

# Grassroots Progressive Christianity

## A Quiet Revolution

By Hal Taussig

In Chicago a Tony Award–winning piano player improvises a jazz tune while some thirty church members dance and another hundred sing . . . in Phoenix a congregation can hardly wait for new scholarship on who Jesus was as a first-century Galilean . . . in Boston the United Methodist bishop, a woman, appointed a pastor to the new church formed explicitly to affirm the full participation of gays and lesbians . . . in semirural Washington some nuns are entering the twelfth year of their “Earth Ministry” dedicated to a new ecological consciousness . . . in Decatur, Georgia, a group of women that started worshipping in the late 1990s in each other’s houses has now settled into life together as a feminist congregation.

In Manhattan the thirty-year-old woman associate pastor preaches about urban poverty the morning after she was a stand-up comic in the church-sponsored night club . . . in Delaware the visiting leader of the Center for Progressive Christianity helps a group of churches examine the relationship between science and religion . . . in Wichita, the second largest United Methodist church in Kansas baptizes a child of an openly lesbian couple . . . in California’s wine country hundreds of clergy gather to hear leading biblical scholars from around the country . . . in a Capitol Hill neighborhood Episcopalians form a communion circle of more than one hundred people of different races, sexual orientations, and classes . . . in Philadelphia’s ultraconservative Roman Catholic diocese hundreds gather in an urban neighborhood parish church each week to challenge each other’s and the archdiocese’s racism . . .

In Alabama 700 people gather to hear an Episcopalian author talk about why Christianity must change or die . . . in Rochester, New York, an entire parish decides to break with the Roman Catholic hierarchy and ordain a woman to the priesthood . . . in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, a local Mennonite church which proclaims itself as a refuge for divorced people, gays, and lesbians has grown so much in the past fifteen years that it has gone through two building programs . . . in countless cities “faith sharing groups” have challenged Roman Catholic prohibitions by having eucharists in their homes without priests.

New voices celebrating a lively, open-minded, and open-hearted Christianity are emerging at the grass roots across America. Comfortable with their own faith, they also insist that they are not better than Jews or Muslims. In contrast to the old liberals of the 1960s and 1970s, these new voices are just as interested in spirituality as they are in justice. With much more confidence than Christians of the mid-twentieth century, this new momentum strongly affirms both intellectual analysis and emotional expression of one’s own faith. With constituencies of both inspired youth and seasoned leaders, new groups advocate strongly for the causes of women, gays and lesbians, and the environment. Weary of materialist decadence, these voices proclaim a Christian practice that helps individuals resist the dominant American paradigms.

*A New Spiritual Home: Progressive Christianity Emerges at the Grass Roots*, my most recent book just published by Polebridge Press, is about these new voices and their new movement. It describes, celebrates, and assesses them. Less a proposal for some new dream of Christianity, this book is the product of a yearlong research team having found

some astonishingly new developments with promise for a very different future. Indeed, what the nationwide research shows is that a similar and new kind of Christianity has emerged at the grass roots across America in the last fifteen to twenty years. This research project has dared go below the surface of reactionary Christianity struggling to hold on to the past or fading denominations unsure of what they represent. Underneath this veneer, it turns out, is a nationwide impulse well underway that is already practicing a new kind of Christianity.

These new voices do not make up the majority of Christians. But they are refreshingly confident about a new lease on Christian expression that is strikingly different from both the fundamentalism and the flailing denominations often featured in the American press. Rarely self-aware on regional or national levels, this new momentum is just discovering itself. Only within the last six or seven years has it gathered on more than the grassroots level. Because it is both within and outside ordinary Christian denominations, this phenomenon has no clear leadership. Like most grassroots experiences, it is bubbling up in a variety of forms. Like the seeds growing secretly in the gospel parable, the new voices, once identified, surprise us with their fullness.

