Richer, Not Dumber! The Key to Participation

RICHARD FABIAN AND SCOTT KING

Fabian: Christ is risen! The American sociologist of religion Peter Berger distinguishes modern societies from traditional societies by a shift from givenness to rational choice about customs and what they mean. His example: at Ujamaa villages, the Tanzanian government has collected into cooperative villages tribes too small to thrive alone. The village councils like to choose days for the various tribes to dance their dances for each other as a way of fostering mutual understanding among people who may not share the same language. Here Berger finds all the elements of modernness. Earlier people had danced their dances because these simply had to be danced (when the moon rose, when the crops came in); now they are danced for a reason chosen by the village council—people could conceivably choose not to dance at all. Earlier the people danced with no audience, except perhaps the gods; now performers dance for an audience of their fellow villagers to watch and learn. Berger concludes: “dancing then and dancing now are two drastically different activities.”

In San Francisco, St. Gregory Nyssen Episcopal Church dances now, both metaphorically and literally. We are getting famous for dancing, and for the many other choices we make; and we hope other churches will join in these choices—we hope your churches will join in. Many of you have seen our video or our website or our publications or compact disks; and seminary professors tell me these stir up discussion whenever they show them.

Let me sketch the context of our choices at St. Gregory’s. Sociologists say that Americans have kept roughly the same ratio of church attendance—sixty percent—since colonial times. Until recently most Americans knew what kind of Christian they were, and what denomination to look for when they moved to a new city. But since World War II at least, San Francisco and the west half of Washington state have scored the nation’s lowest percentage: less than ten percent of our public tell census takers they have any religious affiliation at all. That includes folks who say, “I’m an Episcopalian/Catholic/Lutheran, but haven’t been to church in years,” and the ex-Catholics, ex-Jews, and ex-Episcopalians who now support Zen and other traditions. Our Bay Area is a wonderfully open, creative, and lively place, where people dine out on a different ethnic cuisine every night—and ninety percent of our public cannot even spell Episcopalian. In this context every choice we make comes under fresh judgment. And resources from the whole ecumenical world properly belong to our mission, much the way restaurants from every place feed one city.

The Diocese of California organized St. Gregory’s Church in 1978 to reach people who were not hunting for familiar twentieth-century Episcopalian trappings. We were to press forward with
the liturgical reform that had already produced the new American Book of Common Prayer, building further on the same sort of scholarly research into tradition as a resource for renewal. Above all we were to go for participation: tradition preserves popular usage, and the diverse forms of Christian worship around the world today have deep popular roots that spread far, and connect underground. So we openly mine tradition from everywhere to help us. We are a modern church, "dancing now," in Peter Berger's phrase. John Baldovin, a Jesuit professor at Weston, brought a busfull of students to Easter at St. Gregory's, and on the way home told them, "You have just had the closest experience possible to worship in the fourth century." But we're not re-creating any century. We're drawing on the whole tradition of God's conversation with humanity, for Christian mission today. Better yet, drawing on the writings of St. Gregory of Nyssa, our fourth century patron, we put our mission this way: "St. Gregory's Church invites people to see God's image in all humankind, to sing and dance to Jesus' lead, and to become God's friends."

Today St. Gregory's draws some two hundred and fifty people to three services each weekend, in a new sanctuary specifically designed for our worship, that won the A.I.A. award for the best religious architecture in the country the year we put it up. Our two hundred members' average age is late thirties—twenty years young for an Episcopal Church—and they divide roughly sixty-forty percent on most social scales: sixty percent single, sixty percent female, sixty percent straight, and so on. Most have been away from any church for years before joining us—sometimes away and angry; a number had no previous religious training. (Scott here likes to say that "Rick is part of our growing minority of lifelong Episcopalians." ) Our bishop Bill Swing says we're "open," and people who are open will like us, and people who are not open won't; he tells the press "St. Gregory's is the Episcopal Church of the future." Donald Schell and I are the founding rectors. It's a team ministry that began with seminary fieldwork in East Harlem; then we served at the Episcopal Church at Yale, where Donald married the most beautiful member of the Class of '76. And we have a terrifically active vestry, and a lay and clergy staff of six part-timers.

Music has always been a powerful force for participation and reform, and music centers St. Gregory's life. Church growth studies have found that newcomers evaluate a church quickly on the basis of the music they hear and sing. We choose high-quality music, expecting worshippers to rise to a high level, rather than stooping to the commonplace. Our music is accessible for singing off the page, and we consciously assume people can read music.

I'm delighted that a key volunteer, Scott King, can join me here today—not only standing in for our Music Director, whose other job has glued him to California, but more importantly exemplifying our lay leaders.

**King:** I have been a member since 1985, and I came back the second time to St. Gregory's because of the music. When I walked in the first time, I saw fifty people and no organ, and I wondered how the music would happen. I found out when all fifty began to sing the music, and in a few minutes I no longer noticed we had no accompaniment.

Although we have no organ, we have many drums, and we drum when we dance. Experienced drummers keep a steady rhythm so that all move together.

