THE LEGACY OF ESTABLISHMENT IN A CHANGING CULTURE

Dwight Zscheile
After this the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go. 

He said to them, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. 

Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves. 

Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road. 

Whatever house you enter, first say, ‘Peace to this house!’ 

And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you. 

Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide, for the laborer deserves to be paid. Do not move about from house to house. 

Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; 

cure the sick who are there, and say to them, ‘The kingdom of God has come near to you.’ 

But whenever you enter a town and they do not welcome you, go out into its streets and say, 

‘Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you. Yet know this: the kingdom of God has come near.’ 

I tell you, on that day it will be more tolerable for Sodom than for that town.”
Capitola, California
Religious Adherence, Santa Cruz County, CA

Year 2009
Source: Social Explorer
Inhabiting a Predominant Story

• You are what you earn/achieve
• We’re on our own to create meaning, identity, purpose
• Community must be constructed but is unreliable
• Forgiveness?
• Church had to come to me
Finding a Home in Anglicanism

- Not going it alone!
- Ordered prayer in a self-constructed world
- Living into the mysteries
- Real presence in world of superficial promises
- Holding the tensions together
- Generosity and expansiveness
An Identity Crisis

“Who are we? What does it mean to be an Episcopalian? What are our core values? How are we differentiated from other Christian faith traditions? What are our strengths and weaknesses? What are our opportunities? We cannot be leaders within our church nor in the global community if we are unsure who we are or where God is calling us to go.”

—House of Deputies Committee on the State of the Church, 2007
Establishment Legacy

• From established church to church of establishment
• ‘National church ideal’
• Benefactor mission

Luke 22:24-27: “A dispute also arose among them as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest. But he said to them, “The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.”
Establishment Assumptions

- Church buildings and clergy are focus of God’s presence and activity
- People know what church is, where to find it
- People come to us already Christian, we make them members
- Everyone must learn established customs/language (vs. embracing vernacular principle of translating tradition)
Disestablishment Underway

- Loss of ‘national church’ ideal in social upheavals of ‘60s/70s
- Rejection of colonialism
- Disintegration of cultural Christianity in U.S.
  - Co-option by therapeutic individualism
- Culture no longer supports formation of Christian identity
- Public voice: church just one moral authority among many (not privileged)
Religious Climate Change

“The evidence for a decades-long decline in American religiosity is now incontrovertible—like the evidence for global warming, it comes from multiple sources, shows up in several dimensions, and paints a consistent factual picture—the burden of proof has shifted to those who want to claim that American religiosity is not declining.”—Mark Chaves, “The Decline of American Religion,”
Weather and Climate
It’s All Up to You

- Shift from culture of duty/obligation to culture of discretion
- Disintegration of inherited stories, structures for identity, meaning, community
The Search for Identity

• “In our fluid world, committing oneself to a single identity for life, or even for less than a whole life but for a long time to come, is a risky business. Identities are for wearing and showing, not for storing and keeping.”
  —Zygmunt Bauman, *Identity*
Emotional Branding

• From better product to identity, meaning, belonging
A Colonized Christianity?

- Moralistic Therapeutic Deism
  - A God exists who created, orders world
  - God wants people to be good, nice, fair, as taught by Bible and most religions
  - Central goal of life is to be happy, feel good about oneself
  - God doesn’t need to be involved except when needed to resolve a problem
  - Good people go to heaven when they die

What God Looks Like to Americans?
From Family to Restaurant
[God]
Managerial Responses

- Strategic control through marketing to religious consumers
  - ‘Luring them back’ (assumes they were once there)
  - Reduces church to vendor of religious goods/services
  - Assumes capacity to control environment
  - Fickle commitment
  - Younger generations increasingly resistant
Primary Challenges Facing Us

- Theological and spiritual in character
  - Only 28% of Episcopal churches had ‘high spiritual vitality’ according to own members (2010 FACT Study, Hartford Seminary)
- Require us to mine tradition for ‘treasures new and old’ (Mt 13:52)
- Are open-ended, complex and ambiguous (no easy answers)
- Require new learning on the part of all
Where Are We?

- What if we’re in the biblical wilderness or exile?
- What if our primary challenge is to rediscover our identity as disciples in a strange new land?
- Disciple=learner
Turning Church Inside Out

• Our future (if we have one) lies with those outside doors

• Asking deeper questions:
  • *What does it mean to be a Christian community in our culture today?*
  • *Who are we in God?*

• Challenge: cultivating Christian community within existing congregations and with new populations and generations
Letter to the Exiles (Jeremiah 29)

Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.
Questions for Discussion

• What signs do you see of the church’s disestablishment in your context?
• What losses are involved?
• What opportunities do you see in a new apostolic age?