



Epiphany Explorations 2010

Report by Clair Woodbury

February 2010 Contents

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Think you know what TGIF means? Think again. That was the message delivered by that guru of the acronym, Leonard Sweet, at this year's Epiphany Explorations.

Victoria was ready with its green grass and open water to greet those of us attending this year's Epiphany Explorations sponsored by First Metropolitan United Church. The event had a rich agenda of presenters, with great musical leadership by Linnea Good and Bruce Harding.

TGIF stands for Twitter-Google-Internet-Facebook, the digital information world our young adults and so many others live in. The keynote speaker Leonard Sweet's challenge was clear – if you want to have anyone under 40 in your congregation, you have to communicate in their language. 1973 was the dividing point. Before that we lived in what was essentially a Gutenberg world, one based on the printed word. After 1973 it morphed into TGIF. "There is a very different culture out there," he told us. "We in the church need to master the way young people communicate."

That's where the next acronym comes in – EPIC. Every event, be it worship or study group or gathering of any kind, has to be Experiential, Participatory, Image-rich and Connecting. That is the interface any organization has to use that wants to communicate with people who are part of today's culture. Leonard Sweet's presentation was itself an example. He was an Experience, looking the part of a guru to the "with-it" culture – full coiffure and beard, casual flowing shirt, and jeans. He is Professor of Evangelism at Drew University. There was no danger of falling asleep as he modulated his voice between full volume and intimate whisper.

His presentation was Participatory, inviting us as he did to finish his sentences. His use of live Internet to project images

meant it was Image-rich. He is a gifted communicator and held the audience's attention for every minute of his three presentations.

When we are buying a cell phone it is not a piece of hardware. We are really buying the ability to connect. Computer networks, Facebook, and Twitter are all part of that desire for relationships. The digital world, however, has limitations, and that is where the church can come in. Deep down, Sweet believes, we are spiritual people who hunger for a personal connection, one that can come only through personal contact and participation in a real community.

Too many churches, however, operate in the ABC mode. It's all about Attendance, Building and Cash.

Sweet's answer lies in the acronym MRI. Churches that are going to survive in the future are the ones who are truly Missional, Relational and Incarnational. As far as mission is concerned, we need to be clear, says Sweet, it is not the church's mission but it is God's mission. It's not about preserving the church institution but rather meeting the needs of God's people in the community. We may think of the church as a sanctuary. According to Sweet's definition, "a sanctuary is not a safe place from risk, but a safe place to take risks." The MRI definition is elaborated in Sweet's latest book, *So Beautiful*.

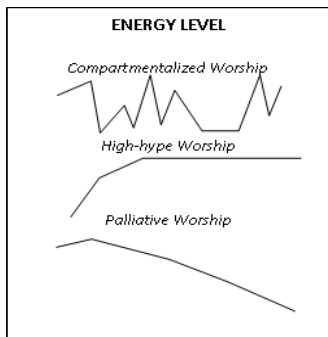
Leonard Sweet's theology tends toward the conservative side and his approach is definitely American. What was compelling in his presentation however was the unmistakable challenge that those in the church have a choice. The church can continue to live within the culture it has inherited from the past, and eventually die as that culture fades away. Or it can move into the digital image-rich culture of today, using modern means of communicating to reach the younger generations.



Leonard Sweet

Beyond the Hymn Sandwich

Good Advice from Linnea Good—story by Centre Staff



Linnea Good led much of the music and several worships at Epiphany Explorations. She has the ability to truly involve an audience. She is also very talented and shared with us the insights her concert experience provides for the whole process of leading worship.

Linnea suggested it is time to replace ineffective models for worship. Too much of main-line worship is what she called Compartmentalized. It moves from one unconnected phase to another taking the participant on an emotional roller coaster ride. It is more commonly known as the “hymn-sandwich.”

High-hype worship has an emotional tone that goes up and then flattens out because the leadership can't get the hype any higher. The most deadly of all church experiences is Palliative worship where the energy level does nothing but drop.

What Linnea advocates is an energy flow in worship that emulates what she knows works well in musical concerts. As we come into worship there is usually a sense of excitement and anticipation. We greet one another and feel connected to the community. Linnea suggests music is a good way to sustain this energy.

Worship needs to start and end on a high, but the substance of effective worship is to make a connection and have an experience of the holy.

We need to take into consideration, for instance, what we do while the children are at worship. Linnea challenges us to be very creative in how we present scripture. Some of her ideas include a scripture story, finding ways to read the scripture dramatically, sing the scripture, or create a drama. One of the things she had us do was all recite a familiar passage from memory. (We were surprised at how well we remembered the Christmas story.)

