

Friday, July 27, 2007
Maxine Clarke Beach
Drew University
Drew Theological School

Wesley's Class Meetings: Chaos and Community as a New Interpretation

*Never doubt that a small group of committed people
can change the world – indeed it's the only thing that can.!*
Margaret Mead

This paper is a spin off of a larger project that asks questions about how and why groups work and do not work. Personal interest comes from recognition that much of what we try to do together creates dysfunction and frustration rather than a sense of accomplishment and growth. What are the dynamics that make a group of people want to work together to be more productive for the common good? What kind of leadership is needed for that kind of group?

Many resources look at leadership for successful group process. The Fetzer Institute, Institute for Co-Intelligence, Collective Wisdom Initiative, The National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation, The World Café, and the groundbreaking work of Margaret Wheatley and Peter Senge to name a few. These resources have assisted me to claim my own style as beyond naïve. That is for the larger project.

The narrow slice that is presented here looks at the recent movements of organizational management of Margaret Wheatley, and the cross-cultural realities that have become obvious to me as I have looked at how the individual and the group functions in other cultures or where there is a diversity of world-views within the same group.

Having been immersed in this thought process provided by contemporary organizational theorists for most of the last 15 years it seemed an interesting challenge to now read Wesley's guidance for the class meetings and bands and to briefly/quickly follow that movement into the United Methodist's attempt to use his words throughout the centuries of the church.

This I approached with some energy and hopeful expectation. As a biblical scholar, I find myself often cringing as I quickly embrace the quadrilateral to moderate Wesley's guidance concerning scripture. My need to read with a hermeneutics of suspicion in a post-modern, post-colonial, academic world makes holding on to some of Wesley's biblical interpretations difficult. I hoped that my venture into Wesley "the group organizer" would be a less complicated journey of interpretation and translation. Having participated as an active layperson in many of the US UMC churches, which have attempted to revive that church with some edition of Wesley's class meeting concept, I

was interested in how or if there was an intersection of the present organizational models and the class meeting structure. What I found is that Wesley “the group organizer” also has long story of reinterpretation as the situations and the scholarship change.

This first section briefly describes Wheatley’s concepts and then moves to my own recognition of the dynamics of living within groups that contain multiple worldviews that differ in how they understand the individual and the group. Then after a quick summary of the guidance that Wesley gave to his contemporaries and the generations who have followed, the last section presents some questions that I am left with and a couple of suggestions. It is my hope that the “real Wesley scholars” at this institute might help me with this pursuit.

What appears to be obvious is that we have a need to relate to a small group of people. Our organizations seem to function best when part of the structure is small groups. They may be for control and order or they may be for completion of a task or support of a concern but they are the basis of much that we do. Wesley may have stumbled onto this but through the decades of the Wesley tradition; leaders have reinterpreted the idea for the present age. Can what we now know about organizational dynamics from the New Science help us to reinvent for this age?

New Science and how groups naturally organize

Margaret Wheatley first came into the picture of groups struggling to function more affectively with her 1992 publication *Leadership and the New Science*.¹ It was one of the earlier organization management books to look at how new discoveries in quantum physics, chaos theory, and biology challenge our standard ways of thinking. She was an organizational consultant who in her own words expected no real results since she and others did not know how organizations worked. After a friend told her to check out quantum physics, she discovered a world that only exists in relationships. There was no sense of an individual independent of its relationships. “It is all relationships...But the real eye-opener for me was to realize how control and order were two different things, and that you could have order without control. That was a major shift in my own thinking that I certainly discovered through the science.”²

These are basic truths of life. Life needs to create and participate in the creation of itself. Why would that not also be true for human beings, with our levels of thought and self-awareness? Yet when you look at these organizations, the re-engineering is still going on — trying to perfect an organizational-chart as a way of perfecting an organization, and excluding people, and pretending that loyalty and love and the desire to work together are not important criteria for productivity.

¹ *Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World* Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.; 1992. Margaret J. Wheatley

² In a 1997 radio interview on “Insight and Outlook” with Wheatley and Scout London.

