

**Part II**

**Christian  
Organizational  
Forms**

## 7. A Historical Overview of Christian Organizational Forms

Since the time of Constantine, most of the organizational forms of the Christian religion have been hierarchical, matching the secular organizations of their day in one-to-one correspondence. In the early centuries, however, the basic style of the communal life of Christianity was quite different from this familiar medieval pattern. The earliest Christian communities maintained a balance between Spirit and religious order. Early Christianity was wild Spirit seeking workable form. The forms which Spirit inspires never quite hold the Spirit that inspires them. The religious forms of early Christianity continued to change at a surprisingly rapid pace throughout the first century and a half.

In the first three quarters of the first century, the religious movement which came to be called “Christianity” was still a sect within the overall Jewish culture. Christianity at that time was simply a Christ-way of being Jewish. This movement within Judaism was like a spurt of Spirit unruliness within the established Jewish order. Fresh religious forms were being invented by these earliest Christians, but these forms had not yet crystallized into firm dogma. The earliest Christian communities were committed to a set of powerful symbols surrounding the appearance of a figure named Jesus. They fixed upon the Messianic myths and some new uses of the symbolic potentials of bread and wine and water. Though a reassessment of the whole of Hebraic heritage was taking place, the new religious forms were relatively minor innovations. Also, early Christianity was in constant flux and was amazingly open to borrowing religious images from many cultural sources.

Similarly, early Christianity was not yet a firmly established set of organizational forms. To say that Peter was the first pope is an appalling exaggeration. Peter was probably a prominent leader, not because of some hierarchical organization that selected him, but simply because he was more “rocky” (as his nickname implies) than others in his commitment to a transfigured view of Jesus as the Christ. Paul certainly did not find Peter infallible. And Paul, who was the first great theologian of the Christian breakthrough, was not a paid clergyman. He provided for his financial needs by making tents.

In the late first and early second century, we see “bishops” appearing as prominent leadership figures in each local Christian community. But these bishops were not clergy in the medieval sense of that word. It is understandable that Christians have projected later ideas of religious leadership upon first and second century Christianity, but this does not give a true picture of what these earliest times were actually like. The earliest Christian communities did create a certain amount of social order, but this ordering was characterized by much variety and creative religious invention. The life of these communities was a Spirit-driven surprise.

As these earliest Christian communities designed their leadership roles, they came up with deacons as well as bishops. But these early deacons were quite practical servants – distributing alms; arranging for candles, wine, and bread; seeing that people had a place to sit; and other things of a quite mundane nature. The earliest bishops played a role with somewhat more power than the deacons, but they were not seen as clergy in the sense of being in charge of their communities. These earliest bishops were more like bouncers than men of the cloth. Their role was to exclude from the community any charismatic know-it-all who taught that Jesus could not be divine if he was also wholly human. Such teachers (“gnostics” they came to be called) were seen to be a dread disease that could destroy the entire community. The bishops were

protectors of the basic commonality of these early Christian communities.

Some modern interpreters of this early period sympathize with the gnostic innovators and condemn the bishops for being too stern, but such a view does not grasp that every New Testament writer and Jesus himself would have viewed these gnostic elements as Hellenistic hotheads who did not understand the basic axioms of the Hebraic heritage. It is true that Paul used gnostic myths in his theologizing, but for him these were evangelical tools used to bring Gentiles and Hellenized Jews to an understanding of the Good News – a scandalous message that was seen as nonsense from the typical Greek perspective. Christianity as a powerful Spirit breakthrough would have been entirely lost if these early bishops had not played their roles of protecting their communities from gnosticism. Every community, in any age, needs a few people who are given permission to play the role of fiery dragon toward those elements that threaten the core commonality of that community. These early bishops played this role.

The birth of fully hierarchical forms of Christian organization began when Constantine invited some of the Christian bishops over to his house for dinner. Some modern interpreters have criticized the bishops for accepting Constantine's proposal that Christianity be made the religion of the empire, but we should give these Christian bishops more credit than that. They chose to no longer be a persecuted religion but instead to operate in a peaceful relationship with state power and to use that resource to bring their teachings to every rural village in the Roman Empire. If they had not made that choice, it is doubtful that any of us would be Christians today.

This fateful decision did, however, change the character of Christian organization. Christian leadership roles evolved into paid positions in the secular establishment. When the Roman form of church order was completed, a pope participated in the imperial court, bishops matched the regional kings, and clergy, monks, and nuns did the chore work in the local villages. The hierarchy of the Church paralleled the hierarchy of the secular society.

Also these strong ties with the state made it imperative to clarify what was the true Christian religion and what was some fresh perversion. Defining the boundaries of the faith became a political as well as a doctrinal discussion. Christianity had become an institution of state power. These new conditions resulted in a narrowing of the early diversity of Christian practice into more carefully defined dogmas that excluded views that were judged to be heretical. In some ways this was a creative process, for it forced a widespread and rather chaotic Christian movement to think itself through in a systematic fashion and to clarify within the basic culture of the Greek world what the core of the breakthrough of Christianity was all about. But the downside of this development was a narrowing of religious creativity and the establishment of state power as a means that could be used to threaten each succeeding generation of creative thought and practice. Christians had to stay within strict bounds or be prosecuted for heresy. Under these conditions there were strong tendencies for Christianity to ossify into rather rigid dogmas that no longer had vital contact with the living Spirit experience of persons. And the worst case scenario in this sort of ossification, was dramatized when state violence was used to suppress any person or group of persons who seemed to threaten the current status quo of dogma and morality. This is how we must understand the meaning of Christendom's slaughter of so many independent nature-affirming women for being "witches" who were threatening the true faith.

Nevertheless, within these strictly policed bounds of medieval dogma, Christians continued to be creative. The remarkable creativity within Christian monastic orders is an example. These movements were often startling in the ways that they gave fresh form to genuine Spirit. Throughout the middle ages Spirit never died, it just learned to live within a rather large box.

