

17. Circles, Assemblies, Guilds, and Retreats

The methods described in the preceding chapter and the theology described throughout all the previous chapters do not fit well into the inherited structures of Christendom. Never has the old dictum about new Spirit-wine requiring new wineskins been more appropriate than right now in this turning point of Christian history. Protestant, Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and all the other long-established expressions of the Christian religion are now in decline. Even though there are strong flare ups of conservative backlash, the trajectory of Christendom is steadily down. In many once-Christian nations, the Christian alumni are greater in number than the active church members. And the most sensitive descendants of this complex set of religious heritages are the ones who are the most uncomfortable with attending the old institutions. Nevertheless, we can see within these obsolete containers occasional upwellings of valid insight and enthusiasm. We also see the supporters of these obsolete containers fighting against positive upwellings in passionate defense of the indefensible.

In spite of these strong signs of decay, the old forms are going to last a while longer. Perhaps they need to last until the more adequate forms have come into being to replace them. Many pastors and other church leaders are already living a schizophrenic life: (1) on the one hand, being administrators of what they know is a dying institution, and (2) on the other hand, building new social forms alongside the old for those who are ready for them.

My task in this chapter is to describe my intuitions about those new social forms. I do not intend this to be a rejection of the good work that many church leaders are doing within their dying institutions. I strongly support the work of assisting those institutions to die gracefully and helpfully in any way that they can. But for an increasing number of aware Christians, the imagining and building of new organizational forms has become first priority.

A New Birth of Intimacy

Archeological evidence seems to support the fact that pre-civilization peoples lived in tight-knit groups of about 150 adult members. Extrapolating from the size of the neocortex of various primates including humans, the British anthropologist Robin Dunbar concluded that the “mean group size” for humans was 150 members, with an “intimate circle size” of 12. However valid such research may be, it is remarkably suggestive of something being discovered by current religious experimenters. In our general society we are missing effective social forms of those two “intimate” sizes. We have circles of friends and various volunteer organizations in those size ranges, but the seriousness of purpose typical of groups of these sizes do not compare with the seriousness being attached to nations and states. Great pressure is being applied upon singular individuals to succeed within the fabrics of these huge social structures. We seldom sense a comparable urgency for our more intimate associations to succeed. Many people have very little life within intimate groups. They are basically alone within huge social collectives. Modern society in general can be said to suffer from both immense collectivism and lonely individualism. And when wealthy individuals game the collective society in their individual favor, human life becomes especially mean.

I am suggesting very strongly that the Next Christianity needs to “pioneer” strong social forms in the size ranges of 12 and 150, and do so on behalf of humanity at large. I am giving these new social forms of Christian practice names: The *Christian Resurgence Circle* and the *Regional Assembly*. The Christian Resurgence Circle, as I envision it, is a committed and disciplined group that meets for meaningful ritual, serious study, and intimate care for one another. The Regional Assembly is (ideally)

about 12 of those Circles meeting together quarterly for a whole day or weekend. When 12 Circles of 12 people meet together, that is 144 people. That is my optimal picture of the next sociological design of the “local church” in my vision of a Next Christianity.

So let us explore in our imaginations this quite practical dream of 12 or more Circles of 3 to 12 adults meeting weekly in twelve places within driving distance, and meeting quarterly all together for Spirit refreshment, theological clarity and discussion, a eucharist meal, plus planning and common work toward the expansion of a CRC Network and its mission to its region of Earth and humanity. This model for the next local church requires no church buildings, no janitor, no secretary, and no pastor. Living rooms and rented space suffice. And every member is pastor, janitor, and secretary in whatever proportion results from the skills and choices by the persons involved.

(1) The Magic of Circles

There have been various house church experiments going on in both conservative and liberal venues. Most of them strike me as theologically, methodologically, and missionally inadequate. They tend to carry forward the same dogmatic attitudes, moralism, and sentimentality that characterizes so many congregations. More interesting to me have been the base communities launched within Latin American Catholicism by Liberation Theology priests and lay persons. These small groups of mostly working people push for new social justice for the poor, a theology of liberation, and an alternative to the overreaching hierarchical church structuring. Also instructive are the sanghas of renewed Buddhism. Here also are disciplined small groups who are serious about accessing our common profound humanness. Whatever be their gifts or weaknesses, these groups are witnessing to a felt need for intense small group religious practice.