A lot of our understandings of who we are as human beings has disappeared in this mechanistic imprinting that we've all gone through as Westerners. I believe passionately that we've got to reconnect with who we are as human beings, and our unique capacities because of who we are, as alive, vibrant human beings.³

A quote that she uses often is from Burt Mannis who, in *The Leader's Edge*, said, "In this day and age, if you're not confused, you're not thinking clearly." This movement toward allowing organizational theory to be messy, chaotic and confusing resulted in new creativity and possibilities to come to her work and to the organizations with which she worked. It also showed how our reliance on old, mechanistic models could stand in the way of innovation and effective leadership.

Wheatley speaks of the chaos, the edge of chaos and the ability to live in the midst of the ambiguity as part of the process. "To get into the *messiness* of the data before you try to see what it means. That process has served me well. . . I have been in enough experiences with groups of people where we have generated so much information that it's led us to despair and led us to deep confusion. I now know that that's the place to be if you want to really be open to new thoughts, if you want to be totally open to a total reorganizing of your mental constructs or your mind maps, or whatever you want to call them. You can't get there without going through this period of letting go and confusion. For somebody who's been taught to be a good analytical thinker, this is always a very painful moment."⁴

Her work assisted businesses to deal with the move from autocratic hierarchical management to a more-team approach to getting the job done. The group and the ability of the group to organize itself in the ways necessary to get done what needs to be done assumes that within the group is what is necessary. It has a familiar ring to the later work of James Surowiecki in "The Wisdom of the Crowd"⁵ where he promotes the proven theory that the crowd together is wiser than any individual in the crowd. As Wheatley worked with groups through the 90's she became more aware of the issues that get in the way of this natural formation. Her later work⁶ has become quite spiritual as she looks for words to describe the possibilities for leadership in our uncertain times. According to Wheatley, "We have to slow down. Nothing will change for the better until we do. We need time to think, to learn, to get to know each other. We are losing these great human capacities in the speed-up of modern life, and it is killing us."⁷ She challenges us to find the new story that connects us and makes us believe in each other.

Wheatley describes leadership that works in this less controlled way like this. "Leaders who live in the new story help us understand ourselves differently by the way they lead. They trust our humanness, they welcome the surprises we bring to them; they are curious about the differences; they delight in our inventiveness; they nurture us; they connect us.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Radio interview with Scott London and Margaret Wheatley

⁵ *Wisdom of the Crowd* Random House,

⁶ Margaret J. Wheatley *Finding Our Way: Leadership For an Uncertain Time*, Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.; 2005

⁷ Ibid,

They trust that we can create wisely and well, that we seek the best interests of our organization and our community that we want to bring more good into the world.”⁸

Wheatley’s use of the New Sciences of chaos and complexity theory, quantum physics, and the new biology as aids to new understandings of leadership and organizational theory has continued her work in a more recent work on talking. Her premise is that we have lost the art of conversation and in losing that art we have mislaid the very tool of participating in the creation of a future.⁹ “Human conversation is the most ancient and easiest way to cultivate the conditions of change—personal change, community and organizational change, planetary change. If we sit together and talk about what’s important to us, we begin to come alive. We share what we see and feel.”¹⁰

In *Turning to One Another*, Wheatley’s book on talking and how to talk,¹¹ she introduces her readers to the *World Café* movement. This concept is a detail-defined process to get a large number of people to come to some sort of consensus without losing the individual and sometime quirky ideas. It is a well-orchestrated movement to find the common ideas and the thoughts so the collective wisdom of the group can rise to the top and merge into a generally accepted idea for moving forward. The planning for the group is essential not only to set the conversation up but also to define the question. Coming to common agreement of the question that the group is trying to answer is the most important work of preparation. What question or small set of questions will allow the group to reach a point where the next steps are obvious with the way clear? In this understanding, the questions are consistent changing as the work of the group nuances a different set of expectations and outcomes.

