

Muriel Lipp: The Problem of Growth

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First of all, I'd like to honor all those among us who are mothers, aunts, godmothers, school and Sunday school teachers, big sisters, all caregivers of the young. This is Mother's Day, a day to celebrate the nurturance of women. So, Happy Mother's Day to all nurturing women. Gentlemen, you'll get your chance in June.

Today we also celebrate the ascension of Jesus and his promise to send the Holy Spirit as comforter, presence, and guide. It is a good day for us to consider anew what is this entity called the church, which is the body of those who witness to God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit.

We Seekers have just recently made a big decision not to buy a building – the building on Pennsylvania Ave., which for some of us was already beginning to feel like church. But as in the song we just sang, "The church is not a building, The church is the people." So those of us who are disappointed will, I hope, survive this disappointment and look for the Holy Spirit elsewhere among us. No matter where we are, we are still the Seekers Church.

Today I'd like to talk about church – that little body that formed after Jesus' ascension, but most especially the church today, our own church in particular. And I'd also like to talk about the Holy Spirit, that energy that infuses the church and gives it life. How do we assess it?

When we talk about discerning the Holy Spirit – what seems like guidance for one person, for another seems not to be. The core membership likes to make decisions as close to consensus as possible, slightly different from the Quakers who will stick with a proposal for years if only one person departs from the majority decision. However, the Quakers, with their history of silence and listening, are different from us Seekers, who do a lot more talking. I think we (and I include myself) will want to grow and deepen our listening and praying. Where is the Holy Spirit leading us?

I'd like to quote from the journal of Frank Laubach, the literacy pioneer who developed the each-one-teach-one method of helping people to read. This entry in *Letters by a Modern Mystic* has been helpful to me over the years. He is writing from Lanao in the Philippines. He says, "I have just returned from a walk alone, a walk so wonderful that I feel like reducing it to a universal rule, that all people ought to take a walk every evening all alone where they can talk aloud without being heard by anyone, and that during this entire walk they all ought to talk with God, allowing God to use their tongues to talk back – and letting God do most of the talking. This day has been different from any other of my life, for I have not tried to pray in the sense of talking to God but I have let God do the talking with my tongue or in my inner life when my tongue was silent. It has been as simple as opening and closing a swinging door. And without any of the old strain the whole day passed beautifully with God saying wonderful things to me."

Whether you call that God or the Holy Spirit or Jesus, I think that is how we get guidance, individually or as a church. Still I am not saying discernment is easy. Perhaps the paradox prevails. It is easy and not easy.

So we are in the wilderness, without a clue about how (or where) the Holy Spirit wants us to move. It was in the wilderness that God raised up a community for Abraham;

likewise Moses. We are not yet tent dwellers, but I suppose that's an option. Just kidding.

Let's look at our history. Santayana says, "those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." We want to remember our past, and some of it we might want to repeat, other parts we'll want to re-form. All churches as they grow revise their structures. Look at the Methodist church. It is much changed over when the Wesleys began it. And the Presbyterian Church is a long way from the Calvinism of its forbears. It is clear to me that the Holy Spirit speaks with different tongues at different times in history. Or perhaps it's always a problem of discernment. Unfortunately, as churches grow, there is a tendency to water down. We of the Church of the Saviour – we'll celebrate our fiftieth anniversary this fall – what parts of our heritage do we Seekers want to keep? What is the Holy Spirit saying to us about our present and our future?

In this, our Jubilee year, we find ourselves with 12 to 14 associate churches – that is, churches that have grown from our roots or are copies of our methods. Earlier in our history, the council was very strict about what is a church in the C. of S. Tradition. Now we are not quite so strict. We Seekers say in our bulletins and brochures, "in the tradition of the Church of the Saviour." I think we say that proudly, because we have a noble history, recorded in the books of Elizabeth O'Connor. Yet there were hard times—times when the people of the church could not agree on what was really the leading of the Holy Spirit. Some very active members left during the time of the new lands, when we broke down into six churches.