Nor are these new communities—the research has discovered literally thousands of them—a result of some national program or initiative from above. Although they exist clearly within all denominations, including Catholicism, their emergence is not in response to an overarching collaboration among the various religious bureaucracies. Nor are they a product of some popular and charismatic national preacher. Rather, in their similarity, they come from an unorganized but broad-ranging kind of Christian response to felt needs for vital spirituality, intellectual integrity, new ways of expressing gender, an alternative to a Christian sense of superiority, and a desire to act more justly in relationship to the marginalized. This is a dispersed grassroots phenomenon across a wide range of denominationalism.

### **The Term “Progressive Christianity”**

I am calling this emergent movement of Christianity in the United States “progressive Christianity.” It is not yet the perfect term, and as the phenomenon develops, a better term may come into view. This term is descriptive inasmuch as “progressive” is a term being used increasingly by the people themselves who make up this movement. Although there is far from unanimity for the term, there are some clear signs of it working as at least a provisional word this kind of Christian uses for himself or herself. For instance, the only national organization to which this book’s subject matter approximately corresponds is the Center for Progressive Christianity. Theologian John Cobb has edited a book in the past five years that proposes a new justice-centered Christianity and calls it “progressive Christianity.” Author Marcus Borg, whose books have become quite popular with this new kind of Christian, dedicates his recent *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith* to a couple of Texans and their “commitment to progressive Christianity.”

Other terms might be used, but have distinct disadvantages. To a certain extent the term “liberal” might apply. Certainly the commitment to intellectual open-mindedness and to acting for social justice has been at the center of the self-understanding of Christians who think of themselves as liberal over the past fifty years. However, many of “liberal” churches still exist with this focus and without having developed the new excitement about spirituality and expressive worship I have discovered across the country in so many other socially conscious and intellectually stimulating churches. So I do not use

the term “liberal” for the vital new movement I want to describe. Rather, I consider a “liberal” church to be one that has not changed much in the past twenty years and has maintained a strong intellectual openness, an emphasis on social justice, a traditional worship with a lot of preaching and very little participation or expressiveness by the people, and not much attention to feminism, gay and lesbian issues, spiritual renewal and experimentation, or other religions. The new nationwide trend profiled in *A New Spiritual Home* emphasizes creative worship, feminism, gay-friendliness, and new attitudes toward other religions. In this regard, “progressive” seems preferable to “liberal” in designating the new movement, while “liberal” is a convenient term for the churches with an older mix of traditional piety, intellectual rigor, and emphasis on social justice.

“Open-minded” and “open-hearted” as a combination has much to commend it in relationship to this new movement. In contrast to the way I am using “liberal,” it connotes the new spiritual vitality of this new movement. Unfortunately, this combination is part of the new denominational motto of the national United Methodist Church: “open minds, open hearts, open doors.” While pleased that this denomination wants to claim open-mindedness and open-heartedness for all its churches, I know as a United Methodist pastor that United Methodism is much more conventional, much less creative, and much less adventuresome than the amazing set of Christian churches, organizations, and individuals documented in my research.

Something also needs to be said about the term “Christian” in the descriptor “progressive Christianity.” Although the emergent movement I am describing does not think of Christianity as better than other religions, that does not mean that the participants in this movement are not Christians. Some of those described in this book are somewhat uncomfortable with the self-designation “Christian.” And, they do seem quite different from the majority of Christians in the United States. Nevertheless, there does not seem to be a better term for people who talk about Jesus, read the Bible regularly, and practice the rites of breaking bread and baptizing those new to the community as this new movement does. So I have concluded that just because these new Christian communities do not conform to some of the conventional models does not mean that they are not Christian.

Even though forms of conservative or reactionary Christianity may dominate the American scene and even embarrass some participants of the new movement, I am quite sure that it is not only accurate, but also important to call this new movement “progressive Christianity.” This distinguishes progressive Christians from evangelical Christians, cultural Christians, New Age adherents, mainline Christians, Jews, Muslims, and many Quakers and Unitarians. Just clarifying these differences helps to identify the rather spectacular new promise this movement brings into view.