The work of Paulo Freire¹² is echoed in her work as it struggles to help us to own the possibilities of the entire group. His belief that everyone has something valuable and even essential to the development of the best solution, shows great faith in each individual and the ability to delight in what the group together can create. This is very different than our individualism and our isolated way of making decisions but sounds familiar in Wheatley. “Relationships are all there is. Everything in the universe only exists because it is in relationship to everything else. Nothing exists in isolation. We have to stop pretending we are individuals who can go it alone.”¹³

Other cultures seem to understand this better than what we find in the United States. Our individualism gets in the way of allowing relationships to have real power in our identity. In South Africa there is a concept of that is contained in the word “ubuntu”.¹⁴ According to the Bishop Tutu it is so basic that it may be the reason the Truth and Reconciliation

⁸ Ibid, 30

⁹ Margaret Wheatley, *Turning to one Another: simple conversations to restore hope to the future*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc ,San Francisco, 2002

¹⁰ Ibid, 4

¹¹ Find the quote

¹² Freire, Paulo, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, New York: Herder & Herder. 1970.

¹³ Wheatley, *Turning to one another*, Page 19

¹⁴ Desmond Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness*, Doubleday, 1999.

Commission was able to do its painful work. This concept of the interconnectedness of all is quite foreign to the western mind.

This seems to be the case in cultures that have not been so influenced by the individualism of the west. In the recent edition of *The Progressive Christian*, Hak Joon Lee seems to speak of this in the View Points article “When Community Disappears”. He, I believe correctly, identifies the fundamental problem that the incident at Virginia Tech revealed can be “traced back to fundamental cultural and moral assumptions – particularly as individualistic anthropology and contractual sociology – that no longer functions in a multicultural, global society as we expect them to or as they once did.”¹⁵ He goes on to discuss the excessive individualism that creates loners who feel connected to no one and who reach out in violent ways. It seems that those who have come from a more community-oriented culture have much to teach the western church that has thrived on individual salvation and individual dreams of prosperity as we have picked ourselves up by our own bootstraps.

When I mentioned this concept of connectedness in chapel at Drew, students from Africa and Asia will come and tell me that they understand this way of thinking about our connectedness from their home cultures. One student told me that in his native Bantu language there is not word for the individual.

Tutu describes this connection with phrases like: Without the other, I am not. The very essence of being human is to be bound up in others. A person is a person through other persons. I am human because I belong, I participate, and I share. A person with *ubuntu* is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed, or treated as if they were less than who they are. The very essence of being human is that my humanity is caught up in your humanity. Without you, I am not.

As I look at the principles for conversation that are in Wheatley’s book on conversation¹⁶ I see this desire to move to the deeper understanding of our connections – maybe even to *ubuntu*. Certainly her “how to talk list” is influenced by her earlier discoveries in the new sciences of how we are indeed connected.

We acknowledge one another as equals
We try to stay curious about each other
We recognize that we need each other to become better listeners
We slow down so we have time to think and reflect
We remember that conversation is the natural way humans think together
We expect it to be messy at times

¹⁵ *The Progressive Christian*: Hak Joon Lee, *When Community Disappears*. July/August 2007

¹⁶ *Turning to one another*, page 29

This connectedness also results in a sense of responsibility that members of groups play in carefully revealing the accumulated junk of an institution. People can change and institutions can change, but it is not instant or predictable.

Again looking to the efforts in South Africa in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission we see the power of this commitment to the group and the deep work of remembering, truth telling, repenting, forgiving with the hope that there might be some sort of reconciliation and healing.

The group must commit themselves to the deep work of purification-- healing of the memories and the hard work of dealing with the hurt of the past. These experiences have left scars but more importantly, they have resulted in certain patterns of behavior and way of thinking and acting.

Sally Kempton who teaches eastern meditation and yoga refers to these groves as the energy patterns in our consciousness that results from the scars caused by our experiences. She sees these as mental groves, like rivulets in sand that let water run in certain patterns. These repeated behaviors create our mental, emotional, and physical default setting. She uses this image of the groves in our brain to assist individuals to understand why it is so difficult for them to change – to embrace health and a more desirable life style -- and it would seem that it is similar to what happens also within our institutions.

This is the tendency within our institutions and us to think, “I can’t do this” or worse yet to simply continue in the way of the usual or the familiar without being mindful of what we are doing. We repeat behavior until it is a real habit and a real grove. It requires great intentionality to somehow get out of that grove and to have the confidence of a new skill so that the hard becomes possible.