I have a notation in my journal dated August 30, 1977: "I am discouraged about church. At a council meeting last Sunday – new lands council, where each new sister community of the Church of the Saviour is represented – Mary Carol and I, representing Seekers, voted against everyone, on the subject

of corporate mission. Gordon defined corporate mission, 'as we understand it historically.' We in Seekers want to experiment with structures. We don't want to be limited to past understandings. Then I added, "but it is so terrible to be voting against these brothers and sisters."

Continuing to look at our history, the old Church of the Saviour gave up the large meetings of its members when these became unwieldy, and a council made decisions. I wonder if we Seekers are coming to such a place. We now have 23 core members, with two more coming in soon. Making decisions with so many people is very difficult. When the Church of the Saviour grew so large that division seemed the only solution, it broke down into six churches. Looking ahead, is there anything like that in our future? The Church of the Saviour always said it was called to smallness. For us that is complicated by our Sunday school and the need to have enough children to make it work. There must be a right number for us, above which people get lost and below which we are too small for a vibrant Sunday school.

Perhaps corporate mission is one of the bigger seeker departures from the root church. We felt that individual calls were as valid as corporate calls, and we formed mission groups around both. Unfortunately, this had the result of making us feel different from most of our sister churches, which were smaller and focused on one mission. I also think geography played a large part in our feeling separated from the sister churches on Columbia road. They are close physically to one another; we are more isolated.

Our investment in children and families also makes us somewhat different from those churches formed around corporate missions to the poor. We have given much time and seen it as mission to provide a Christian Sunday school and other activities for our children, and so we have attracted families to our church more readily perhaps than have our sister churches. However, our isolation here is, I think, partly of our own choosing. We

have not reached out to our brother and sister churches as we might have. You could say, "nor have they reached out to us", and I think that is true.

Partly we are all so busy doing what we think is God's work in the world. But I would appreciate hearing occasionally from these churches on Sunday mornings—having some one of them bring us the word. How are they doing? What are their problems? Can we be of help to one another? Sometimes I hear among us unkind gossip about people from our sister churches, and I think that diminishes us as well as them. I'm not just talking about you out there. I've done it too. I think for some of us it is based on not knowing one another well. But it sets up a we-they dynamic, and that's not good.

I hope that when we leave here, we will leave in kindness and goodwill. Being a tenant has taught us a lot about sharing space. I wish we had been able to do more things together with the ecumenical service, like share the seating arrangements on Sunday mornings, and the altar preparations. It is a lot of work to change all of this between services. There is a separateness about our two services that feels less than ideal. Having the same roots, we are different. I cannot see the dolls, art in progress, and homemade paper goods that find their way onto our altar on the altar of the ecumenical service.

Growing as a church, we shall keep some of our C. of S. traditions and re-make others, just as we have been doing and as our sister churches are doing. I hope we shall keep the concept of call that means so much, the disciplines of time, money, prayer, and mission that keep us strong. And we are all grateful to our forebears for wellspring and Dayspring, our retreat center, where we spend silent weekends in prayer and contemplation.

I am perplexed by the problem of growth. Large numbers delight many churches, but I think the benefits of smallness are many.

Yet we are called to spread the word, as in our Ephesians scripture this week, to tell others of the hope that is within us. How do we do that and still remain vital, alive? What is the Holy Spirit saying?

We are a strong church. We experience a lot of joy just in being together. We are welcoming to strangers. We are serious about the missions we engage in –strong in our school of Christian living, our Sunday worship, and our children's program. Our three leaders are so faithful and efficient that I, for one, take them for granted when I should thank God for them daily.

However, I think we could grow by listening more deeply to the winds of the spirit, sitting silently in prayer much more than we do. Prayer is a strong part of our heritage in the Church of the Saviour. Back in the '50s and 60s I remember prayer vigils here in this chapel where persons, taking turns, would pray about a decision or an ill member for a full hour so that prayer was going on for 24 hours a day for several days. But the times are different now. Then you could leave the church open, and the prayers were responsible for one another's coming and going. Also, there were not so many of us working long hours at stressful jobs. I never did a 2 A. M., but I was in awe of those who did. As we rest in the wilderness and wait for the next sign, let us keep our spirits open and tuned to the mysterious Holy One, who speaks to us individually, and as a church.