Protestantism fractured this medieval box and to some extent reintroduced elements of community reminiscent of the New Testament period. But most Protestant movements retained paid clergy, church buildings, and hierarchical modes for organizing their leadership and preserving their revised dogmas. And this new Protestant dogma also tended to ossify into defensive systems of belief and the resulting “witch hunts.” As Protestants moved into the industrial age, their church organizations became more like corporations with the clergy serving as a type of CEO who managed these topdown institutions. Money often became the tyrannizing value in these organizations; and as it did, local congregations tended to become retail stores selling the public a particular brand of religious product. Many of these clergy ruled their profit-making organizations with the type of iron fist that would make even secular CEOs cringe. Even in the most democratic of Protestant congregations, the clergy have usually remained on such a high pedestal that it is difficult for them to be fully honest with other community members. This has been especially true when clergy themselves have had significant doubts and questions or criticisms about the inherited dogmatic and organizational modes. Clergy tend to play the game of being hierarchical leaders with clear answers even when they know they do not believe these answers themselves. Rarely if ever do “pastors” of local congregations preoccupy themselves with reenvisioning the future forms of Christian communal life. Most are trapped in the role of preserving the congregational form even when its ineffectiveness has become plain. Perhaps it is understandable that contemporary clergy rarely rock the boat that pays their salaries, heats their buildings, and appears to hold in being the only ministry they can imagine for their lives. Nevertheless, clergy and laity alike now live in a tyranny of obsolete forms, and their integrity depends on their breaking out.

The present state of the inherited Christian organizational forms has two main flaws: (1) it manifests an insidious type of economic tyranny that squelches religious creativity and prophetic ministries, and (2) it defends topdown notions of leadership combined with the image that these leaders are duty bound to clarify and preserve the dogmas of their particular brand of Christian religion.

There have been movements within contemporary Christianity which have opposed hierarchical organization and experimented with alternatives. Among the most prominent has been the base communities of the liberation theology movement in Latin American Catholicism. Here small groups of relatively poor village people have met weekly, read their Bibles, and shared their lives from the perspective that Jesus identified with outcasts and the poor and called them to full dignity. Such an emphasis built energies that opposed grueling poverty, injustice, and hierarchical disempowerment.

The Protestant wing of Christianity has also experimented with alternative forms of small group work. This has often been shallow and tightly joined to existing congregations. But some home church movements have broken altogether with congregational life – with building buildings and paying clergy. Most of these movements have, in my view, only scratched the surface of the possibilities offered in small group work and covenantal discipline. Most of these movements have carried into their home churches many of the same oppressive theologies, doctrines, and leadership modes they were attempting to leave behind.

So what would it mean to move away from oppressive doctrine and hierarchical organization in a thoroughgoing fashion? What would it mean to break the economic tyranny that grips the typical congregation? What would it mean to build Christian community that is consistent with being loyal to the Awesome and filled with Awe?

## 8.

# The Disciplined Small-Group Circle

In practical terms, what would it mean for Christian organizations to move away from their authoritarian, topdown, hierarchical, clergy-dominated patterns of organization? What would it mean to move toward a new mode of organization that encourages decentralized creativity, integrity, and effectiveness unhampered by disabling rules, irrelevant dogmas, and the need to mollify popes, cardinals, bishops, clergy, seminary professors, and other authoritarian figures?

The disciplined small-group circle is an important part of the next formation of Christian life together. So what might a disciplined, small-group circle of a vital and valid Christian resurgence look like? Picture three to twenty people sitting in a circle, exploring together a thoroughgoing resurgence of Awe-inspiring Christian theology and ethics. Picture them covenanted to meet with one another every week for two hours. When they cannot make the meeting, they call and let the group know. Each person knows that his or her presence is valuable to everyone in the group. This is not a drop-in group. This is a group in which everyone assumes responsibility for the entire group and in which everyone sees attending this group as a primary part of their own religious practice.

Picture these people invoking a Christian context, singing some songs, and then doing a “go-round” in which each person is answering a probing question put to them by the discussion leader. Each is answering this question out of the experiences of his or her own life. The discussion leader and the selected question give order to this practice, but the answers given by each person are emerging from a wide diversity of living experiences. Such a group process is an example of creative rather than hierarchical ordering. Order and freedom blend. Notice that order and discipline can be present in the custom of practicing pristine listening in which each person gives full attention to the person speaking. Yet hierarchical order is avoided, for no one person in this group is the one to whom everyone else looks for answers. Answers arise through interpreting our life experience through some common theological understandings and common group methods. And even these common understandings and methods will evolve as through the months and years of meeting together.

Further, picture this small group further ordered by a commonly understood membership covenant. By “covenant” I mean an agreement to be this group and to do certain disciplines designed by the group. For example, here are the disciplines I recommend for such groups. Meet for two hours every week and expect one another to be there on time and stay for the whole two hours. Expect every member to try to be honest about his or her own experiences, doubts, questions, and discoveries. Expect every member to assume an attitude of care for every other member. Expected every member to be serious about probing the depth of the Christian heritage for wisdom that will be applied to all aspects of living. The details of the covenant may differ from group to group, but the typical undisciplined approach to religious practice must be overcome. No excuses about being too busy are accepted. Time for religious practice is a top priority because it gives meaning and healing to all other aspects of life. “Too busy for depth living” is considered to be a primary malady of modern culture, a malady that must be denounced and overcome. Much more needs to be said, but this is the basic direction that the next expression of Christian communal life needs to take.

These small groups of covenanted Christian-identified persons need a name. For the time being, let us call them “Christian Resurgence Circles.” “CRCs” for short. Let us imagine

thousands of CRCs operating in a meaningful network of mutual support. Let us imagine some members of these circles meeting with members from other circles for training or for common mission.

One of the most important qualities of a CRC is that no economic obligations limit its honesty or restrain its missional purposes. It pays no salaries, builds no buildings, owns no expensive properties. On the other hand, it might raise considerable sums of money to do its chosen tasks. It might even buy equipment for its common life and work. But a CRC would never need to own buildings. Meeting spaces for a group of 20 or fewer people are readily available in homes, hotels, libraries, classrooms, and underused church buildings. Money ceases to be a tyrant in the life of these circles. Money can, therefore, become a servant for enabling the life and mission of these circles.