### **The Five Characteristics of Progressive Christianity**

**1. A spiritual vitality and expressiveness.** The wide-range of churches and groups in this movement—in contrast to the traditional liberal Christians—are not just heady social activists and intellectuals. They like expressing themselves spiritually in meditation, prayer, artistic forms, and lively worship. It is astonishing how similar these spiritual and worship expressions are, even though they come from widely different denominations and parts of the United States. *A New Spiritual Home* details five aspects of this new spiritual vitality: participatory worship, expressive and arts-infused worship and programming, a reclaiming of discarded ancient Christian rituals (for example, bap-

tismal immersion and anointing with oil), a wide variety of non-Christian rituals and meditation techniques, and development of small groups for spiritual growth and nurture.

**2. An insistence on Christianity with intellectual integrity.** This new kind of Christian expression is devoted to and nourished by a wide-ranging intellectual curiosity and critique. It interrogates Christian assumptions and traditions in order to reframe, reject, or renew them. God language, the relationship between science and religion, and post-modern consciousness are the major arenas of this intellectual rigor.

**3. A transgression of traditional gender boundaries.** These groups are explicitly and thoroughly committed to feminism and affirmation of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people. The feminism is regularly a part of new kinds of family and child-rearing dynamics. The extent of gay-friendliness is illustrated by at least seven national Christian movements devoted to support of GLBTs and rooted in thousands of local churches.

**4. The belief that Christianity can be vital without claiming to be the best or the only true religion.** In contrast to mainstream Christianity's lukewarm "tolerance" of other religions, progressive Christianity pro-actively asserts that it is not the best or the only. Progressive Christians take pains to claim simultaneously their own Christian faith and their support of the complete validity of other religions.

**5. Strong ecological and social justice commitments.** The longstanding Christian interest in aiding those who suffer or are poor is continued in progressive Christianity. Similarly, this new movement is committed to old style liberal social justice programming and peace advocacy. In addition, however, there is a passion for environmentalism, including explicit attention to changing life style and consumer patterns in order to lessen the human footprint on the Earth.

### **Where to Find Progressive Christianity**

One of the most surprising aspects of my team's research was the breadth and depth of this new phenomenon of progressive Christianity. We found it in all geographical sections of the country and in urban, small town, and suburban America. There are two major forms of this emerging kind of Christianity. The first is not at all a new form per se, but is a powerful expression the new progressive Christianity.

The research found over one thousand local churches which fit the five characteristics described above. Some fifty of them are profiled in the book, *A New Spiritual Home*. They include some of the churches mentioned at the beginning of this article. Another is the Park Slope United Methodist Church in Brooklyn, New York, a diverse congregation bursting with drama in its worship, social justice and ecology in its program, and new congregation-designed windows celebrating liberation figures of the twentieth century. Like Calvary UMC in West Philadelphia, Glide Memorial UMC in San Francisco, Judson Baptist Church in Greenwich Village in New York, and the Church of the Savior in Washington, D.C., Park Slope UMC has drawn deeply on its diverse neighborhood.

St. Stephen's Episcopal Church in Houston, Texas, which marches in the city's annual gay pride parade, has a weekly worship service intended for people who have never developed a church affiliation or who may have left the church because they no longer felt comfortable or connected or because "organized religion" no longer seemed relevant to their lives. This Sunday evening, called "Engaging the Questions," bursts the regular Episcopal bonds. The service includes active discussion of questions such as, "What does it mean to be a person of integrity?" "What is a person of faith?" and "Is there a purpose to human life?" "Engaging the Questions" is not, however, a mostly

cerebral engagement. It integrates discussion of big questions into dramatic performances, eclectic music, and artistic expression of biblical texts.

The North Raleigh United Church in North Carolina has a strong relationship to Muslim worshipping communities and gives 51% of all its income to ministries beyond itself. The Jesus Our Shepherd Parish in Allentown, Wisconsin, is a Catholic Church with three married priests. The Circle of Grace Community Church in Decatur, Georgia is a feminist-based house church. Noe Valley Ministries in San Francisco sponsors eight different hours of worship or meditation: five “quiet times” each weekday morning, one meditation service on Sunday morning, a Wednesday morning “prayer circle,” and the regular Sunday morning worship. This intense spiritual focus has not impeded NVM in social justice programming. NVM participates in the larger San Francisco area efforts of Habitat for Humanity, the Religious Witness for the Homeless, the San Francisco Food Bank, Foundations for Education, Inc., La Casa de las Madres, Raphael House, and Sequoia.

