

Ken Burton: A View From the Threshold

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I stand here this morning on the threshold of becoming a core member of Seekers. At the members meeting next Sunday afternoon, I will read my spiritual autobiography, sharing the journey that has brought me to this point in my life and my sense of next steps on that journey. That "reading" will also be the point of transition into core membership. But what is this about? Do I suffer from a shortage of meetings in my life, thus needing another to attend on the first Sunday of every month? Or is it that I crave additional duties and responsibilities and seek to satisfy that through core membership? Or maybe it is my lust for power, a desire to exercise control over the community in which to date I have been a mere participant. While I suspect that all of these are present, the primary energy for my movement into core membership lies elsewhere.

The Episcopal *Book of Common Prayer* speaks of a sacrament as "an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace." And so it is for me and core membership. From this pulpit, in mission group and in informal conversation I have already shared much of my spiritual autobiography. And as way has opened, I have already taken responsibility for various aspects of the life of the community, from participating in the "ministry of chairs" at the conclusion of this service each Sunday to hosting the School of Christian Living. Well before this time, I began observing most of the disciplines of membership. So I am not so much taking on a new role as I am seeking recognition by the community of a movement that has

already taken place in my life, asking for "an outward and visible sign" of what can only be called "an inward and spiritual grace."

So how did I get to this point, and what exactly is this "core membership" into which I seek to enter? For some of you, the answers to one or both of these questions are already known. In listening to what follows, I ask your patience and understanding as I share something of my own story, some thoughts about core membership, and an invitation for us all to go deeper.

In the Summer of 1992, I visited Seekers for the first time at the invitation of a Seeker whom I was then dating. This was for me something of a homecoming, since I had spent some time at the Church of the Saviour and at the Potter's House during two college summers and had written a paper about the church for a Sociology of Religion course. I instantly and immediately felt at home here. This is remarkable for me. As Sue will tell you, it often takes me a long time (like a couple of years) to really feel at home in new surroundings. But that was not the case for this building or for this community. My comfort was due in part to my earlier contact with the C of S. But of much greater significance was the genuine warmth with which I was received and the strong sense of love embodied that seemed to appear and reappear in the interactions of Seekers with one another and in the larger life of the community. I had been a Quaker for the prior twenty years and had experienced this strong sense of community on occasion in that context but never with the week-to-week consistency and intensity that I found here. I fell in love with Seekers!

Being part of Seekers was complicated for me by living at the time in Philadelphia. That combined with the end of the dating relationship kept me away for several months. Then in March, 1993, I attended what was then called the "Wellspring Orientation." Part of the ministry of the Dayspring Church's

Wellspring Mission Group, this long weekend is an introduction to Christian community in the Church of the Saviour tradition. Out of this experience I felt called to move to Washington and become part of one of the communities, Seekers being the obvious choice. I began coming most Sundays, usually making the round trip to and from Philadelphia in one day. I also started looking for consulting work in my technical field in the DC area. It would take me over a year to get that first contract. That period included several months of doubt about the wisdom and grounding of my decision to move, combined with frustration about not being able to be here on Tuesday evening for the School of Christian Living, which is the usual next step in moving into the community. Synchronistically, my son, David, moved to Alexandria to do a law degree at Georgetown, and then Sue Johnson came into my life, bringing new warmth and affection, and yet another reason to move to DC. I put more energy into getting consulting work here, and in June, 1995, was able to move.

At last I could take courses in the School! I valued it all the more for having been prevented, by the weight of sheer distance, from doing so earlier. After Christian Community and Christian Doctrine, when I was ready to join a mission group, it became clear to me that beneath my interest in the School of Christian Living was something more than the energy of having been denied access for over a year. Teaching was an early career interest of mine, and remains a gift that needs more exercise. In the Learners and Teachers Mission Group and its ministry through the School of Christian Living, I will be able to use my gift as well as to support others in their movement into community. But my mission group is more than that.

