

the center letter

Cultivating Missional Communities

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TOUCHSTONES:

Religious Heritage: Images to Shape the Church's Witness

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"But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light." (1 Peter 2:9-10)

The 2001 *Center Letter* will be a resource for stimulating fruitful conversation about the formation of faithful church life and ministry. The starting point for such conversation is theological: the church does not exist primarily to meet its own institutional needs, the felt needs of its members, or the people it hopes to attract. It exists, rather, because God is active and present in the world in particular, local, and tangible ways. The church exists, as the words from 1 Peter suggest, to be a visual declaration of God's marvelous deeds. The church's nature, purpose, program, and practices are to be defined by this mission. When embraced by the church, this mission is the source of renewal and transformation. But, how is this mission to be engaged and manifested through the life of the church? Are there aspects of the church's life and ministry that have greater impact on missional faithfulness? Given the variety of histories, contexts, and dynamics in churches across North America what areas of church life should be given particular attention and scrutiny? These questions guide the 2001 *Center Letter* series. The TOUCHSTONES for ministry offered here will direct church leaders to the key areas of church life that have greatest influence on the missional faithfulness of the church.

A touchstone is quartz-like stone used to test the purity of precious metals. No less, the church is a precious gift, a new creation of the Spirit for the life of the world. The TOUCHSTONES offered here will help leaders evaluate and strengthen their church by lifting up for examination aspects of the church's life and witness that cannot be ignored. These areas include the role and influence of the church's religious heritage, the impact of the cultural context, and organizational history. They include discernment of the church's guiding vision and missional strategy. Also, leaders cannot neglect communal formation, relational dynamics, organizational structure, and the stewarding of resources – all essential for transforming the guiding vision into tangible results. And, attention must be given also to the way the church learns from its experience, continually renewing its witness. This series of TOUCHSTONES begins by inviting you to look at your church's religious heritage. Biblical and theological heritage are the fundamental source of images for faithfully interpreting, shaping, and guiding the church's life and ministry.

Caution! Do not read this series on TOUCHSTONES alone! If you are a pastor, find a way to read and discuss it with lay leaders – as well as with other pastors. If you are a lay leader, invite your pastor and other leaders or friends to read and discuss it. If you in other than a local church setting, invite colleagues, a ministry team or staff group. The aim is for leaders and members together to identify and explore those areas of church life that have greatest impact on missional faithfulness.

Religious Heritage. We live in a time when traditional understandings of the church are being called into question. Leaders and congregations are asking, "Who are we and what should we be about?" Many churches are attempting to create a vision that offers a compelling answer to this question. Often these churches seek an understanding of the church's identity and mission that will help unify and renew their church, or to put it on a more fruitful future course. In their search they encounter a two-fold temptation. One is to allow the marketplace uncritically to define their church's identity and mission by its version of religious or spiritual needs. The other temptation is to ignore the changing cultural context and cling tightly to the church's religious traditions, regardless of whether people find them meaningful or not. Neither option is appropriate. These temptations, however, raise the issue of how a church relates to and appropriates its religious heritage. What if anything from the church's past is to guide the understanding of its identity and mission for the future?

The importance of images. We may believe we have captured and expressed the church's identity and purpose

when we have a concise statement – often a catchy phrase or single sentence short enough for everyone to remember. Mental images or verbal pictures, however, like great paintings communicate far more than a polished statement. The Bible discloses the nature and meaning of the church in this way. It relies on images and narratives instead of doctrines, definitions, or slogans. The Scriptures offer a rich tapestry of images that strike the imagination. The profusion of images for the church in the New Testament stimulate creative thinking and imagining about the life of the church.¹ When the imagination is engaged, excitement about the Christian faith is ignited and new hope is stirred. Such is the power of images.

