble nature and covenant commitment. Grounding ourselves in tradition while allowing God to "re-form" us through whatever challenges emerge is not only a good and faithful combination for long-term survival, it's a reflection of the intimate, caring, active faith community God calls us to be. As long as we keep one eye on our Covenant and the other on our personal spiritual gifts, I figure the appropriate "functional structures" will follow to help us get whole, get real, and share what we have, so we can exhibit God's Kingdom the best we're able. For that, after all, *is* the point, isn't it?

To the glory of God. Amen.