So what might a CRC meeting look like? Here is a suggested order of nurture currently being explored by several groups who are experimenting with these topics.

### **A Suggested Order of Nurture for an Every-Week Circle of Christian Resurgence**

Light three candles while singing a verse of song.

#### **Act One: Owning Up to Reality (The Confession)**

Observe moments of silence

Sing one or two songs

Conduct a Spirit question go-round

Pronounce absolution

Celebrate birthdays and other significant events

#### **Act Two: Opening the Mouth of the Infinite Silence (The Word)**

Translate a portion of the Bible into contemporary metaphors  
and respond to some grounding questions.

Study an appropriate selection of current theological or ethical thought.

#### **Act Three: Committing to Spirit Action on Planet Earth (The Dedication)**

Observe moments of silence

Ask volunteers to share words of petition and intercession.

Extinguish the candles while singing a verse of song.

## Organizing a Circle

A Christian Resurgence Circle is, first of all, a nurture group for those who are organizing and leading it. It is not to be understood as a course or program for awakening others, even though new people will come to these circles and be awakened by their participation. A CRC is not a group for everyone. Its members are choosing to be among people with whom they can be nurtured and to whom they can provide nurture to the end that all those involved become the Awed Ones, the Body of Christ, the Spirit mission to planet Earth. This means that most people should be discouraged from considering CRC membership.

Effective Spirit nurture can only take place if the CRC members are ready to take the group seriously, attend every week they can, and cultivate a genuine openness to a new sort of Christian practice. Without this minimum commitment, a new member dilutes what the CRC is gathering to do .

This is a very different principle of operation than the one typically followed in the inherited congregational church life. For several centuries Christians have been persuading and manipulating people to attend church with them. The belief has been that if new people hear the preacher or feel the quality of the fellowship then they will want to be a part of the group. In CRC organizing we want to discourage people from joining until they are ready to consider it seriously.

Of course, those who are organizing a circle will have friends they want to join the circle. With many people, the question will come up: Is this person a possible candidate for the circle? But in this new style each potential member is invited with care with full permission given for them to say "N o" as well as "Yes."

The organizers of a circle will also need to make clear to new members that a context of understanding the meaning of Christian resurgence is already presupposed. As members of a circle, we are welcoming people to do with us what we are doing for ourselves. We are not, in the first instance, inviting new people to decide what the purpose and direction of these circles is to be. As new members make this ongoing circle their own, then they join in the decision making about the practices of this group.

At times the CRC is going to feel very refreshing to people, but at other times the CRC is going to feel very demanding and perhaps frightening. People who have joined and in some sense want to be part of it, are going to feel challenged to change their lives in directions that are not wholly comfortable to them. So they may be tempted to drop out, become irregular in their attendance, show up sullen and rebellious, and other variations on that theme. When such things arise for persons, the more committed members can certainly support them in deciding to continue rather than drop out of this practice, but we do this not because we need them for the success of our group, but because they need to do this for themselves and for all the people they love (including the other members of the circle).

It may also be true that the presence of a new person in the circle strengthens the group. This new person may be someone the group would sorely miss if he or she left. Still the members of the circle need to honor each person's freedom and well being more than the hope to have her or him in the group. A CRC needs to value freedom and Spirit maturity over numbers of people. Since the members of a circle don't have to pay a preacher's salary or build a building, their whole energy can be directed toward the well being of the members and their contributions to the surrounding world. Quality can be emphasized over quantity of people.

## 9. The Decline of the Old and the Growth of the New

It is important to clarify how these Christian Resurgence Circles are related to the denominational congregations of established Christendom. If we attempt to make CRCs part of current congregational life, we will find that they are like patches of new cloth sewn on an old shrunken garment. They will rip loose in the wash. Using Jesus' other parable, they will be like new wine in old skins; they will break the skins.

The theology, ethics, and communal life being assumed for the CRCs I am envisioning will not fit within the fabrics of the typical congregation. CRCs need to be viewed as *alongside* congregational life rather than *within* it. But this alongside quality does not mean that these circles are in competition with the old institutions. In most cases, existing congregations are not even interested in experimenting with new communal forms. So we might say that there is no competition, for congregations and CRCs are playing two different games.

Furthermore, even though those who participate in these circles may be critical of the typical theology, ethics, and communal practices that take place in the inherited institutions, they need not claim that the older institutions do no good or have no true Christian Spirit living within them. Some congregations embrace many elements of resurgent Christianity. Sermons are given that are expressions of Awe rather than impositions of rational beliefs. Tasks are done within and by congregations that are expressions of compassion. Even some elements of disciplined small-group communal life may appear within some congregations.

Nevertheless, it is important to understand that these reforms are uncharacteristic of the inherited congregational form. These reforms are also temporary modifications. The denominational congregation is like a rubber band. You can stretch it out toward renewal, but when the pressure is removed, it will snap back to the form it had when renewal began. The hierarchical heritage built into these institutions will eventually reassert itself. A local congregation's denominational connections and its economic pressures will inevitably force it to revert to the old modes of Christian organization and understanding.

From the perspective of the forces of Christian resurgence, the unrenewability of the denominational congregation can be seen as good news. Rather than complain about the recalcitrance of the inherited institutions, the renewal forces can simply surrender their expectations for permanent renewal within these old organizations. This will release the CRC movement from needless frustration. When this realization dawns, resurgent Christians will no longer attempt to do what cannot be done. They can divert their energies from futile congregational renewal efforts and redirect their time and energy into building a vital network of Christian Resurgence Circles.

