

Deborah Sokolove: Authority, Commitment, and the Body of Christ

A Sermon for Seekers Church

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by Deborah Sokolove

Authority, Commitment, and the Body of Christ

Today is the last Sunday of the Easter season, six weeks after we first announced, "Christ is Risen." Many churches celebrated the feast of Ascension this week, the commemoration of that moment when the apostles watched as the Risen One was "lifted up and carried on a cloud out of their sight." Although Jesus had promised that the Holy Spirit would be with them, his followers still didn't seem to know what he was talking about. Although by this time they had experienced many signs and wonders, including several post-resurrection appearances of Jesus, they still didn't quite get it. They still thought that, through Jesus, God was about to restore the political fortunes of Israel. So when Jesus disappeared, they just stood gaping up at the sky until a pair of heavenly beings told them to stop. Then, not knowing what else to do, they went back to Jerusalem to hide out some more in that upper room. It wasn't until the dramatic events of Pentecost, really, that they understood that **they themselves** were to carry on the work of Jesus, that they, themselves – along with all who believed – were to be the Body of Christ.

Now, almost two thousand years later, we here in this room, and all others who seek to follow Christ, are members of that

Body. But what does it mean to be a "member" of Christ's living, breathing, acting, earthly Body? And what is the relationship between membership in **that** Body, which is sometimes called the Church Universal, and membership in **this** body, the Seekers Church?

A few minutes ago, we heard Sherri Alms make her commitment as a Core Member of Seekers Church. As members of her mission group, Celebration Circle laid hands on her, and she was ordained to the particular ministry into which God calls her, in witness of her vocation in the priesthood of all believers. I volunteered to preach on the day of this celebration because it offers me the opportunity to talk about these issues that sometimes are pretty cloudy and have, at times, been the cause of hurt and misunderstanding. I wanted to talk about commitment, about membership in the Body of Christ, and membership in Seekers, because I love Seekers so much that I can't quite understand why anyone wouldn't want to be part of the core membership. ... Well, yes, I do understand some of the reasons, and that's what I want to talk about.

One of those reasons is the matter of authority, the matter of who decides what. As churches go, Seekers is a pretty flat organization. Our call as a church talks about shared leadership, and there isn't much in the way of hierarchy. As far as I can tell, our paid "leadership team" doesn't so much lead as broker information. They listen to what already going on, listen for the yearnings and the frustrations, encourage us to follow our calls and to help one another. They lead more by example and by asking questions than by exercising authority. According to the Guide to Seekers, a document that spells out some of the understandings and traditions of Seekers, final authority is not in the leadership team. Rather,

. . . authority for the life of the community rests with a group of core members. . . . the commitment to core membership is an ordination to ministry that carries a

commitment to support the faith journey of the community. . . . The organization of Seekers . . . flows from the Free Church tradition, where the final authority is the leading of the Holy Spirit. The traditions developed through our experience as part of the Church of the Saviour provide guidance in discerning the movement of the Holy Spirit. . . . Formal decisions within Seekers are the responsibility of the core membership . . .

There is a tension between the kind of authority that is exercised by the core membership and that exercised by individuals, regardless of their membership status, because of their call or gifts. Anyone in Seekers can propose some activity, some program, and by the simple fact of others joining in, exercise the kind of leadership that has been called "authority at the point of one's gift." There is no hierarchy from which to gain permission, no red tape to cut through. Leadership in this sense is affirmed (or denied) by the participation of others.

Another kind of authority is that exercised by mission groups on behalf of the community. Celebration Circle organizes our worship life, Learners and Teachers organizes the School of Christian Living, Hope and a Home extends our collective hand outward to families in need, and other groups initiate projects and activities in keeping with their call. There is no "oversight committee" to coordinate all this, no one person to give or with-hold permission; rather, the authority of mission groups is acknowledged and supported by the entire congregation on the basis of each group's call.

However, there are some things that affect the ongoing life of the congregation, that are basic to the organizational health and function of the community, that must be addressed in a different way. This is particularly true for the difficult issues, the ones on which lots of folks have strong feelings, on which there is a lot of disagreement. Last year, about this

time, the core members wrestled with the issue of authority, and finally decided how to decide when decisions are tough. We affirmed that for the difficult issues, it is the core members, those who have promised to take responsibility for the whole of Seekers as an organization, that have the authority to make final decisions. This is not, as some may suppose, because we think we are somehow "better" than those who haven't made that pledge; it is only that we **have** made that pledge, and that we take it seriously.