The Next Christianity being recommended in this book, envisions a type of small-group Circle in which the methods and theology described in this manifesto are operating. The name “Circle” is recommended because it emphasizes seating equidistant from a center, symbolizing a full manifestation of the “priesthood of all believers.” This circle pattern has been pioneered by radical feminist movements, and it does provide fresh air for women. Such circling does not mean watering down the members to a common mediocrity, but rather the upgrading of all members to a fully competent leadership status. These envisioned circles are leader-full, rather than leaderless. There will be differences in leadership capacities, but even the most skilled and dedicated do not sit on raised platforms or take on special seating.

The specific experiment in small group practice in which I have been participating for over two decades has used the longer name “Christian Resurgence Circle,” or CRC for short. Every new invention of religious practice needs to describe its practice and make clear what that practice is and what it is not. Here is a summation of what my group’s 20-year exploration has envisioned a CRC to be and not to be:

A CRC Is Not:

- A Church School Class
- A Study Group
- An Open-Discussion Group
- A Circle of Friends
- A Meditation Circle
- A Spirit Group with Spirit leader
- An Interreligious Dialogue
- A Men’s or Women’s Support Group
- A Peer-Counseling Circle

A Social Action Task Force

All these activities are good and may be led or participated in by CRC members, but they do not describe a CRC.

A CRC Is:

A CRC is a disciplined group who practice together (mind, Spirit, & body) with being a base community for a Next Christianity. This religious practice is designed for 3-12 persons meeting weekly for at least two hours. While the particular meeting times and disciplines are designed by each Circle, we have found that meeting face-to-face weekly for two hours is a baseline necessity. It is a viable continuation of the Sabbath heritage.

A CRC is rooted in Christian practice. By “Christian” we mean a basic loyalty to the history-changing and continuously transformative event of dying to our illusions and rising to authentic life – an event indicated by Jesus-as-Messiah, retold by word of mouth, and restated in Christian Scriptures and traditions. Such an understanding is outlined in this manifesto.

A CRC is rooted in the radical Christian theological awakening dating back to at least the innovations of Søren Kierkegaard. Such theology affirms radical social responsibility and continues to take in further respect for women’s experience, equity topics of all types, ecological responsibility, interreligious respect & dialogue, and other edge topics of intense relevance to a Christian practice.

The CRC group practice uses a nurture design constructed upon the frame of Confession, Celebration, and Dedication.

A CRC is an ongoing experiment in religious innovation made by a whole network of CRCs acting together. As a whole group of CRCs we strive to evolve for ourselves and our descendants a structure of living practice that can become or influence significantly the base communities of a widespread Next Christianity. This networking is a key part of the whole pattern, for it can hold the balance between a commonality of religious practice and ongoing local experimentation. Each CRC needs to remain open to its own best intuitions without being so alone that it easily disintegrates into its own narrow egoisms. Being a vital Next Christianity requires both a planetary commonality and a local autonomy. How to balance those seemingly conflicting values is part of the sociological challenge we face.

(2) Quarterly Assemblies

An Assembly is conceived as a quarterly gathering of CRC members. These gatherings might be a 10 am to 4 pm Saturday event which includes an inspirational talk, breakout groups, a communion luncheon, and an afternoon of planning the common mission as well as the nurture and expansion of that regional group of CRCs. Such meetings would be carefully planned and carried out by leadership taken from all or most of the CRCs involved. Perhaps once a year they come together for an entire weekend. In my own experience, I have not yet experienced a sufficient number of CRCs in close enough proximity to experiment with these Assembly dynamics. Nevertheless, the eventual appearance of such a common structure seems to me absolutely necessary.