Proudly proclaiming itself as “an alternative to church as usual,” Christ Community Church in Spring Lake, Minnesota, has a strong sense of spirituality and worship expression, eschewing the old liberal dichotomy of head and heart by focusing simultaneously on the “awe of worship” and a ministry of theological inquiry. The CCC mission statement claims Christian identity full-heartedly but without a sense of superiority over other religions: “Christ Community finds its window to God in the face of Jesus while affirming the quest and insight of other faiths: opening ourselves to dialogue and mutual enrichment in our pluralistic world.”

The great majority of Extended Grace Faith Community (Lutheran) in Grand Haven, Michigan, is under thirty-five, and “led by young adults, many of whom have been hurt or made to feel unwelcome in traditional church environments.” The main worship and gathering place for these people is a former Steakhouse bar and restaurant. Although many of the readings come from Buddhism or Sufism, the worship is “unashamedly Christ-centered.” Each Sunday worship service contains a communion meal right alongside eastern meditation practices. Extended Grace is an official “Reconciling in Christ congregation,” the Lutheran term for local churches that have made an official Affirmation of Welcome to GLBT people.

The second main form of progressive Christianity can be called “the Roman Catholic resistance.” Although official Roman Catholicism in America has in the past twenty-five years come increasingly under the control of centralized and reactionary hierarchy, two factors have come together to form a significant faction of genuine American Catholicism. These two factors are: 1) the foundational reforms to Catholicism articulated in the Second Vatican Council; 2) a network of sub- or extra-parish communities committed to the same five characteristics evident in the progressive local churches sketched above.

This network of Catholic resistance is astonishingly widespread and persistent. Although rarely existing as an official or entire parish, it appears in almost every part of the country. There are two main populations of this network. The first is what has come to be called “Small Christian Communities.” These groups (SCCs) exist at the edges of organized Roman Catholicism. Many of them have been started by regular parish initiatives and continue to consider themselves a part of those parishes. Some of them have originated through the initiatives of individuals, a religious order, or an informal action within an existing parish.

The SCCs gather in small groups. Although some have grown to include as many as five hundred members, the typical SCC meets in a home or parish hall and has a con-

stituency under thirty people. About one-third of SCCs gather weekly and another one-third gather biweekly. These groups are made up almost entirely of laypeople, although occasionally a woman religious or—less frequently—a priest will take part.

When SCCs gather, they typically engage in the following: prayer, faith sharing, discussion of scripture, spiritual exercises, group silence, and sharing of visions. Some of them also share eucharist regularly, sometimes with a priest and sometimes without. Their leadership is mostly informal, almost always from within the group, and consistently of a volunteer nature. The members of the group pledge to support one another in crises. They generally work together outside their spiritual gatherings on a “mission” project that addresses a particular social or economic need. Almost half of the groups engage as a group in a larger advocacy action in society. These include working for the elimination of poverty, advocacy for human rights, and protesting social injustice.

Commissioned and funded by the Lilly Foundation in 1996, Bernard Lee, S.M., of Loyola University in New Orleans and William V. D’Antonio of the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C. directed a massive team of researchers to study these SCCs. The study produced a book, *The Catholic Experience of Small Christian Communities* (Paulist Press, 2000), that describes and documents these communities, of which, it estimates, there were 37,895 as of 2000, the year of the study. Analysis of Lee and D’Antonio’s research reveals that about half of these—some 19,000 groups—fit the above five characteristics of progressive Christianity. It is clear then that American Catholicism has literally hundreds of thousands of active progressive Christians flying beneath the official radar, and thriving in these small Christian communities.

The other major population of Catholic resistance is a significant proportion of American nuns (or, as they prefer to be called, “women religious”). These women are the one part of the American Roman Catholic Church that is still working hard to implement the Vatican II Council’s call in the 1960s to *aggiornamento* (an Italian term for “updating” that refers to the task of bringing faith to contemporary expression). Although one can still find some conservative orders of women religious, the vast majority have made earthshaking shifts in their lifestyle, outlook, self-understanding, and appearance. Most American women religious no longer wear habits and so are almost invisible to the public. But they are nearly everywhere.

