**Becoming a Contemplative Church**

Spiritual formation begins in a contemplative church—at least that is where it should begin because we need others as we seek to open ourselves to the living presence of God (which is how I understand contemplative practices). This, of course, raises the question of what constitutes a contemplative church. As a working definition I would suggest that a contemplative church is one in which the living God is consciously sought by engaging in those ancient and modern spiritual practices that open one up to God.

Many churches engage in such practices as a natural part of their locus of worship, service, and teaching without necessarily naming these (or even recognizing these) as “contemplative practices.” But I would argue that it is important to recognize these inherent spiritual practices that we engage in, by reflex, as such so that we can build upon them, enhance them, add to them, and embrace them. Contemplative practices have not been a strong part of the UCC (for the most part) and the resolution on "Becoming a Church of Contemplatives in Action" at the recent national conference seeks to rectify this problem.

What are “contemplative practices”? *Prayer* is certainly a core contemplative practice. But prayer takes many forms and shapes. However, it is easy, over time, to lapse into a few types of prayer (e.g., pastoral prayer, ‘read prayers’ to which we respond, the Lord’s Prayer which we recite together). The challenge would be to explore other forms of prayer. For example, there is some evidence that different prayer styles fit different personalities (as in the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator). So-called Franciscan Prayer is said to fit the SP temperament. Such prayer involves movement (peripatetic prayer), the influence of art and nature (responsive prayer, *visio divina*), brief exclamatory prayers to God, active response to the world around us, etc. The key characteristic of Franciscan Prayer is *spontaneity* which is alert to the movement of the Spirit. In contrast, so called Thomistic Prayer (NT), is a much more rational form of prayer which involves *thoughtful* *reflection* on issues, problems, concepts which forms the basis for orderly prayer to God (such as written prayers). This is the kind of prayer that uses lists of people for whom we pray. (Other forms of prayer fit SJ types—Ignatian prayer and NF types—Augustinian prayer.)

And when it comes to prayer, this is only a start. Learning to *pray the Psalms* is worth exploring as is *written prayer* which would lead to *prayer books* of various sorts (a rich trove of insight) and then to liturgical prayer (which is a great way to explore theology). The list goes on: the prayer of examen, the prayer of examination (not to mention all the other forms of Ignatian prayer), intercessory prayer, centering prayer, prayers of blessing (*berakah*), prayers of worship. I could go on. A contemplative congregation would be skilled in prayer.

But prayer is not the only contemplative practice found in most churches. Biblical exploration is also a key practice which is given expression via preaching, teaching, daily private reading to name just a few practices. Learning to encounter Scripture in life-changing ways is also a challenge for a contemplative church. Once again there are a host of avenues to explore: inductive Bible study as a form of lay exegesis, regular group Bible study (someone once said “God’s word to us is almost always for the other”), study of a Gospel or a theme in the Epistles, the art of Scripture paraphrase, lay preaching, etc.

What I am trying to say is that if we are seeking to aid the emergence of contemplative congregations, curriculum which focuses on contemplative practices would be a start.

We need to be clear that becoming (or being) a contemplative church does not preclude engaging in other aspects of our Christian calling such as social justice, care for the needy and marginalized, worship of the living God, educating a theologically literate congregation, etc. In fact, I would argue that contemplative practices help fit us for such activist engagements. The Great Commandment is quite clear with its all-encompassing call to loving God, loving others, and loving ourselves (properly). It is not a choice of only one direction in which our love is focused. In the UCC we are strong on the “loving others” side of the Great Commandment but I would argue that loving God (and being loved by God) enables us to love others, not to mention loving ourselves as God loves us. And loving ourselves properly (in a self-effacing, self-affirming way) gives us a better shot at being the kind of people who can actually love others because we ourselves are loved.

A start for us as a committee might be to collect examples of contemplative activities used in various congregations. For example, here is what my (recently retired) pastor the Rev. Mike Duda (Wenham Congregational Church) has to say about how he incorporated silence into our weekly worship service:

1.       Three chimes, three breaths: with a brief introduction (there's no place to go, nothing to do, you are here, God is here within you) at the beginning of the service, between the welcome/announcements and the start of the worship service, usually an introit by the choir.

2.       Pastoral Prayer: a few words about prayer, centering, and breathing followed by a few minutes of silence before beginning the prayer.

3.       Silence: throughout the service using silence before or within prayers such as the offering or reading scripture, or the benediction.

4.       Pace of the service: using a measured tone in readings, call to worship or offering; setting a calm, quiet tone without being boring or lulling the congregation to sleep!

We could also collect examples of resources that teach contemplative practices. During the past two decades, with the rediscovery of spiritual formation as a key aspect of the Christian life, a variety of such material has been produced. (I could pull together a beginning list based on the materials I used with my students as a professor of spiritual formation.)

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