The CRC movement can also be relaxed about the fact that the current congregational mode of Christian community is in decline. Some claim that it is only liberal congregations that are in decline and that fundamentalist congregations are still growing. Statistically this may be true in some places, but these statistics prove rather than contradict the overall decline of the old forms. Fundamentalism is a reactionary movement. It is powered by the threats that the course of contemporary history is making to the old cherished forms. Fundamentalists can be expected to become more energetic in their futile attempts to save the unsavable. In contrast, as liberal Christians become more aware of the needed transition, they tend to become discouraged with their congregations and leave. Some turn to other religious practices, some abandon all religious

practice, and still others, after a short absence, return for one more fling with Christian fundamentalism. While the situation is complex, the best interpretation of these phenomena is that the inherited denominational and congregational form of Christian community is in inevitable decline. Its flaws and obsolescence are becoming increasingly obvious.

It is helpful to note that organizations are nothing more than ideas on the basis of which groups of people are living. An organization cannot be tasted or heard or seen. Organizations are just ideas in people's heads, ideas that are temporarily ordering human living. So the next communal forms of Christianity are simply fresh ideas that can guide new group practices. These new ideas do not need to fit within the old ideas. The older ideas of Christian communal life are being experienced as straightjackets that are keeping the new ideas from being fully explored and fully realized in their historical potential.

Denominational Christianity is in decline not because the people who attend these organizations are bad people, or because most clergy are ineffective. This decline is happening because the inherited organizational mode is obsolete. It no longer fits into its times. A hundred years ago the congregational mode of Christian community was not obsolete. The congregation was still useful for training individuals to participate Spirit-wise and morally within the exploding and disorienting industrial civilization. But today industrial civilization itself is in decline (perhaps we call it "thoroughgoing transformation"). In every part of social life we are in transition. A similar destiny is in store for Christian community. Like all destinies, this destiny is not automatic: it must be realized by human action. But also like all destinies, when the time is up for something, the time is up. No matter how hard they try, Christians will not be able to go forward with the same old patterns.

Nevertheless, in its declining days, the denominational congregation can still serve humanity in many ways. Many congregations do fruitful work that is far more important than the work being done by the typical service club. We don't need to do away with the service clubs because they don't do all that needs to be done. And we don't need to hasten the end of denominational congregations because they are not doing all that needs to be done. Most congregations are not interested in even trying to be an embodiment of the next expression of Christian communal life and mission. But, to whatever extent congregations are willing to do valid aspects of Christian Spirit nurture or Christian social mission, the CRC networks should consider them allies not foes.

At the same time the emerging networks of Christian Resurgence Circles will face huge disappointments if they view the existing congregations as vessels that will one day house our long-range hope for that full Christian resurgence which will endure for hundreds of years. In fact, the CRC movement will be destructive rather than creative if it takes on the role of insisting that these obsolete institutions become what they cannot become. The Christian theology, ethics, and communal life being assumed for a CRC network is new wine, and this new wine will need new skins to be preserved and to fulfill its historical potential.

# 10.

## The Paradox of Unity and Diversity

Before I attempt to picture more fully the organizational specifics of a Christian Resurgence Circle Network, I want to examine the thorny topic of diversity and unity. In the book *The Call of the Awe* I spelled out a way of building Christian theological unity rooted in the Awe experience. In this book I am working on a way of building the organizational unity needed by a network of Christian Resurgence Circles.

In every age of Christian expression there has been both diversity and unity. The age of Protestantism spawned an almost endless variety of diverse organizations, so much so that some have wondered if there can ever again be unity among Christians. Various theologies and conflicting views have also characterized the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox families of Christians. Unity was strongly emphasized throughout the Christian Middle Ages; but even during that period, diversity was vast. The various religious orders and the various geographical areas manifested marked differences.

Even during its first two centuries, Christianity was characterized by diversity. The New Testament itself contains many quite different theologies. It is easy to see that the theology of the Gospel of John is very different from the theologies of Mark, Matthew, and Luke. And, in spite of their similarities, Mark, Matthew, and Luke are likewise distinctly different theologies. And the theologies of these gospels are not the same as the theology of the historical Jesus which New Testament scholars have sorted out from these later layers of Christian memory. The theology of Paul is yet another distinct body of reflection quite different from that of the gospel writers or Jesus. The book of Revelation contains another distinct theology. The post-Pauline letters represent several more distinct theologies. Perhaps there are a dozen distinctly different theologies contained in the New Testament. Those who have attempted to harmonize all these writings into one smoothly consistent body of doctrine have not been reading their New Testament carefully enough.

Yet it is also true that the New Testament is characterized by unity, a unity that does not deny its diversity. Jesus had many admirers and followers who understood him differently than the unity of interpretation found among the New Testament writers. The scroll that bears the name of Thomas (sometimes called the Gospel of Thomas) is an example of a theology that is outside the New Testament unity. Thomas's collection of Jesus sayings depicts Jesus as a teacher of universal Spirit wisdom, but this author does not apply to Jesus the title of Christ nor dwell on the cross and resurrection. At the other extreme, there were followers of Jesus who revered him as a significant enrichment of their Jewish practice, but remained quite conservative about circumcision, dietary laws, and the like. These followers also avoided the Christ myths as well as a preoccupation with the cross and resurrection.

These three topics characterize the unity within the diversity of the writings of the New Testament: the Christ title, the cross, and resurrection. Also assumed in all "New" Testament writings is the validity of the "Old" Testament witness to a personal relationship with a unified Infinite Presence active in ordinary historical events. The New Testament witness understood Jesus to be more than a wonderful human being and an inspiring teacher. Jesus was seen as the dawn of the Messianic Era, an era in which his followers participated. They, and potentially we, participate in this era by participating in the death of Jesus as a death to the old era of willful rebellion and by participating in the resurrection of Jesus as a birth into the new era of creative obedience. However cryptic and strange such talk may seem to our twenty-first century ears, it pointed in its time to a Spirit experience that undergirds all the New Testament writings. This

was their unity, a Spirit unity that was manifest in a wide diversity of theological forms.