"The contemporary crisis of faith is, I believe, in very large part a crisis of images," Avery Dulles declares.² The concern expressed here is not for the number of images available to the church. Rather, the concern is about which images are influencing and shaping the church's life and ministry. And,

then, not only the images themselves but the reality to which the images point and in which they are grounded is our concern. It is the reality in front of, behind, and underneath the images that shapes the church's identity, life, and mission. If the images, language, and experience of the church are predominantly secular and utilitarian, for example, filling human needs, coordinating volunteers, running like a "business," entrepreneurial, doing whatever "works", the reality shaping the church is the contemporary culture. Then the church's identity, purpose and life look remarkably like the culture, and the culture's priorities, commitments, and values provide the primary shaping influence. When this occurs, biblical images drawn from the church's own heritage actually seem alien, and the church's vision dries up. Its missional activity is deformed, and the church falls short of declaring God's saving purpose for all creation. As a result, the process of visioning means only developing a new set of programs and structures, discernment becomes merely a method of decision-making.

Tapping into Religious Heritage. Probing into the rich reservoir of the church's biblical and theological heritage to discern the identity and purpose of the church for these times is a more fruitful and faithful alternative. As the church taps into this heritage, it is leading from its strength. The Scriptures indicate through metaphor, image, and narrative that the church is a human community that experiences and communicates God's saving intention for the life of the world. The images from 1 Peter of "chosen race," "royal priesthood," "holy nation," and "God's own people" are a few among many biblical images that point to the theological and missional identity of the church. All of these images of the church presuppose that the reality of the church is grounded in the reality of God. "The early church understood itself to be the holy people of God's own possession, a people whose pattern of life differed essentially from that of the rest of the world. This is the self-consciousness that stands behind 1 Peter 2:9-10. The unambiguous identity of the early church is the prime ingredient in the fulfillment of its mission."³ Thus, whatever figure of speech is used, the community knows itself to be God's possession, existing for God's purpose, living under God's rule, and bearing already the marks of God's new age.

Cultivating faithful images. The dominant image(s) the Christian community has of itself is an important subject of discovery, study, and are key to the community's formation. The Christian community's cohesion, integrity, and future direction are shaped by its dominant image(s) in both

profound and subtle ways. "Images are the ways that most powerfully express our visions and convictions; they challenge us and motivate us; they provide standards that we are willing to stretch towards and live up to; they help stir up the emotional energy that we need to live out our commitments, they lay bare the theories out of which all of us live, and give shape to who we are and how we see ourselves."⁴ Taking the time to identify the church's current images of itself and discern faithful images to shape the future are key to cultivating missional faithfulness.

Tapping into the church's heritage involves discovering and appropriating biblical images for shaping the common life and witness of the church in each unique setting. Thus, there is not one "right" image for the church. As the community gathers to discover, study, and learn about and experience a common life, new and compelling images that clarify purpose and identity emerge. Through caring interaction that reflects the divine reality behind the images, the images become known and interpreted experientially, shaping the community's life together.

Engaging with one another around biblical images is not only an exciting and refreshing encounter. It also exposes the cultural biases and inevitable blind spots that the church naturally develops by living daily in a cultural context. When the church is faithfully appropriating its religious heritage, people are coming together also to surface, share, and test the images from the cultural context shaping them. Holding culturally-formed images up to the light of the Gospel loosens their grip. The community begins to experience the transforming influence of the Gospel. Here the church's religious heritage is playing a dynamic role in the shaping a people who "declare God's marvelous deeds."

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What is the first thing that comes to your mind when you hear _____ (name of your church) _____?
 2. What cultural images or language influence how you think and talk about your church?
 3. In what ways do biblical images and language currently influence your church's self-understanding?
 4. Which biblical images would you like to see more fully shape your church's identity and purpose? Why?
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¹ Paul Minear identifies four major and 32 minor images in the New Testament, in *Images of the Church in the New Testament* (The Westminster Press, 1960).

² Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church* (Images Books, 1978), p.25.

³ John Driver, *Images of the Church in Mission* (Herald Press, 1997) p. 35.

⁴ Stephen Bevans, SVD, "Images of the Priesthood in Today's Church." *Emmanuel*/Sept. 1996, p.390.

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