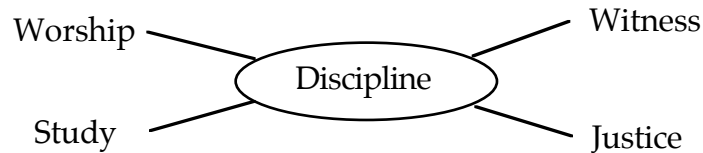


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A Fresh Look at the Bug Model

Decades ago my teacher and mentor Joe Mathews and others developed a course on the dynamics of the local church. That course began by supposing we had just arrived from Mars on a space ship entitled Christian Mission to Planet Earth. As we took our place in some local community that had never heard of Christianity, we were challenged to begin a local church. This exercise enabled us to see the essential character of these five dynamics: Worship, Study, Disciplined Community, Witness to the Christian self understanding, and Acts of Love for the overall well-being (Social Justice) of that local place. Worship and Study were grouped together as nurture activities. Witness and Justice were grouped together as missional activities. Disciplined Community was the body that held in being all these other activities. The following diagram, affectionately entitled “the bug model,” was the main board image for this course:



The Symposium on Christian Resurgence for Century Twenty-One came into being to do thoughtful research and embodied experimentation with regard to appropriate sociological expressions of Christian practice for these times. We have concluded along with Douglas John Hall and other Christian thinkers that the current forms of Christian community are obsolete, appropriate for the Middle Ages and the Modern revolt from the Middle Ages, but inappropriate for Postmodern times.

Though the currently needed changes are massive, the dynamics in the above “bug” diagram remain essential not only for the past forms but also for future forms of Christian practice.

One very important assumption held by this bug model is that Christian practice is communal. Solitary exercises are included in Christian practice, but the communal nature of Christian practice is primary. The opposite might be said for some forms of Buddhism in which communal life is included but the solitary practices are primary. Nevertheless, the Buddhist sangha or local communal body is worthy of our attention as we seek to fertilize our imaginations relative to what the local communal life of the future forms of Christian practice needs to look like.

Intimacy and discipline are two very important qualities present in many sanghas but absent in many Christian congregations. The Christian Resurgence Circles being organized by the Symposium are, above all else, experiments in intimacy and discipline. A Circle of 4 to 12 people which emphasizes honest sharing and the grounding of religious topics in life experiences has intimacy. No one gets lost in a crowd of people. No one can, for long, hold his life issues secret or treat religion as a peripheral matter. Such intimacy is a recovery of what it means to be the body of Christ and to be Christ to one another. Christian religion that is spoon-fed to the masses by a hierarchy of priests, monks, and nuns, or pastors, bishops, and theologians is obsolete religion. Intimate circles are the body of the bug. These intimate circles may meet together in wider associations, perhaps quarterly, but the intimate Circle is foundational.

And what does it mean for these intimate groups to be disciplined? On the most elemental level, these circles are constituted by the promise or covenant to spend two hours together every week. Also implied is the covenant to do whatever study preparations and leadership preparations are needed to make these weekly sessions effective. Even deeper is the implied discipline of being open to Spirit maturation and to making that maturity manifest in all aspects of living. Without such discipline the Circle falls out of being or becomes superficial.

So, what about the legs of the bug? First of all, what is nurture? What is Study? What is Worship?

Study means serious effort to understand living the Christian faith and its ethical implications. Study is the engagement of the mind in relation to the transrational actualities of Trust, Freedom, Compassion, Tranquility, REALITY, and so forth. Such study needs to be selected for the particular group so that it is

both accessible to them and relevant to their needs.

Worship is an artistic activity. It includes the overall drama of the scheduled time together. It includes ritual, singing, sharing, celebrating, praying, perhaps silence, perhaps dancing. Worship is the art form of the entire time together. Art engages the emotional intelligence and this is essential for fully experiencing the transrational actualities of Spirit – that is, Awe, the Awesome, and being the Awed Ones.

Next, what is the Mission? What is Witness or Witnessing Love? What is Justice or Justing Love?

The **Mission** of the Circle is an important aspect of the Circle. The Circle must first establish itself as a disciplined community and nurture its own members. Otherwise there is no one there to do the mission. But this does not mean that the community, its discipline, its worship, and its study are only for the sake of the mission. All aspects of the bug stand on their own as intrinsically valuable. At the same time mission is an essential outgrowth of community, worship, and study. Attention must be paid to mission. Christian community is something more than a psychological support group. It is a presence in the world. It is an ethical assault upon suffering and injustice. It is a healing ministry toward the illnesses of despair, delusion, bondage, and malaise wherever these humanity-crushing sicknesses occur.

What does **Witnessing Love** actually look like for an individual Circle? It may take place as individual relationships with those touched by each Circle member. And the members of the Circle may also act together, perhaps with other circles, to put on courses, to arrange for workshops, to schedule events featuring inspirational speakers, to put on music performances, dramas, pageants, parades the list here is endless. Witnessing love is any activity aimed at healing the depth levels of human lives.

What does **Justing Love** look like for an individual Circle? Again this may take place as individual members join and work within the various movements and organizations that are most relevant in that neighborhood and to current historical transitions. And the members of the Circle may act together, perhaps with other circles, on some matters. I need not make a list of those possibilities. I only want to insist that each Circle be open to the possibility that they are a body from which the initiation of new social thrusts can emerge. These initiations need not be done entirely by Circle members. Most concrete social projects can gather persons of good will from many other religious practices and from the general society. The continuing consideration that accompanies such activities is this: What is the unique contribution being made by the Christian Circle? What qualities of leadership, what group methods, what vision, what strategy, what skills for working with people has our life together in the circles prepared us to contribute?

These brief summary statements only scratch the surface of these five dynamics of the bug model. The purpose of this article is to paint with fresh strokes an overall portrait of the needed local community of Christian practice. Also, I want to invite you, whoever you are, to consider joining or organizing such a Circle and thereby becoming part of this experimentation on behalf of Christian Resurgence for Century Twenty-One.