Linnea is gifted at matching the music to the theme and mood. She used music as background for scripture reading and dramatic presentations. Even a simple drum being played quietly adds another dimension to a prayer or the message.

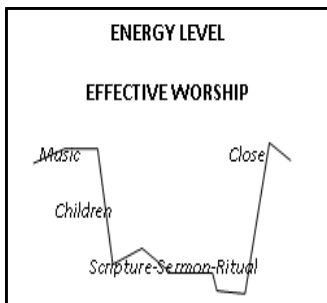
As I listened, my theological history kicked into full swing.

Friedrich Schleiermacher teaching in Berlin in the mid 1800s talked about the state of ultimate dependence as the core of religious experience. When we worship, we rehearse that God is the one on whom we ultimately depend, and that dependence is the foundation of a faith that will sustain us no matter what. A century later Paul Tillich picked up that idea in his theology, defining faith as the state of ultimate concern.

In the 1970s Bruce Reed developed a theory known as the Grubb Theory of Oscillation. His most readable explanation was published by the Alban Institute. According to this theory, human beings have needs both for work and for rest, for productivity and for nurture, and that we humans need to oscillate between the two. Bruce Reed's finding was that the deeper you oscillate into a state of extra-dependence (dependent on that which is outside yourself), the more energized you are for the remainder of your intra-dependent life — where you have to make the decisions about what you do, what you wear, what you say, and who you relate to. Worship and meditation are two places where we can go most deeply into a state of extra-dependence, dependence on God — because God is the one who is ultimately dependable. Good worship can release the energy that makes life truly worth living.

Linnea's diagram for effective worship connects to what past theologians felt is important. The core of the service needs to provide an opportunity for as many as possible to move into a deeper sense of connection with God and with one another. Rituals help this process, but we must make sure that they are relevant for today. The worship needs to end on a high so people can take that with them as they move back into everyday life. That means the final hymn and words are energizing and uplifting.

Here's to the death of the “hymn-sandwich” and to creating worship where we experience our connection with God.



Linnea Good is a song & hymn-writer from Sumnerland BC. She is a leader in the field of music and worship for all ages and tours much of the year, giving concerts and leading workshops. Her latest CDs are Swimmin' Like a Bird and Momentary Saints. Linnea will tour in Alberta in Feb/March 2010. Find out where on her web site www.LinneaGood.com.

Becoming Community

by Clair Woodbury

We introduced the A-B-Cs of congregational development last newsletter with “A” for “A Warm Welcome.” Let’s continue. “B” is for “Belonging” and “C” is for “Creating Christian Community.”

Everyone wants to belong. We are social creatures after all. All too many people receive a warm welcome in a congregation they are exploring, but after a time are unable to find a way to really get to know people to the point they feel they belong. That’s where a conscious process on the part of the congregation to find out why people have come will yield great benefits.

Speed Leas and Roy Oswald make the point that people need to find friends in a congregation or else they will not stay. By friends we mean more than just casual social contacts, people we know by name or face and not much else. We mean people with whom we share areas of life in common, people we can talk to and feel we are really understood.

Small groups are one place where this can happen. Large gatherings tend to be dominated by an agenda with very little opportunity for people to actually get to know one another. It’s all about the business and the busyness. In groups of ten or less there is time to get to know one another, particularly if there is a specific time for personal sharing.

Most who have been in a congregation for some time have a cadre of old friends. We can be warm and friendly to new people, but as far as having the time or energy to give to a new relationship, it is just not there. That is why it is so important to introduce new people to other new people. They are the ones who have come looking for the friends that will give them a sense of belonging. This may happen naturally over time, but in today’s fast pace of life it needs to happen sooner rather than later. A process that helps friendship to get established can go a long way to creating the sense of belonging that people need.

That brings us to the “C” component – Creative Christian Community. When we feel we belong we recognize the congregation has made a difference in our lives. The call is then for us to reach out to make a difference in the lives of others.

There is a deep need in all of us to give ourselves to others in compassion. Finding ourselves is the inward journey of belonging. Making a difference in the lives of others is the outward journey that creates community.

Growing a strong vibrant congregation is a lot of work, and requires courage and creativity. That is true, but basically it is as simple as A-B-C: offering a warm welcome, providing a place to belong, and building a caring outward-oriented community.