We recognize, of course, that many who haven't formally made the commitment also feel responsible for the ongoing life of the community, and work hard to ensure that what needs to happen, will happen. Just a few examples include the Women's Retreat, organized by Else; the monthly Singalongs, coordinated by Glen; and, of course, the web page, which Jeffrey initiated and maintains. I'm sure that there are many other examples we all could think of. Conversely, there are some among the core members who do not initiate projects or events, who hardly seem to participate at all except to come to church, mission group, and those monthly Sunday evening meetings. So what's the big deal with core membership?

In recent months, the Core Membership has been exploring the promises and expectations of core membership, and, indeed, the entire ritual of Recommitment as it has developed and changed from the original pledge of the Church of the Saviour. This is not simply an exercise in changing a few words here and there, but a deep re-examination of what it means to belong at Seekers. Actually, such a re-examination has been in process for at least five years, beginning with a class on Belonging in the School of Christian Living, led by Marjorie and Ron.

One of the issues raised in that class was that the term "member" only applied to those who had taken the vows that Sherri has today; other regular attendees and contributors to the life of Seekers were, by default, "non-members," which didn't seem fair, to say the least. Even more, the designation

was problematic for those who understood membership in a church to be equivalent to membership in the Body of Christ. In an attempt at greater descriptive accuracy, that group which meets on the first Sunday of every month adopted the term "core members", and other Seekers were more generally referred to as "members." Some time after that, the Recommitment ceremony on the third Sunday of October was emended, so that all who wished to make a commitment to the community could pledge:

I am a Seeker. The Seekers Church is my community of faith. I acknowledge that I am called by God to be part of this community.

I have joy and pain to share, and joy and pain to bear. As part of the Seekers community, I am a growing Christian. I will be intentional and accountable about naming my relationship to this community, sharing my gifts from God with the community and the wider world, and living out my commitment of faith

And everyone, not only core members, was invited to sign the commitment book.

These, however, came to be seen by some as merely cosmetic changes that did not address an underlying problem, which was the perceived hierarchical relationship between those who are "in" and those who are "out." Part of the problem is our legacy from the Church of the Saviour, to which one came as a visitor and within a relatively short time was expected to become an Intern on the way to full Membership, or to leave. The Church of the Saviour model had no room for the long-term affiliation of those who did not choose the radically intentional commitment both to Christian life and to the particular community that full membership implied. The Church of the Saviour, while it called itself a "church" was in actuality a religious community not unlike Third Order

Franciscans, or the medieval Beguines: groups of lay men and women who dedicated themselves to a life of Christian service in the world, rather than in a monastery or cloister. Like monastic communities, membership in such groups was restricted to those who were willing to make vows binding them to a more intentional Christian life than that of the ordinary person. In the European Middle Ages, of course, virtually everyone belonged to the Church (there was only one before the Reformation, of course), so inability or unwillingness to join one of these communities, cloistered or not, did not make one less a Christian, less a member of the Body of Christ. Like monastic or "third order" societies, the Church of the Saviour model assumed that if someone didn't want to, or couldn't, take on the disciplines of full membership in its community, they were free to worship somewhere else.

Seekers inherited this model, but chose a more inclusive path. For Seekers, any level of commitment to a serious spiritual journey is seen as a positive step, and people can remain part of the community indefinitely without becoming a core member. Individuals are encouraged to move towards core membership, of course, but participation, and even some forms of leadership in the community doesn't hinge on it. Because of the ambiguity of the word "member", therefore, there are proposals to change the terminology – words like "steward" or "deacon" have been mentioned for the core group, so that "member" would mean what it does in most churches. There are proposals to change the commitment statements, both for the core group and for the wider membership. And there are proposals to change the recommitment ritual itself, in order to clarify who has made particular commitments to the life of the community as a whole.

