

Protagonist Corner

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1001 New Worshiping Communities, Atlanta, Georgia

In my experience, it is spiritual hunger and an insightful friend that draws the people of new worshiping communities in. They are looking for something that has been missing or something they once had but fear they have lost. They gather in a kitchen, a coffee shop, or someone's living room. Some are life-long Christians, some have given up on church, and some never took a seat in the proverbial pew in the first place.

Because we begin in this mixed economy, new worshiping communities rarely start out with a sermon. It would feel, quite simply, inauthentic to gather around the story proclaimed by someone who is "in" to a group of people, most of whom feel they are "not." We begin with conversation.

What it looks like a lot of times is men and women and sometimes children sharing what they have been missing that they hope to find: "connection," "friendship," "something more," "God," "a way to make a difference." In these moments the subjects of future sermons are knit together in the future preacher's heart and mind. How often do we give ourselves permission to begin here? To begin, that is, with the great conundrums of our lives? To begin with hope? To begin with our stories?

The sermon is an event in which the story of God meets us where we are and takes us somewhere. It transforms my story, my family's story, my history, my future, my present into our story, into God's story.

If people commit to really listen to one another without judging or correcting, I have found in these nascent conversations that many "non-church" people begin sharing that they *really do* want to know God, or at least more *about* God. They are not anti-God or even anti-church. They were just too embarrassed to ask.

So in the midst of testimony, a group hope emerges wherein those gathered commit to do the same kinds of things that Christians of every time and place have done. Sometimes it is prayer. Sometimes it is simply lighting a candle and breathing deeply. Sometimes it is pooling their money for the good of the world. It is listening to the stories that Jesus told.

If they are wise, they acknowledge often that Jesus hasn't been waiting 2,000 years for them to start the perfect church. It is more proper and powerful to join instead the great cloud of witnesses and take our seat in the vast and imperfect congregation whose weakness is made powerful in Christ's presence. This is also worth acknowledging. Once the new community gets around to worshiping, the sermon can be an event that can take the losses and the triumphs – the high points, the indifference – of a group of people and transform a people into God's people. If the preacher is authentic, when the new members of Christ's church look back at their lives, it begins to make sense to them that God has been the author of their lives all along.

In a recent Google Hangout training with budding church planters, San Francisco Theological Seminary's chaplain Scott Clark described this as "conservative with a lower-case 'c,'" honoring the years of seeking and being the Word in worship that have come before us. But we also must be "progressive," he says, "remembering that at Pentecost the Holy Spirit gave the church permission to worship in new and

transformative ways.” At its best, new worshipping communities engage in worship that is both rigorously faithful and free.

“A lot of what we do is just for practical reasons,” Nancy Wind told me. Nancy helped to found and now co-leads Isaiah’s Table, a new worshipping community in Syracuse that rotates sermon duty and follows each sermon with an open discussion during which worshipers reflect on the message. “Beautiful things happen,” she says. “We have testimonies from people who share about abuse as a child, and ministry to those people happens after the service, too. It’s a way for people to get out their deepest angst and share the message.”

Because its vision is to offer “grace, hope, food for all” in town, worship happens on Saturday mornings, when it’s safer for congregants, sometimes children, to walk through the neighborhood to church. Because laity preach most sermons, these are also served up with a dose of humility.

Nancy Wind says, “Some of the people [in the congregation] know *way* more about the Bible than we (preachers) do. And that’s great. They can bring up a passage that we didn’t think about, that we never would have.” In a sense, those who gather at Isaiah’s Table for worship aren’t doing anything radically different from the mainline established church down the street.

Effective missional churches of all sizes share hallmarks in preaching and worship. They include testimony about the impact of faith in real people’s lives. They publicize sermon series that address felt community needs and move people toward greater faithfulness to and awareness of God’s call. Liturgy is thoughtfully crafted using “real, every day” language. Not one aspect of worship is glossed over, and leaders don’t assume that those gathered understand the purpose of any particular part of worship. They explain. They consider what the experience of confession or a sermon or tithing or an affirmation of faith could mean for people walking into a church for the first time, and they make that clear in each invitation. Surely some lifelong churchgoers are also waiting for the explanation. Effective churches link Sunday (or Saturday) morning to Monday and beyond.

The church planter’s axiom states, “If you start with church, you may not get disciples, but if you begin with disciples, you will get a church.” This informs the rhythm of the church gathered. The movements of worship, and particularly the “sending” part, help to set the stage.

If “fruitfulness” is the Bible’s term for success, fruitful worship ultimately ends with people going out to be the word of God both to a hungry and to an over-fed world. It takes the experiences of our lives and a diverse and scattered people and molds them into one people, God’s people, for the world. It looks like a community taking God’s story seriously enough to live it out when the gathering ends.