An event for your Board or Vestry

New energy — new perspective — renewed leadership

Everything we read today says congregational health is about leadership, leadership, and more leadership. The Board or Vestry of a congregation plays a vital role in providing this leadership. Developing leadership is freeing, energizing, liberating, engaging, and opens the way for real growth in the congregation. Think what that would mean for your church!

Edmonton

Tuesday March 16

Calgary

Wednesday March 17

Central Alberta

Thursday March 18

3 hours: 7–10 p.m.

E-mail the Congregational Life Centre at
clair@congregationallife.com

Or phone 780-619-0386 or 780-438-6016 (after Feb. 23 please)
to reserve a place for your Board or Vestry at one of the events.

The cost: \$200 per Board/Vestry.

Leadership for Today - A Review & Reflection

by Monica Rosborough

This book challenges church leaders to focus on helping their congregation to follow its strengths and answer the call to be God's partner in mission to the wider community. Once they have done that and stopped trying to block the Spirit, God becomes a partner to be dialogued with, not an ancient superstition to be locked in a closet and ignored like some distant cousin with poor social skills.

The book examines church growth and leadership from an unusual perspective, not "what would Jesus do?" but what leadership styles and actions did Jesus demonstrate and implement in his short time of ministry. Somehow Jesus took 11 men (and some women, too!) and trained them into a core group of leaders who would not only survive persecutions but strike out into unknown territory, training new leaders and providing the basis for long-term sustainability in a program that revolutionized the societies it encountered, regardless of the costs to the leaders themselves.

The authors bring a wide range of experience to their writing. They have wide experience as church consultants and it is truly heartening to read the stories of congregations conquering their challenges. They talked to many leaders, asking what worked, what didn't, when mistakes were helpful, and when they were not. Throughout, the message is one of the need to listen and to reflect.

Eight aspects of Jesus' leadership are identified and we are given biblical stories that show Jesus using them. Jesus was spiritual, visionary, flexible, story-based, team-based, courageous, action-oriented, and authentic. Each of these is fully fleshed-out and explored in depth. At the end of each chapter there are reflections that lend themselves to group discussion, questions like, "If church leaders need to spend 80% of their time developing relations with others, what will you stop doing to make that time available?" I could see using this book as a study for potential leaders, and using the questions to facilitate group learning.

One of my favorite quotes was on what congregations had in mind when they talked about revitalizing their churches:

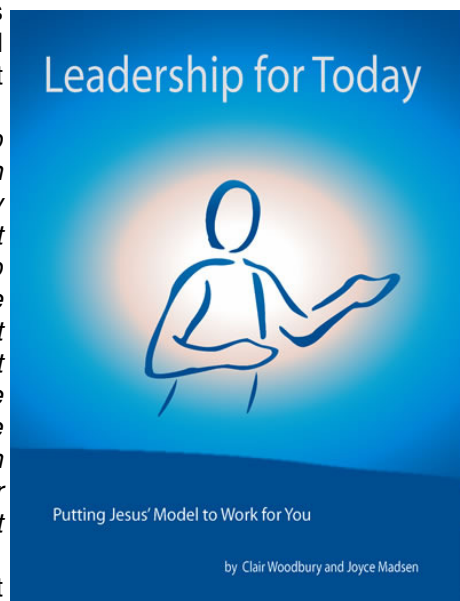
Initially people often ask us to help them grow, by which they mean "fill the sanctuary with people who will do what we are too old and tired to do and donate money to solve our budget crunch." What they need to hear is that growth comes only as we meet people's needs. The vampire school of evangelism – we need fresh blood in our congregation – does not work.

I had often heard that sentiment before from other congregations, but to hear it labeled as a vampiristic way of looking at recruitment was surprising. At first I chuckled, but then I realized that this is a serious problem our churches need to address. If newcomers are pounced on like the innocent traveler in a Bram Stoker vampire novel, they only become drained to the point of death. They in their turn look for a new victim to drain of their life, their blood, their enthusiasm.

Church should be about giving life, not taking it. Metaphors like this lead to an instant jump in understanding and make paradigm shifts much more comprehensible. It also increases the chance that people will buy in to the idea that we should not immediately try to integrate newcomers into committee work as soon as they express an interest in church. However, the problem remains: how do we deal with the reality of shrinking congregations in a rapidly diversifying society?

This question comes up again and again throughout the book, and if it weren't for the rich selection of anecdotes from churches and leaders I would question the authors' conviction that there is hope for our struggling denomination. However, I have been to some of the congregations named

(Continued on page 5)



Jesus' leadership was spiritual, visionary, flexible, story-based, team-based, courageous, action-oriented, and authentic.