So, what does it take to become a "core member" of Seekers? And what are the expectations afterward? The steps towards core membership are simple: take four classes in the School of Christian Living (Hebrew Scriptures, New Testament, Christian

Doctrine, and Christian Growth), join a mission group, write a spiritual autobiography, and take the pledge. Once a member, the expectations are to:

- Attend Sunday worship, usually with Seekers;
- Observe daily quiet time – prayer, scripture reading, and reflection or journaling. Scripture reading is usually guided by the ecumenical lectionary, also used for our Sunday worship.
- Give proportionately of income, to Seekers, beginning at ten percent;
- Make a retreat once a year, if possible with Seekers;
- Participate in an ongoing mission or support group with two or more core members, for living out the person's chosen ministry, for building the Church, and for accountability in spiritual growth;
- Be accountable for the spiritual journey in a written report to the group;
- Attend members' meetings regularly;
- Express commitment to discovery and use of gifts, to education and growth in the faith, and to the pastoring and support of the community as a whole in the ongoing life of the Seekers Community;
- Review the core membership commitment with one's group or another core member and spend an hour in meditation prior to Recommitment Sunday in October.

Okay, maybe not so simple after all. Maybe it's even complicated, perhaps demanding. I have heard some people complain that it is too difficult to become a core member, and that it seems to them like a lot of unnecessary "jumping through hoops." In my mind, there is some connection between this complaint and the discomfort that some may have that the core membership reserves to itself the right to make major decisions. The connection lies in the explicit commitment both to serious, intentional life as a member of Christ's universal Body; and to Seekers as a particular expression of that Body.

In case you haven't read it lately, I'd like to read what the [Guide to Seekers](#) has to say:

Considerable effort is usually made to involve all Seekers in formal and informal discussions that contribute to decisions by the core members. Issues are addressed from the pulpit; special meetings are held to seek out the views of all participants in the life of Seekers; discussions over coffee after worship often turn to the decisions facing the community. Our general traditions of openness and inclusively sometimes create the expectation that all who participate in the life of Seekers will be involved in all decisions, or at least the important decisions that shape the community. Two issues are at stake here. What gives core members the right to make the decisions? How should core members consult other Seekers before making decisions?

The explicit disciplines expected of core members in Seekers may seem difficult, or peculiar to those whose reference point is the tradition of other churches or volunteer organizations. Yet, it is the authenticity of this intentional commitment to core membership that provides the foundation for authority in Seekers.

The Seekers description of core membership, expressed in the membership commitment statement and the disciplines of core membership, are essentially unchanged from the description of membership developed in the Church of the Saviour since it was founded in 1947. These are primarily concerned with process: core members will engage in active ministry; they follow daily disciplines, make silent retreat and recommit to core membership annually; they take responsibility for the life of the community through participation in core members' meetings and major contributions of time and money to the life and ministry of the church. For us, these processes serve the same function as creeds or hierarchy in other churches – they encourage discernment of God's will, guide the life of the church, and help prevent abuses in the

exercise of authority by the core members.

High expectations of core members help to sustain continuity in the life of Seekers. We want to be responsive to the Holy Spirit, but we also want to test the validity of those who claim the Spirit's leading, whether the leading concerns an individual call or the direction of the community as a whole. The core members look for the marks of the Holy Spirit in decision making for the community, and expect each other to be prayerful and reflective about the information we offer. We hope that our emphasis on this deliberate, reflective process will protect us from the extremism that has often marked communities in the Free Church tradition. By placing the formal decision making in the hands of those who are fully committed to all elements of the life of the community, we hope to nurture both a dynamic reliance on the Holy Spirit, and a conservative reliance on reflection and accountability within the core membership.

In Seekers, all core members are ministers of the church. All those who participate in the life of the community are invited to become core members. We believe that the Holy Spirit is sending to Seekers as core members those whose gifts are essential for the life of the church.

In the tradition of the Church of the Saviour we have chosen to give authority within the community to those who commit themselves to consistent discernment of the direction for the community, and who take responsibility for the ongoing life of the community. In Seekers the core members take seriously the community's call to be church, a call that emphasizes the importance of inclusivity in the life of the community. As a result, the core members do make the core decisions that shape the community, but only after much listening and discernment.

As we celebrate today Sherri's commitment to the ongoing life

of Seekers Church, we are also celebrating her commitment to an intentional, self-reflective life of following Christ's call. All of us are invited into that kind of commitment. John tells us that as Jesus left his disciples for the last time, he prayed for them. He said, "And now I am no more in the world, but they are in the world . . . Holy One, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one" [John 17:11]. In choosing to follow Christ, in choosing to hear the call of God on our lives, we are all members of the living, moving, Spirit-filled, fragile, earthen vessel that is the universal Body of Christ. May we be held as one in God's holy Name.