These early Christian communities also built some organizational unity that supported their unity of Spirit and theology. The entry ritual of baptismal washing and the repeated ritual of eating the bread and wine were manifestations of this early organizational unity. Other organizational forms were soon created. The office of the bishop was one such innovation. Another was the creation of baptismal creeds. The so-called Apostles' Creed was not written by the original disciples, but it was intended to preserve the original (apostolic) breakthrough from gnostic perversions. Some of the key words in that creed are "maker of heaven and earth," "born," "crucified," "dead," and "buried." These words were intended to offend and discourage anyone who disparaged the creation or denied the full humanity of Jesus from joining that rather informal Christian network of local groups. This creed was intended to guard the borders of Christian unity. The later creeds played a similar role.

It is a mistake, however, to assume that the essence of early Christian unity was synonymous with the organizational forms that early Christians were inventing to express and preserve their unity. The essence of their unity was a Spirit quality – a quality that is finally invisible and unreduceable to any creed or ritual or organizational structure. Organizational forms can express Spirit unity, but organizational forms also draw boundaries that imperfectly define who is and who is not part of this unity. Organizational forms both unify and divide

Some Christians have become so disenchanted with the inherited organizational forms of contemporary Christianity that they wish to avoid any fresh attempts to design organizational forms. Spirit, they say, is what is important: organizational forms are subject to perversion. And this is true. Nevertheless, for any practical historical continuance of Christianity, some sort of theological, ethical, and organizational expressions of unity must be constructed.

The typical approach of Roman Catholic reformers has been to work within the inherited organizational forms. Innovative Catholics tend to create new Spirit expressions without rejecting the old forms of Pope, Cardinal, Archbishop, Bishop, Clergy, or the authorized monastic orders. Protestants have been more inclined to reject obsolete inherited forms and start over with new organizational innovations. Yet even Protestant groups who vigorously reject the Roman Catholic forms of organization typically organized themselves with hierarchical and centralized modes of organization. For the most part it is appropriate to picture Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant organizations as fingers of one overall Christendom that began to take organizational form in the time of Constantine. These forms have been, with very few exceptions, hierarchical and centralized.

The Christian ecumenical movement has increased respect for and conversation among the various hierarchical bodies of Christendom. This movement enabled a few hierarchical organizations to combine with other hierarchical organizations into larger hierarchical organizations. Such unions brought about very little significant renewal. At its best, the ecumenical movement has been aware that the unity needed is a Spirit unity and that post-hierarchical forms are needed to express that unity. But little headway has been made in manifesting such Spirit unity in viable post-hierarchical organizational forms.

These observations underline how overwhelming it is for most Christians to envision organizational forms for a next Christianity that fully rejects hierarchical and centralized modes of organization. With this in mind, let us return to the challenge of envisioning the organizational particulars of a decentralized, post-hierarchical, Spirit-based network of Christian Resurgence Circles. Such a network, if it is to exemplify the qualities appropriate for the next millennium of Christian communal life, needs to be characterized by the full empowerment of local groups and the use of horizontal modes of relationship between these local groups. I am willing to carry this principle forward to the extent of abolishing entirely the topdown ordination

of clergy and to envision instead the development of an organic form of leadership that arises within local groups in accord with the Spirit maturity of these leadership individuals.

In order for this to happen, some deep clarity on Spirit and Spirit unity needs to be embraced by all, or almost all, the persons involved in a CRC network. To see Spirit as Awe and to know in experiential terms what we mean by Awe is a step in this direction. Such a step, however, is a huge departure from the typical patterns of Christian understanding and practice. Therefore, it will seem to many that moving in this direction creates division rather than unity. A vital CRC movement will divide people, but this division is not a new bigotry. It is a challenge to abandon all bigotry and establish community on an entirely different basis.

Being called by the Awe is the foundational unity for a vital and viable network of Christian Resurgence Circles. Within that unity we can have many forms of theological, ethical, and organizational diversity without disturbing that unity. Diversity can take place within the unity of being called by the Awe. We will not need a pope, a collective of clergy, or authorized religious teachers who decide the correct dogma, ethics, and organizational patterns. Leadership in the CRC network needs to emerge from the unity rather than unity being established by the leadership.

The call of the Awe to be the Awed Ones who trust the Awesome is the core unity needed by a viable network of Christian Resurgence Circle. But this emphasis on Awe does not mean that theological, ethical, and organizational unity have no place. Rather our constant question will be: What theological, ethical, and organizational forms best express the Awe we are experiencing?

A thoroughgoing rejection of hierarchy is an important aspect of the organizational unity that grows out such Awe experience. Rejecting hierarchy implies the promotion of every member of the network to a level of responsibility that is not typical in most religious organizations. This responsibility will include the ongoing study and thinking through of theology by each person. Though I am giving some leadership to clear theological thinking, I do not wish to see myself as a theological authority. Rather, I want to play the role of assisting my Christian resurgence companions in doing their own theological thinking. At the same time, I am working to establish a basic theological consensus in the CRC movement of which I am a member. I want this group to reject blatant and subtle forms of Biblical literalism. I am equally critical of the opposite extreme of aweless liberal rationalisms, moralisms, and sentimentalities. But between these two extremes there is much room for diversity and for vigorous theological dialogue. And if the participants in such conflicts are doing thinking on the basis of their own experiences of living rather than arguing from rigid belief systems, then these theological conflicts will be creative activities that lead to wholesome outcomes. The futile modes of theological discussion are those in which persons with different rational belief systems are banging heads with one another without ever asking how or whether these beliefs reflect anyone's actual experience.

In addition to developing some theological and organizational commonality, these decentralized local circles of Christians will be developing commonality in their ethical thinking. In the ethical arena, however, diversity will be even wider than the diversity in theological thinking. The very nature of ethical thinking is to make ambiguous decisions in the midst of current temporal conditions. Therefore, there will always be change taking place in everyone's ethical thinking, and thus there will always be a wide spectrum of views at any moment in time.