Neurophysiologists mapping pathways in the brain report that each time we react in a certain way – getting angry, for instance – we strengthen the power of that pathway. It becomes the path of least resistance and like rats in a maze we continue to run in the same old patterns and experience the same old feelings. This is also why spiritual disciplines of compassion and prayer map us in a more productive way. If we follow this like of thought only a little way, we get to the power of the support groups for illness and dependency to change patterns of behavior.

A new story

In the midst of this journey to understand leadership and group process and what will work and why so much does not work I found myself in one of the most diverse communities possible.¹⁷ For some time I have tried to understand how to allow for the

¹⁷ Drew Theological School has no majority culture. As students we are half women and half men, 25% African American, 20% international 6% Hispanic, 10% Asian and 39% Anglo. As faculty and staff we are nearly 50% people of other than white ethnicity. A third of faculty and staff were born outside the US or spent most of their younger years in another country. We work on New Jersey, one of the fastest growing diverse communities with new immigrants and older immigrant communities.

freedom of the particular in the presence of the whole. To respect the difference that people bring to the groups that are formed so that the group is unique because that particular group of individuals are present. To respect past hurts and individual experiences of violence while attempting to create safe and holy places. This respects language and traditions with the real hope that while we hold on to whom we are, the other also forms us.

Every group of people is made up of the complexities of each individual life in that group. It is overwhelming to ponder the number of possible combinations of experience, genes and happenstance that come together to create even one human being. We are each part accident and part intentional decision. When even a small group of these complicated organisms come together the complexity in the group is beyond imagination. Yet the story of all good things is full of examples of how such groups have changed the course of history.

I have also come to believe that a group made up of a diversity of world-views and cultural or ethnic identities is a better group. Where there is a lessening of an accepted majority thought pattern there is more of a possibility of something new really happening? I regret that I only speak English and that I have been formed by a privileged life in the majority white culture, but it is who I am. However, I have become wise enough to know that I need always to be challenged by that within the groups with which I work.

So this is what I now take to Wesley and the churches attempts to initiate small groups.

Wesley's intent

So what did Wesley have in mind and can it be translated into my post-colonial, post-modern, post-denominational world?

My survey of the literature that describes the formation of the class meetings is not new to this group at the Oxford Institute. Scholars at this meeting wrote some of it, but let me summarize for the sake of this paper.

Wesley's hierarchical structure that developed to maintain the societies and bands had at its base these small cell groups. The ideal number within the group was 12. Leaders meet weekly with the ministers to inform them of the group and to pay what had been received for the poor. Those who were "justified by faith" and desired a closer union they could joined Bands as the next level of experience and accountability.

With the bands, the class meetings became part of the pastoral structure needed to care for the societies that formed around the preaching and outreach of Wesley and his followers but originally they were seen as a way to collect money to pay off the debt of the new preaching house in Bristol. However, the class meetings quickly began to fill a spiritual function. The Bristol idea spread to London and became part of the movement. In addition to the spiritual and financial function, they became a place for evangelistic outreach. Unconverted seekers were invited to participate as a way of accessing the teachings and experience of the movement. There is some indication that it was assumed

that conversion was a process and class meeting participation would gradually lead to conversion.

All were eventually required to attend class meetings where discipline was central to the classes. Wesley drew up “Directions for the United Societies” and “Rules for the Band Societies” regular attendance and observance of various rules were outlined. They were advised to follow the advice of the letter of James, “Confess your faults one to another and pray for one another, that ye may be healed”. He listed the questions to be asked and gave advise as to how to keep the group functioning. Those who could not or did not live up to the standards were the slackers and were weeded out to keep the church separate from the world.

Wesley described the job of the class leader as to see each person in his class once a week, at least, in order to inquire how their souls prosper. They were to advise, reprove, comfort or exhort, as occasion may require and to receive what they may be willing to give to the poor.

The class meeting was successfully transplanted to the US church. However, the literature indicates that with the development of more stationed preachers with more regular weekly worship service and more involvement in the life of the members, the need for the class meeting was less defined and harder to enforce.

In 1868, Bishop E. S. Janes of the New York area published his *Address to Class Leaders*.¹⁸ He was clear that the success of the structure of the church depended on the class leaders. He called the leaders “assistant pastors”¹⁹ and went so far as to say that if the church was failing it was their fault. “When a leader has a large number of members on his list, and yet few are present, I take it for granted that he is at fault.”²⁰

He also criticized the critics of the class meeting who wanted to lessen the part that the discipline of the class meeting played in the process of becoming members of the church by making it easier for member of wealth and education to join without attending meetings. He made the role that leader played one of shepherd and judge.