This week's lection from the Letter of James invites us to "confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed." (James 5:16) Something like this goes on in mission group. Wounds are shared. Hurts are exposed. Joy

is exchanged. Christ is present. We serve. We are healed. And we are held accountable to one another for our spiritual journeys. I have been in groups that lasted for short periods, perhaps as much as a week, that had some of these qualities. I have never before been in anything like mission group that is sustained for weeks, months, and years. Inward journey. Outward journey. It happens in mission group. The mission groups are the heart of Seekers Church.

So why, you may be wondering, why not just be in mission group? Why become a core member? The "Guide to Seekers Church" suggests two possible responses. [Read page 17, paragraphs 3 and 4.] And it is certainly true that some in the community are simply not called to core membership and live out their belonging in other ways. My own experience of this community has consistently been that the more I have given, the more I have received, that as I have extended myself to you, you have responded with understanding and generosity of spirit and resources that are exceptional in my experience. I am called, therefore, to put my weight down in this place as fully and completely as I am able, to take upon myself the disciplines and responsibilities of core membership with a certainty rooted in personal experience and grounded in faith, that my growth will be supported; my ability to give, increased; and my spirit, enlivened. Core membership is, for me, the next step on both my lifelong spiritual journey and on my movement into the Seekers community.

The "Core Members' Statement of Commitment" speaks generically of "nurtur[ing] my relationship with God and Seekers through specific disciplines." They are listed elsewhere in the "Members Guide". They are

- attending Sunday worship;
- observing daily quiet time;
- giving proportionally of income to Seekers;
- making a retreat once a year;
- participating in an ongoing mission group;

- being accountable for the spiritual journey in a written report to the group;
- attending members meetings;
- discovering and using gifts;
- ongoing education and growth in faith;
- sharing in the pastoral responsibilities;
- annually reviewing the core membership commitment.

Now if I thought that these disciplines represented rigid standards to which my adherence was required as a condition of membership, I would definitely not be standing here on the threshold. I'm really not into "rigid." For me the disciplines are tools, resources provided to take me deeper into the life of faith. Last Sunday, Ron suggested that these disciplines might better be called "personal practices." I know that there will be days in which, for whatever reason, I do not practice a quiet time, but that in no way mitigates the value of that time of centering, renewal and reflection or compromises my commitment to it. My awareness of my own imperfections is not an obstacle to commitment but an invitation to further growth, and my Seekers experience tells me that further growth is more likely to happen within the context of commitment. Authentic commitment carries within itself the power for its fulfillment.

One of the Seekers practices that may seem unusual is that of annually, on a scheduled basis, reviewing the commitments we have made to the community. For core members, this means considering whether or not they are called to remain in membership and, if not, what form their relationship to the community, if any, should take. For all, Recommitment is a season to examine how we connect to the community and to consider next steps in our spiritual journey, whether or not in the context of Seekers. I would challenge you to take this reexamination seriously. If you have previously concluded that you do not want to move towards core membership, or that mission groups are not for you, or that proportionate giving

is something that you just can't handle, then the season of Recommitment is the time to revisit those conclusions, to open yourself radically to their opposite, and to welcome the Spirit as the Spirit leads.

I need to look more closely both at the exercise of my gift for teaching and at my role in Seekers ministry to our children. I have kept myself at some distance from children in general and Sunday school in particular. In the months ahead, I want to be accountable for changing that, even if it means missing most of the worship that I love for six weeks. Recommitment is a time for new growth. Sometimes that involves moving ahead on an established path; other times, branching out in a new direction; and in yet other years, a sharp change or reversal of course. Know where you are in this process. Be accountable for your next movement.

And so I stand on the threshold of core membership. But my situation is not unlike yours. Each of us is on the edge of new movement, new energy, and new understanding of what it means to be faithful. We are all being called in this time and this place to live more deeply, to love more powerfully, to be more adventurous in sharing our gifts. May God grant us each the wisdom to discern that call and the power and the courage to faithfully respond. Amen.