Theological, organizational, and ethical unity will exist right alongside a significant amount of diversity. More important than any particular form is the manner in which the network of circles decides upon its common theological, organizational, and ethical forms. In the next two chapters, I am going to expand upon how a CRC network might organize itself and continue to organize itself for centuries to come.

# 11.

## Honoring Both Chaos and Order

In recent years, we have seen evidence that the restructuring of religious life is a priority for humanity as a whole. We have seen Islamic fundamentalists attacking the entire modern world with fully fueled jet planes. We have seen Jewish fundamentalists clinging to obsolete notions of Jewish nationalism with almost total disregard for the worldwide consequences of their action. We have seen Christian fundamentalists take up defensive political positions that are corrosive of democracy as well as supportive of nationalistic, sexist, and racial bigotries. Religious communal life in general is in need of a major overhaul.

Most Christians have not been terrorists, but let us not overlook the fact that some Christians have bombed abortion clinics and terrorized medical personnel. Many Christian-identified people supported the state terrorism of Adolph Hitler and many still support more subtle forms of state terrorism.

In all these cases, we see religious establishments defending themselves against the challenges to change that are facing them in our actual historical circumstances. These desperately defensive religious energies show that religious obsolescence is one of the serious factors in world affairs.

Therefore, I find it helpful to focus on the practical reenvisioning of Christian community within the context of the organizational issues that are arising in all of the organizations of our times. My thinking on this topic has been helpfully provoked by Dee Hock's book *Birth of the Chaordic Age*. Reflecting on his years of engagement in founding and building Visa International, Dee Hock found that no word in the current English language held the quality he had been striving to achieve in the Visa organization and in his vision for all social institutions in the century to come. He came up with the word "chaordic."

"Chaordic" is the combination of the two words "chaos" and "order." Here is Hock's proposed dictionary entry:

**Chaordic** [kay' -ordic] adj. fr. E. chaos and order

1. the behavior of any self-governing organism, organization, or system which harmoniously blends characteristics of order and chaos. 2. patterned in a way dominated by neither chaos nor order. 3. characteristic of the fundamental organizing principles of evolution and nature.<sup>1</sup>

Hock claims that the building of a new style of organization is central and essential to meeting the pressing challenges of our times. Here is a sample of his insight:

Organizations have too long aped the traditional mechanistic, military model wherein obedience to orders is paramount and individual behavior or independent thinking frowned upon if not altogether forbidden.

In chaordic organizations of the future, it will be necessary at every level to have people capable of discernment, of making fine judgments, and acting sensibly upon them.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Hock, Dee; *Birth of the Chaordic Age* (Berrett-Kochler Publishers, Inc. San Francisco: 1999) from the fly page

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, page 264

Hock further elaborates how chaordic organizations require a different style of leadership – people who in addition to scientific and technical knowledge possess wisdom about the depth potentialities of human persons. Hock’s insights, I feel, are as crucial for the reconstruction of religious organizations as they are in the reconstruction of business organizations. Christianity, if it is to have an effective social presence in the coming millennium, will need to emphasize what Hoch calls “chaordic organization.”

Christianity in recent times has been split into two movements which are extremely critical of one another. Fundamentalism and liberalism are the popular names for these two oppositional tendencies. Scientific secularism has been the occasion for this split. The fundamentalist wing of Christianity has revolted against the “rational order” of scientific secularism in the name of preserving the “rational order” of biblical belief. From the perspective of fundamentalism, scientific secularism is a blotch of chaos upon the reasonable order of biblical teaching. But from the perspective of scientific secularism, fundamentalism is a blotch of chaos upon the reasonable order of science.

The liberal wing of Christianity has sided with scientific secularism and against the literalistic order espoused by fundamentalists. But liberal Christians have also been pressed by scientific secularism to define a meaningful place for religion – that is, to show scientific secularists that religion is a necessary part of human life. Liberal Christians have discerned this necessity for religion in two ways: (1) they point out that the best of scientific thought has arrived at the awareness that all human knowledge is approximate and surrounded with mystery, a mystery that can never be fully vanquished by scientific advances, and (2) liberal Christians point out that the human person, the individual existing human being, can never be fully understood as an object of scientific research. Both the depth of the existing human person and the mystery of the natural world reveal a space for religion within the orderly world of scientific secularism. So liberal Christians tend to affirm the mode of scientific truth and go with it as far as it will go. At that point, liberal Christians seek something more than scientific knowledge. In pursuing this quest, liberal Christians have split into an array of positions – some leaning toward order and others leaning toward chaos.

The order-leaning liberals tend to make Christianity an overarching world view that answers life’s most pressing questions. The chaos-leaning liberals (who may even renounce the brand name “liberal”) tend to make Christianity a journey into the unknown, into mystery and into the love of mystery. The notion that Christianity can provide an overarching answer to life’s most pressing questions is scorned by these chaos-leaning liberals as naive. While I identify strongly with those liberal Christians who affirm the inexhaustible mystery of human life, I also see the need to think comprehensively and rationally and to fully honor the vast heritage of Christian written forms. So I see myself living somewhere between the extremes of Christian order seekers and Christian chaos lovers. I envision a third type of Christian liberalism, and I am willing to suggest that “chaordic” is an adjective that may distinguish it.

The chaordic Christianity that I am envisioning affirms the order of scientific secularism and then adds to that ordered thoughtfulness the view that religion is not about bringing order out of chaos but about embracing the chaos of life fully in an orderly fashion. Such a Christianity will contend with both reductionistic order and thoughtless chaos. Fundamentalism, for example, can be opposed on both of these grounds: (1) fundamentalism is a chaotic rejection of scientific orderliness and (2) fundamentalism is an attempt to reduce the Christian religion to a pattern of static rational beliefs. A chaordic Christianity would insist that the basic impetus of healthy religion is not to make sense of life but to express in an orderly fashion that wild Awe that roots our living in the inexpressible Mystery.