(3) Guilds

“Guild” is a generic name for any group that CRC members participate in or organize to do a specific service or to make a revolutionary input into their region. A Guild may be composed of members from some or all of the Circles as well as persons

who are not members of a Christian Circle. And these region-wide tasks of social contribution are not carried out in the name of the Circles or the Assemblies, but are the contributions of bodies having secular names and organized in terms of making specific contributions that many different backgrounds of people may share in making. Calling this a “Guild” assumes that this organization would have only the amount of continuity needed for a particular social contribution, and that it might go out of being when its task is completed. Some Guilds might be ongoing or a significant period – such as an ecological organization, a theater troupe, a small business-help center, a coffee house & educational center, a cooperative-organic-food network, a protest organization, etc. Each of these organizations and/or operations would be composed of whomever is committed to that task and has the competence for it.

For example, if something does not already exist, a group concerned with **Climate-Crisis** would surely be needed. The common citizenry of every region needs to be mobilized for this cause. Also, every local region needs to find organized ways to promote “good” law making and its enforcement. It is not adequate to turn law making over to local old-boys clubs or to groups of political pros and their big business lobbyists. Local people need to design the spirit-of-the-law, if not all its details, and insist on the selection of representatives that carry out that spirit. People in every local region of the United States (or any other nation) need to work on the economic, political, and cultural aspects of every urgent topic.

One of the activities that might take place at a Quarterly Assembly of CRC members would be some discussion and planning concerning what service organizations (Guilds) are needed in this region, and which ones that already exist are in need of improvements that could be promoted by the members of this Assembly of Christians.

(4) Retreats

“Retreats” is another generic category for a wide variety of organizations – organization that might be viewed as the opposite of “Guilds,” (Guilds might be called “Advances” rather than “Retreats.”) By “Retreat” is not meant a withdrawal from mission but a withdrawal in preparation for mission. “Retreats” are programs that have to do with awakening individual persons, training leadership, doing Spirit research, resolving polity questions or economic issues of the CRC Network, and more. Retreats can be constructed for CRC members and for the general public.

For example, one sort of Retreat would be an odyssey practicing a set of Spirit methods like those mentioned in Chapter 16. Another Retreat would be a theological and methodological Leadership Training School. Another would be a Research Symposium, working out new theological edges, methods of nurture, and needed missional thrusts. Another might be a conference of local CRC leaders for working out decisions that affect the whole CRC network or some part of it.

Enablement Offices

Each of the above organizations may require a volunteer or staffed enablement office to support their various functions. Some of these offices will be ongoing, staffed, and financially supported by Circle members and other interested persons. The nonprofit organization called “Realistic Living” in Bonham, Texas, is such an office. It is reasonable to hope that three more such offices might be opened in the next decade: one in Canada and on both East and West coasts of the U.S.

These ongoing enablement offices need to be composed of skilled people who are also CRC members, who are committed to the whole CRC Network, and who are willing to be thoroughly trained in the theology and methods of this specific venture in

a Next Christianity experimentation. The polity of this arrangement needs to affirm both the participation of local circle members in the policy making as well as the independent creativity of these staffed offices. The Circles need to advise and financially support these offices, and these offices need to focus on serving the Circles that support them. These offices need to take care not to be behooven to monetary sources beyond the constituency of the CRC network.

Obviously, this is only a sketch of the organizational direction that a Next Christianity needs to take. Even though this pattern has overlaps with older patterns, the style and focus is very different. This is not a new denomination. It is not a monastic order. Overall, it is something significantly different from what Christian imagination has come up with in previous centuries. And this model is already something more than an off-the-cuff set of ideas; it is a consensus in the making among an expanding segment of Christian practitioners. And it is a consensus still in progress. This chapter is part of a manifesto with both a serious past and some yet to be written future.

A Leadership League

Without reinventing the clergy, we need to take seriously the need for trained leadership. We need to maintain the principle that every CRC member is a leader, and at the same time make provision for the preparation of self-selected leadership cores who have the devotion, commitment, theological training, and methodological skill needed to organize this novel and radical CRC Network and maintain its quality. A first experiment in launching such a Leadership League is outlined in the Appendix.