(Continued from page 4)

and seen youth groups of twenty kids and worship space that is jam-packed with people. Lively worship and strong welcomes are becoming something seen not just in evangelical churches, but in the United Church as well. I know some of the leaders quoted in this book, such as Ross Smillie and Jope Langejan. This adds a sense of reality and possibility to what otherwise might seem like a fairy tale of optimistic hype.

It is one thing to look at the theory of congregational renewal; it is quite another thing to realize that the church next door has successfully transitioned into a mission-driven place. As a leader, I shift from the question, "is it possible to revive my church" to "what do I need to do to make this happen?" Renewal is not just a pipedream but a calling, a responsibility or even duty to God to take this church that has been entrusted to me and encourage it to grow into a healthy thriving community.

Monica Rosborough is a candidate for the United Church ministry and is currently a member of the staff of Chalmers-Castle Downs United Church in Edmonton.

Leadership for Today

Putting Jesus' Model to Work for You

by Clair Woodbury and Joyce Madsen
Order from the Congregational Life Centre,
Edmonton for \$24.95.

NEW! for Kindle

NOW available as an electronic download for Amazon Kindle from for \$11.95. To purchase, go to the Kindle Store at www.Amazon.com/kindle and search in Kindle Books either by book title or author.

If you don't have a Kindle, the Kindle Store has a free software download to turn your PC into a Kindle book reader. We have it on our PC and it works very well. This is also an inexpensive way to see if the Kindle would work for you.

Establishing Small Group Ministry

August 9-13, Athabasca 2010



This five day event takes place at a retreat lodge in a woodland setting two hours north of Edmonton. We explore the steps to take in creating a small group ministry in your congregation — and give you an opportunity to enjoy the spiritual enrichment of being part of a small group. We recommend this program for clergy and lay leaders who want to develop or strengthen small group ministry within their congregation.

For recreation and relaxation, the 80 acre wooded site is laced with walking trails. We relax beside the 25' swimming pool. Evening campfires provide time for talk and entertainment. The cost of \$325 per person includes tuition, meals and accommodation.

The event begins at 1:00 p.m. Monday and ends at 1 p.m. Friday.

Reconnecting with Small Group Ministry

August 4 - 6, Athabasca 2010

An event for those who have some small group experience and want to expand their use of small groups. It provides an opportunity to share insights and gain new enthusiasm and expertise.

Begins 10 a.m. Wednesday Aug. 4 and ends 6 p.m. Friday Aug 6. All inclusive cost: \$195.

New this June ...

Leading Organic Community

Our research has identified the importance of leadership in creating vibrant, effective communities of faith. It is important to identify the leadership skills that are needed to create the Kingdom of God – God's realm or God's new community – in the neighbourhoods or areas served by particular congregations.

To create these environments requires leaders who have the necessary skills and a willingness to explore the possibilities. We want to provide an opportunity for leaders to incubate and grow their community through a process of learning and action.

What is involved:

June 7— 10, 2010 4 days

- ◆ Understanding individual leadership skills and identifying opportunities for growth.
- ◆ Developing an understanding of what Jesus' vision of the Kingdom of God means for our time .
- ◆ Creating a map of how to move one's community from where they are today to where their vision says God is calling them to be.

October 2010 3 days

- ◆ Sharing results so far.
- ◆ A new look at leading organic community.
- ◆ Developing a plan for the next 3 months.

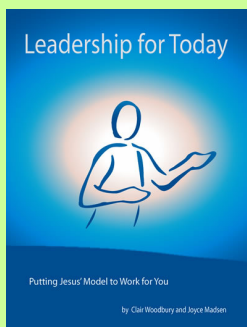
January 2011 3 days

- ◆ Sharing results so far.
- ◆ A new look at leading organic community.
- ◆ Developing a plan for the next 3 months.

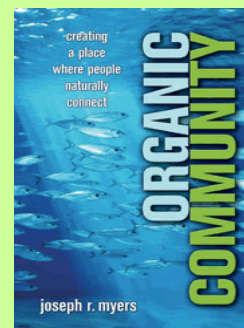
Location: The Athabasca Woodland Retreat

The cost: \$900 per person registration for all three events.
Individual events: \$400, \$300 and \$300.

Call or e-mail us for more information or to register
clair@congregationallife.com 780-619-0386



Our primary resources for this program will be
Leadership for Today
and
Organic Community by Joseph Myers.



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