We find that if we assume that the natural way to make music is *a cappella* part singing we get near universal participation. Our entire congregation sings throughout the service,
unaccompanied and in harmony. Clear directions, easy-to-read sheet music, and responsive acoustics help our people sing and hear each other sing. Even untrained musicians can read the text on the page, observe whether the notes are moving up or down, and imitate the singing around them. For part music we sing the melody alone on the first verse and invite everyone to sing subsequent verses on a part they like. Having strong singers nearby is also helpful, and to this end our choir members sit at random among the people. With a little choir preparation in advance, congregational part singing goes quite smoothly.

Our music is drawn from the Christian worship of many churches. Here are plainchant and part chant, as well as hymns from the Episcopal hymnbook; from the modern collection *Wonder, Love and Praise*; and from composers encountered by our clergy and members far and wide. There are works from the Eastern Orthodox, Taizé, and early American traditions; African-American spirituals; Greek troparia; Shaker tunes; Navajo chant; and European folk songs. Selections from William Byrd and Bobby McFerrin stand next to the works of St. Gregory's composers.

A final thought: when we say we want everyone to participate, we mean it! We don't underestimate the congregation's singing abilities; it is amazing what people can accomplish, given the chance. Of course, in any group there will be some with less singing ability, but we've found that quite a few who considered themselves "tone deaf" can sing melody soon after immersion at St. Gregory's. Even the truly melodically challenged are soon droning along on a suitable note (usually the tonic or dominant) without quite knowing how they learned to do it.

**Fabian:** The late Roman Catholic professor Ralph Kiefer liked to say, "The Bible is not the Word of God. The Word of God is what God says to the Church when the Bible is read." So just as we expect people can read music (at least a little), we expect they want to hear what scholars say the Bible really says, and we give them the critical scoop in every sermon. And then we ask them to share their life experience in response. Not their opinions, or what they've heard or read or dreamt about, but the actual happenings that arose to mind during the sermon, so we can hear what God is saying to the church in their lives. People with very different opinions can share real dialog in this way, and pray aloud for each other despite all disagreement, and go out to lunch and explore God's friendship further. Or work together in our Food Pantry, serving needy families some two tons of groceries every Friday.

Beyond following the *Revised Common Lectionary* (Episcopalian trial version), we treat the whole Christian Year as a lectionary: that is, purely a way of reading the Bible in church. We choose all hymns, music, and prayers to fit the readings and liturgical actions, no matter which conventional "season" they got printed for. And we write eucharistic prayers—or extemporize them—to match the day's scriptural themes.

Above all, Easter centers St. Gregory's parish life. Scott often tells visitors: "This is an Easter church; other churches are Christmas churches. There are two seasons at St. Gregory's: Easter; and Easter's coming." Production starts with the New Year, and involves most of our people in creative work and hospitality. For years we have adapted and refined Holy Week to match Scripture scholarship and our pastoral experience, producing a workable schedule (Maundy Tuesday for the Last Supper, for example: do ask about this during question time!). And our ritual is rich in expressions from the Christian East, where Easter has always centered popular devotion. This coming January we will offer St. Gregory's third workshop on conducting Holy
Week, which already draws participants from Canterbury to Tokyo, and where we hope we may even see some Yale students soon!

The deacon runs St. Gregory's liturgy, much as in an Eastern church, marshaling everyone else and speaking more than anyone but the preacher. And the deacon's first priority is building lay ministry, inside the liturgy and out. At every service, laypeople read all our readings—including the Gospel (this is one of only three Prayer Book rubrics we break deliberately)—and lay deacons assist our ordained deacons (as they do in some Church of England parishes today). The congregation supply their own prayers during the litany, and fill the procession dancing with gifts to the altar table. Laypeople also join in our Great Thanksgiving prayer, humming a drone as the presbyter chants the prayer throughout. Therefore, chief among lay diaconal roles is the cantor. In place of an organ we have chosen a skilled cantor and choral director, who leads the congregation as well as the choir, and trains collaborators like our own Scott King.

And among laypeople, newcomers are the kings and queens, the focus of all liturgical leadership. Every deacon's announcement throughout the liturgy is scripted to enroll newcomers, and that script is honed weekly. We give people no books to get lost in, only the music they will sing—and there's plenty of that. We choose and compose music for people to learn by ear as much as by sight-reading, and we introduce it. We tell them only what they need to know next—never scaring them by telling them they're going to dance later on! By the time they've kissed the Scriptures after the sermon, and sung and prayed aloud and shared the Eucharist, nearly all our newcomers are ready to join in dancing too.