Awe, properly understood, is another word for Holy Spirit. Awe or Spirit illumines the deep

meaning of the Scriptures and of the doctrinal history of Christianity. Nevertheless, Awe is never contained within any of these rational forms. Rational forms can be used to express Awe, but the Awe itself is irrational, disorderly, chaotic in an absolute sense. Rational form can seek to express Awe and expand our orderly living of an Awe-filled life, but rational form cannot reduce Awe to a system of order. So understood, religion is permanently placed at the crossroads between order and chaos. Religion, when it occupies its valid place in human life, is chaordic.

Chaordic is not only an appropriate attitude toward theological thought but also an appropriate attitude toward organizational forms and social ethics. Dee Hock's book has been especially helpful to me on the topic of organizational forms. Hock envisions a "Chaordic Age" in which all human institutions will abandon their over-ordered, hierarchical, topdown forms and embrace the chaos of full democratization, decentralization, and maximized creativity. He assumes that this must be done through using some quite orderly thinking about purposes and principles, people and concepts, structures and practices.

I am convinced that the twenty-first century communal forms of Christianity need to follow Hock's lead. By this I am saying that Christians need to abandon their inherited over-ordered, hierarchical, topdown forms and embrace the chaos of full democratization, decentralization, and maximized creativity. This means inventing fresh practical forms for Christian communal life. And this means doing some ongoing innovative thinking about purposes and principles, people and concepts, structures and practices.

In the next chapter I will deal in some detail with the ongoing task of doing innovative thinking about the purposes and principles, people and concepts, structures and practices of the next formation of Christian community.

## 12.

# A Consensus Process for Perpetual Organizational Designing

Let us assume the existence of a network of Christian Resurgence Circles. Let us assume that the members of this network are practicing a common theological method, a basic ethical impetus, and a similar view of Christian community. At the present time, such a Christian religious culture is a work in progress. No one knows precisely what the finished product will be. This chapter is about how to organize our thinking in relation to the ongoing building that culture. It is a chapter about process not answers. It is an abstract chapter about method with little specific content. The tentative illustrations that are given are my guesses about the emerging consensus among the Christian Resurgence Circles I am envisioning.

If a thousands CRCs were living and working out of their cultural commonality, they would surely ask one another, "What is our purpose?" In answering this question, they might feed off of H. Richard Niebuhr's statement "*the purpose of the church is to increase among human beings the love of God and neighbor.*" This statement resonates with the basic thrust of this book, but it is cryptic. An actual network of Christian Resurgence Circles would need to spell out what they mean by "neighbor," "love," and "God."

Every organized group of people has a purpose, a common purpose that tells them why they are a group in the first place. This purpose may be rather invisible and not fully articulated, but some sort of purpose must exist. Purpose, according to Dee Hock, is the beginning point for thinking through the commonality of any organization. Hock goes on to suggest that every organization needs to think through all these aspects of social form: *Purpose, Principle, People, Concept, Structure, and Practice*. I am going to summarize Dee Hock's definition of each of these aspects of organizing and then apply them to organizing a network of Christian Resurgence Circles.

### Purpose

Dee Hock says, "To me *Purpose* is a clear, simple statement of intent that identifies and binds the community together as worthy of pursuit. It is more than what we want to accomplish. It is an unambiguous expression of that which people jointly wish to become."<sup>3</sup>

This clearly applies to a network of Christian Resurgence Circles. As we who are forming this network state our purpose for being this network, we give ourselves our sociological identity. If we do not have a clear purpose, we do not have enough decisional power to survive and evolve.

So how do we state the purpose of a Christian Resurgence Circle Network? Here is the current bent of my own thinking: "Christian resurgence" is itself a key category for describing the purpose of a Network of Christian Resurgence Circles. Giving fresh organizational form to the Spirit that powered the original Christian breakthrough is the meaning of "Christian Resurgence." Surely this is a central point in our statement of purpose. Our purpose is carry forward this specific lineage. And our purpose is to do this in a manner that is fresh, relevant, and appropriate for the times in which we live and toward which we are moving. Even as current Buddhist movements and their adaptations to Western society are making significant contributions, so also a Christian resurgence can be a gift of immeasurable importance to the

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., page 8

future of humanity on this planet. Our purpose also includes bringing these fresh Christian energies to bear upon the world at large – making significant contributions to the ecological and justice crises of our times.

While the purpose of a resurgent Christianity includes its ethical contributions to the vast needs of humanity and the planet, the purpose of Christian resurgence is deeper than any immediate social agenda. The purpose of the network of Christian Resurgence Circles is to establish in history a prophetic community, a community that will be a resource for Earth care and human justice for thousands of years. It will be part of our purpose to insist that humanity can restyle its presence on this planet and thus survive for thousands of years into the future. It will be part of our purpose to keep alive the foundational optimism that humans, in spite of their many perversions, are in essence Spirit beings, capable of being the Awed Ones – filled with compassion, freedom, trust, and tranquility. And if we understand that being the Awed Ones is what it means to “love God,” then perhaps Niebuhr has indeed summarized our purpose in his statement “*the purpose of the church is to increase among human beings the love of God and neighbor.*”

Statements of purpose are never complete. They change and evolve. And as we think through the other categories of Hock’s chaordic organization, our purpose may be elaborated further and may change significantly.

## Principle

Dee Hock says, “By *Principle* I mean a behavioral aspiration of the community, a clear unambiguous statement of a fundamental belief about how the whole and all the parts intend to conduct themselves in pursuit of the purpose. A principle is a precept against which all structures, decisions, actions and results will be judged.”<sup>4</sup>

So what are some of the principles that might give specific guidance to a network of Christian Resurgence Circles? We have already explored some of these:

- CRCs are covenant communities, not drop-in groups.
- CRCs are organized alongside rather than within current denominational congregations.
- CRCs employ horizontal modes of organization and use consensus processing.
- CRCs study and evolve a theology and ethics personally grounded in the Awe of their lives.
- CRCs are open to interreligious dialogue but are rooted in Christian heritage.

This list could be expanded and each such principle could be extensively discussed in an entire chapter. Some of my previous chapters have already done that.