Today the great majority of American women religious live in small communities. The leadership is rarely hierarchical and governance tends to be relatively democratic. These women continue to lead celibate lives, have little or no private property, and pray communally at least once a day. Their professions vary widely within the helping professions. It is not unusual for such groups to have professors, social workers, elementary school teachers, therapists, and church workers living together with a strikingly simple lifestyle.

The Leadership Council of Women Religious (LCWR) is the national clearinghouse for this astonishingly strong movement. LCWR provides major resources for the thousands of communities of women religious across the country. LCWR’s official self-understanding corresponds in major ways to what my book portrays as progressive Christianity. LCWR’s 2004 official declaration of goals for the next five years starts with the ongoing commitment to vital spirituality, vowing both to “ground all our actions in contemplation” and to “welcome . . . new ways of living into the future of religious life.” LCWR, which represents about 1,000 different orders of women religious in America, has a strong new focus on environmental consciousness, pledging to “live and lead rooted in right relationship with all creation.” The other goals place emphasis on

“peacemaking and reconciliation,” the challenge to “risk being agents of change within our congregations, our church, and our society,” and working to “stand with those made poor, particularly women and children.”

Perhaps one of the surest indications that LCWR belongs to the implicit progressive Christian movement in the past fifteen years is the strong opposition to it by conservative Catholic organizations. “Catholic Culture,” a conservative watchdog organization, advises the public against LCWR’s “radicalization coinciding with the rise of feminism and the post-Vatican II confusion.” It worries that in 1979 Sister Theresa Kane, then “head of the LCWR” had “chided the pope for not ordaining women.” This conservative attack on LCWR accuses it of “antagonism toward the hierarchy and Church teachings,” promoting “the causes of dissidents,” and being “loaded with liberalism’s terminology.”

Progressive Christianity is observable in other places. *A New Spiritual Home* has chapter-length treatments of two other phenomena: some similar developments in relatively new denominations like Unity and the Metropolitan Christian Church and what I call—with gratitude to Bishop John Spong for part of the term, “the exiles” and their books. The exiles, as Bishop Spong describes them, by and large do not belong to a community, but are active in their hope for alternatives, often through their devotion to a new dose of books over the past decade, often published by Polebridge Press.

## Conclusion

It is my hope that this portrait of emerging progressive Christianity may interest those disillusioned souls who think that the only Christian shows going these days are the reactionary evangelicals or the frightened mainstream institutions. I also wish that those many different creative, progressive Christians who have courageously hammered out new ways of being together in the past two decades might realize that they are not alone. Finally, it seems that the research this book reports may spark some new regional and national conversations among progressive churches so that they may emerge more clearly as the eloquent new national Christian voice they are.

It is clear to me that this new vibrancy at the grass roots will not become a majority phenomenon in America in any foreseeable future. In this regard, it seems to me that evangelical Christianity will continue to play a large role in American Christianity for at least the next generation. And, even though I suspect that denominational Christianity has—for better and worse—outlived its usefulness and attraction for most Americans, it will probably take at least several decades to die.

Grassroots progressive Christianity is cross-denominational in character. That is, it is emerging organically from the grass roots across the country without denominational impulse or charismatic national leader. Its strength lies in the integrity of its search for more authentic Christian expression and articulation.

In many ways, this new and widespread impulse can be compared to the renewal of portions of Christianity in the Dark and Middle Ages through the establishment and flourishing of monasticism. Monasticism emerged in Europe as a powerful minority protest against the corruption, intellectual laziness, and spiritual rotteness of the mainstream institutional churches. The monasteries, abbeys, and cloisters became innovative expressions of spiritual renewal and intellectual rigor. They influenced the future of the churches far beyond their numbers because of their integrity and insight. Today’s vital grassroots Christianity can also be such a renewing force and exceptional influence on its culture.

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