

Symposium Paper Number Four

Gene Marshall – November 2003

Envisioning Christian Religious Forms for Century Twenty-One

I am thrilled and grateful for what we, the Symposium members, have accomplished in our first four and a half years. At the same time I feel that we need to have in our imaginations a motivating and challenging picture of the future. We will not be able to realize that future quickly or easily, but having the picture opens us to its possible realization. I see three Symposium priorities: Clear Focus, Spirit Leadership Power, and Project Expansion. In this paper I will reflect on the topic of Clear Focus.

We need a clear picture of what we are out to accomplish and, therefore, a deep, appropriate, and intelligent commitment of life, time, and resources to this project. It is not necessary that each of us do exactly the same things in exactly the same amounts. Obviously, the Symposium project is not the only thing going on in our lives. But whether a member gives 5% or 50% of his or her time to Symposium work, we need to be clear what that work is and why it is important in the broad sweep of history.

So, why is a vital resurgence of Christian practice crucial for each of us personally and for millions of other people? Indeed, what is a religious practice, and why is any religious practice needed? Further, how do we see pioneering and establishing a fresh expression of Christian practice related to meeting the pressing needs of our times? Still further, how do we see pioneering and establishing a fresh expression of Christian practice related to meeting the needs of humanity for the next thousand years?

Thinking through such topics requires an understanding of Spirit experience and how Spirit experience has been articulated and can be re-articulated in an up-to-date Christian theology. And secondly, it requires a sociological picture of the religious forms implied by our times for giving enduring form to Spirit and to the expression of Spirit in an up-to-date Christian theology and practice. Inventing religious forms is a challenging risk of creativity that may or may not succeed in expressing Spirit. Nevertheless, Spirit can never be lived in the abstract; Spirit is always manifest in religious forms. We are already creating those forms. Here is a chart of Spirit as seen through the lens of the Christian Trinity and of the religious forms we have been discussing and embodying. Sometimes a chart is worth a thousand words even if it takes a thousand words to explain it.

Spirit Experience	Father/Mother	The Awesome	There is no reality but THE REALITY.		
	Daughter/Son	The Awed Ones	Every human being is potentially the MESSIAH.		
	Holy Spirit	The Awe	We can experience now the states of human ESSENCE.		
Religious Forms	Continental Symposium	Local Circle	Regional Assembly	Training School	Solitary Practice
	Invention and testing of religious forms Consensus building Publications books, e-matter, manuals, songs, liturgies	The weekly gathering of the Awed Ones The core or base community of the planetary ecclesia Discipline nurture & mission	The quarterly gathering of Local Circles Celebration & Expansion of Circles Common actions events, courses, projects, protests	Personal journey guidance Leadership contexts Leadership methods & skills	An everyday discipline, individually constructed Christian context Eclectic methods

The top portion of this chart has been rather thoroughly explained in my book *The Call of the Awe*. I will focus in this paper on the bottom portion of the chart.

Continental Symposium

This was the first religious form we invented. In the beginning we did not see that we, the Symposium, were one of the five primary religious forms we were inventing. Now it is clear that the Christian “ecclesia” or “church” of the future will always need Symposiums that perform the knowing function of thinking through afresh the Christian theology needed for the times and inventing afresh the communal forms, spirit methods, study materials, contexts for mission, and ongoing inspiration for the whole body.

Local Circle

Discovering through experience what it means to be a weekly local expression of the new Christian “ecclesia” or “church” has become a primary focus of our attention. However confusing and challenging this venture may seem, we have already proved to the satisfaction of most of us that meeting weekly with a committed group open to Spirit experience and Spirit maturity is remarkably effective in fostering strength and clarity and enduring commitment to being Spirit beings and enacting Spirit outreach to the planet.

Regional Assembly

This is our newest experiment. We are beginning to see that those of us who have done Christian renewal have always done the dynamics this social structure is being designed to embody. We have done and will need to continue doing awakening events such as inspirational speeches, convocations, dialogues, panels, pageants, parades, dramas, fireside chats -- all those things that can be done in one evening or one day. We will also need to continue doing longer programs such as courses, workshops, and retreats. The Regional Assembly can also provide the venue for initiating social projects that gather Christians and others from that region together for action. All these types of action define the purpose of the Regional Assembly. In addition, this dynamic can take the form of a quarterly meeting in which all the local circles in a given region gather to design and plan and implement the timely actions needed in their region. It is becoming apparent that the main task of the Local Circle is nurture or simply being disciplined community that heals lives. The common missional outreach of a Circle will almost always be done in conjunction with other Circles. If a Circle is the only Circle in a region, then it will need to act as the Regional Assembly until a second and third and fourth Circle comes into being in that region. And probably the first outreach task of a single Circle will be to give speeches and put on events, programs, and courses that inspire the organization of additional Circles.

Training School

We have now conducted four three-day Leadership Training Schools. It has become clear that Spirit leadership power is key to the success of this entire project. No Circle can become what it needs to be without Spirit leadership. No other component of the new “ecclesia” can become what it needs to be without Spirit leadership. In our meetings together, in our e-mail communications, in our solitary practices, in everything having to do with the Symposium project, releasing our own true selves is a huge priority. The purpose of the Training School is to boost the emergence of leadership power in those attending the school. This includes personal journey guidance by guides who have been walking the path of Spirit maturity. And it includes learning methods, skills, and overall contexts for giving Spirit leadership in both Christian and secular groups.

Solitary Practice

Last but not least is the everyday discipline of taking time to do religious practices that give each day its Spirit context and build Spirit consciousness bit by bit. Each person needs to construct a practice that works for him or her. Methods may be gathered from many sources: Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, Sufi, secular, and others. At the same time, it is also an important aspect of this experiment to give our solitary practices a Christian context. This is one of the challenges that is present in all aspects of our experimentation: how can our interreligious dialogues enrich our lives as Christians?