## People

Dee Hock says that “the *People* . . . need to be participants in the enterprise in order to realize the purpose in accordance with the principles.”<sup>5</sup>

It seems to me that we who are exploring Christian Resurgence Circles are discovering three categories of people who are participating in these circles: inquirers, full members, and leadership.

*Inquirers* are those who are willing to try out attending CRC meetings for a quarter or more in order to more deeply probe their understanding of resurgent Christianity and to decide

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., page 8

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., page 9

whether this will be part of their religious practice.

*Full members* are those who have adopted resurgent Christianity as their core religious practice and have committed themselves to attend CRC meetings for perhaps the rest of their lives and to assume responsibility for the emergence and well being of the entire CRC network.

**Leadership** means those full members who are the most clear about CRC purposes and principles and who are committed to being the Awed Ones who give form and expression to their Awe and thus assist others to do so. In the beginning of a new CRC, such leaders are those around whom the group coalesces and becomes established. As a group continues to exist, other leadership will arise from the group. Leadership is organically grown rather than hierarchically appointed.

## Concept

Dee Hock says, “By *Concept* I mean a visualization of the relationships between all of the people that would best enable them to pursue the purpose in accordance with their principles.”<sup>6</sup>

I am envisioning the basic organizational concept of the next manifestation of Christianity as a network of Christian Resurgence Circles. This organization is Spirit driven, fully democratic, led by whoever is most smitten with Awe and willing to become skilled in living the life of an Awed One. By “network” I mean the establishment of those specific patterns of interrelationship among the circles that are found to be mutually enhancing and enabling to the emergence of other circles. The network also enables common social mission among the various circles.

## Structure

Dee Hock says, “By *Structure* I mean the embodiment of purpose, principles, people, and concept in a written document capable of creating legal reality in an appropriate jurisdiction, usually in the form of a charter and constitution or a certificate of incorporation and bylaws. It is the written, structural details of the conceptual relationships – details of eligibility, ownership, voting, bodies, and methods of governance. It is the contract of rights and obligations between all participants in the community.”<sup>7</sup>

Here, I believe, are some of the appropriate guidelines for structuring a vital network of Christian Resurgence Circles:

- Organize only those legal nonprofit and for-profit corporations that are needed to carry out some particular purpose or set of purposes.
- Constitute the board of directors of these organizations with people who are members of the Christian Resurgence Circle Network.
- Give the staff of these organizations the liberty to serve the entire network in accord with their own best intuitions and wisdom.

With these guidelines in mind, what types of legal entities might be brought into being?

- There might be continental organizations that do publications and leadership training. These organizations are validated through their use and support by local circles.
- There might be regional organizations that coordinate quarterly weekend gatherings for all the circles in that region. Local circles might appoint board members to these regional bodies. Within the oversight of such boards, the staff of these regional organizations could have considerable autonomy to serve local circles in the manner they discern to be best.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., page 10

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., page 11-12

- Local circles might also design service organizations that minister to a specific social need in the local community of that particular circle. Some or all of the members of a CRC might constitute its board of directors. Or such an organization might recruit board members, paid staff, and volunteers from a wide spectrum of religious and secular groups. The specific purpose of such an organization tells us how to design its principles of operation, its people, and its basic concept, structure, and practice. These organizational basics need to be thought through by the people who will be serving on the board and by the staff who do the actual work. No hierarchically passed-down patterns of operation need to be stipulated. Each local group can learn from things being done elsewhere, but then follow its own intuitions and wisdom in doing its own planning of actions that befit its situation.

In other words, when we are dealing with matters of detailed organizational structuring, we need to trust the practical intelligence of Spirit-inspired human beings living in the local situation in which the structuring is taking place. Mistakes will be made, but mistakes are part of any learning process. Prescribed topdown patterns are often more mistake prone than locally initiated structuring. Indeed topdown patterns are themselves a mistake which squelches creativity and encourages pretense.

## Practice

Dee Hock says, “By *Practice* I mean the deliberations, decisions, and acts of all participants in the community functioning within the structure in pursuit of purpose in accordance with principles.”<sup>8</sup>

In the CRC network I am imagining, practice will be flexible for each person, each circle, and each missional organization. Spirit, creativity, and practicality are perhaps the main guidelines.

The term “practice” for a religious organization has an overtone of meaning not found in every organization. A vital religious practice can be understood to be “practice” for living our whole lives. Imagine a pianist who is practicing for a concert to be played in Carnegie Hall. The practice is important in itself, but it is also important as preparation for the big performance. So it is with religious practice. Religious practice is important in itself, but it is also important as preparation for the performing of one’s entire day-by-day living.

This relationship between religious practice and living our whole lives first became clear for me when I realized that true Christian prayer was the practice of freedom. Praying is practice for being freedom in one’s daily life. If I pray for my own health, I am not doing some sort of magic; I am practicing my freedom so that in my daily life I will be that freedom in relation to choosing relevant opportunities to optimize my health. If I pray for justice or ecological sanity, I am practicing my freedom in order to be ready to be freedom in responding to my opportunities to make a difference in those arenas.

Meditation or silent prayer has a similar relationship to the whole of life. Sitting in silence is important in and of itself, but it is also practice for being awake in every aspect of life.

Both solitary and group religious practice is practice for life as a whole. In a sense, religion stands on its own as one part of our lives. But at the same time, religion is nothing in itself; it is only practice for the whole performance of our living. Christian religious practice is a huge topic. It is so important for the overall vision of this book that I have chosen to devote the entire next chapter to this topic.

This completes my dialogue with Dee Hock’s outline of an overall process for organizational thinking. I have applied this process to how Awed Ones who gather to be a revitalized Christian

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid., page 13

practice continually build an operating consensus about their organizational commonality. The specific examples in this chapter should not be taken as prescriptive but rather as illustrative of this organization-building process. I believe that the basic concept of a Christian Resurgence Circle Network is an illuminating direction for the future of Christian community, but the details of what this direction means will need to be worked out by the people who are the actual embodiment of this vision.