Now I'd like you to see for yourselves what I've been talking about. Our building floor plan and orientation adapts Syrian tradition from early centuries, when Christian and Jewish synagogues were similar. And our movements reflect early Byzantine use, more than Latin models. It's a two-room space, allowing processions back and forth between them. The altar stands before the entry doors, greeting newcomers with Jesus' chosen sign of hospitality, and our open-air baptistery beckons beyond. The service begins as clergy move among the people with affectionate greetings, and a short singing rehearsal; and then clergy and people together process into the nave—much as Byzantine Christians did at Hagia Sophia. In the nave we sit facing each other, while the presider sits a little elevated for preaching. (Our presider's throne is Asian style—in fact a Thai elephant howdah—broad rather than lofty.) The ambo rises at the opposite end of the seating, with a menorah and screen behind it, evoking the Jerusalem Temple layout, but pointing instead to our altar table beyond. In this way the whole gathering is orientated to the altar throughout the service. Following each reading deep Japanese bells begin two minutes' sitting in silence. Then the sermon and people's sharing end with an Alleluia procession, as we carry the Scriptures among the crowd for people to touch and kiss: you may have seen this affectionate ceremony in synagogues and Ethiopian churches.

Following the People's Prayers, the congregation processes to the altar again—now in an ancient, simple dance step (three forward, one back)—while deacons lead children bearing the eucharistic gifts from the kitchen, and all circle the table singing an entrance hymn. The Peace follows in a hubbub; then all stand with raised hands while the presider chants the Great Thanksgiving prayer and everyone hums an accompanying drone. Our choir sings two anthems: one during communion, and one afterward while we gather money and food for the church's work and the poor, and set these on the altar table along with the bread and wine, and sing "God grant them many years" to everyone celebrating special anniversaries that week. Then we
dance the carol—a circle dance as at a Greek wedding—while we sing a hymn. And finally coffee, sweets, and snacks emerge from the kitchen: these we lay out on the altar table with the eucharistic remains, and the feast continues until everyone has had enough. In this way the Eucharist and parish coffee hour are one complete feast, just as early Eucharists were.

The late Massey Shepherd, one of our current Prayer Book's authors, often said that Anglican worship has only one distinguishing feature: if you set all the prayer books from all the Anglican churches worldwide on a bookshelf, ranged strictly in order of publication dates, every prayer book will represent a significant step eastward—not to Rome, but toward Constantinople and Syria. In Shepherd's sense, St. Gregory's is an essentially Anglican church. But why stop at the Bosporus, when we can already smell the waters of the Oxus and the Indus and the Yangzi, where Christians went centuries before us, and pioneered inculturating religious tradition to spread the Gospel! We show these also to all who worship at St. Gregory's, so they will remember God's boundless love and conversation with humankind.

These pictures display the visible inclusiveness throughout our building. Beyond our altar table rises a rubbing of the famous stele at Xian commemorating the spread of Christianity by Syrian missionaries during the Tang and Yuan dynasties. Bishop K. H. Ting, President of the China Christian Council, sent this rubbing as a friendship gift to the United States. Our processions feature colorful liturgical umbrellas from Ethiopia, and also from Kerala in southern India, where missions by those ancient Syrian Christians still thrive today. Kerala churches likewise provide our oil lamps for evening worship. Our vestments come from West Africa, where men and women, both Christian and Muslim, still make brilliant chasubles for everyday wear. Our aumbry for storing consecrated bread, wine, and oils is a superb Japanese Shinto household shrine (kamidana): during the liturgy this becomes a throne for the Scriptures. After each reading, sonorous bells from Buddhist monasteries in Tibet and Japan lead our congregation into deep silence. Icons from Ethiopia hang on our walls. And to all these, our congregation's own icon painters, vestment makers, potters, and music composers steadily add more. The San Francisco iconographer Mark Dukes is completing a five-year project: while we dance about our altar table, eighty iconic saints dance on the walls above—a list chosen from three hundred exemplars our congregation nominated out of every nation and era and faith.

Such inclusiveness inevitably includes the Sacrament itself. New Testament scholarship indicates that Jesus' open table fellowship with unqualified and unprepared sinners led directly to his death; and so we follow his example explicitly, inviting all who wish to share Christ's Body and Blood, and baptizing them afterward when they are ready. Our altar table bears two inscriptions on its two pedestals. One, in Greek, an insult to Jesus preserved in St. Luke's gospel (15:2), reads: "This fellow welcomes sinners and dines with them!" The other, by St. Isaac of Nineveh (for whom St. Petersburg's cathedral is actually named), greets the newly baptized as they return from our font: "Did not the Lord share the table of tax collectors and harlots? So then—do not distinguish between the worthy and unworthy: all must be equal in your eyes to love and to serve."

ENDNOTES


2. Some of you may have read Louis Bouyer's Liturgy and Architecture (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1967).

*Richard Fabian holds degrees from Yale (summa cum laude in Chinese Studies), Cambridge, the College of the Resurrection at Mirfield, and General Theological Seminary. He served as Episcopal Chaplain at Yale, and Chaplain to the Bishop of California, and in 1978, together with his fellow Rector Donald Schell, he founded St Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church in San Francisco. He has composed and arranged service music for the Hymnal 1982, Church Hymnal Series V, Wonder Love and Praise, and Music for Liturgy II.*

*Scott King is a scientist and medical entrepreneur developing new therapies. He was educated at the University of Chicago and Harvard with degrees in chemistry. He has long participated in music, and composes hymns for use at St. Gregory’s Church in San Francisco.*