Instructions to the class leader demand two things –he must interest and edify. Bishop Janes goes on with very specific directions for the meetings, to make them highly enjoyable and deeply religious—a spiritual banquet to the soul.²¹

There are, of course, dozens of reports, books, diaries, editorials, sermons through the decades of the use, renewal, revival, recreation of the basic small group as part of the organizational structure of the local church.

¹⁸ *Address to Class-Leaders*, E.S. Janes New York: Carlton and Lanahan, 1868

¹⁹ *Ibid* Page 18

²⁰ *Ibid*, Page 28

²¹ *Ibid* Page 26

Recent attempts

Those of us who have been loyal United Methodists in the past few decades have seen the difficulties of attempts to understand Wesley's class meeting in a contemporary way. While an active laywoman in New England, I participated in at least four different programs packaged for the church for revitalization and renewal that in some way contained a group experience at least partly based on Wesley's Class meeting instructions. Small groups met weekly for accountability and sharing. In some programs, there were acts of mercy to account for and in all was a demand for a renewed commitment to the local church. These plans included personal disciplines that would increase faith and desire through shared readings on the Christian tradition. Always they were introduced as in the tradition of the Wesley class meetings. A recent announcement in the Greater New Jersey annual conference newspaper invites people to an introduction to Discipleships latest program.

Careful systematic directions were given. Personal disciplines that were necessary and what to do when the group gathered were spelled out. Each time that my church entered into these programs, it was to create stronger laypeople so that the church would be stronger and hopefully grow.

Moreover, this is not a new phenomenon in the recent church here or in England. In 1943 *Ventures in Fellowship: Suggestions for Class-Leaders*²² was a collection of contributions to the *Preachers' and Class-Leaders Magazine*. Each article deals with a suggestion for effectiveness in the class meetings. Such titles as, "Grace and Peace, Reconstruction, Changing Ethical Standards, When Waves are High, The Language of Warfare, The Back Room People, Moods, Monotony and Weariness—A symptom and a Snare and Freshness"²³ almost tell the story of the experience that Mr. Ellis was reflecting on in his London setting.

Samuel Emerick and Yokefellow Institute gathered a group in 1957 to look at how the class meetings of Wesley might awaken the present church. "It seemed wise to the Yokefellow leaders that we should learn what the Class Meeting could teach the Church of our time, especially in the matter of our current need for renewal...Real life is needed to fill the empty form. The salt needs to be recharged"²⁴ Emerick wrote in *Spiritual Renewal for Methodism*. This little volume includes four papers written for a seminar on the Class Meeting held in 1957 by the Yokefellow Institute. The goal was to see if a new look at this Eighteenth Century period of renewal in the church's history shed some light upon the need that we face in the Church today?²⁵

This book also relays the concerns reported in 1958 by the Upper Room. They listed these perils of the small groups in "A Manual for Prayer Groups"²⁶ I must add that these have been issues at most time in my own experience.

²² *Ventures in Fellowship: Suggestions for Class-Leaders* by James Ellis, The Epworth Press: 1943.

²³ *Ibid* table of content.

²⁴ *Spiritual Renewal for Methodism* edited Samuel Emerick, Methodist Evangelistic Materials Nashville 1958.

²⁵ *Ibid* Page 8.

²⁶ *Ibid* page 34

- Individuals failing to maintain personal disciplines
- Failure to keep confidences shared within the group
- Presence of destructive critics
- Evil of exclusiveness
- Perils of the group growing away from the church

Wesley, Class meetings, Leadership and a little Chaos

In the new science and Wheatley's organizational theory, there is an innate trust in the gifts and possibilities of the group gathered. There is an assumption that given time and space a group can organize itself, define its goals and determine leadership and process. It also assumes that the group is capable of a different agenda and greater possibilities than any individual in the group can do on their own. This is based on a belief that everywhere in science there is organization even if it first appears to be chaos and confusion. There is also an assumption that the organizing is based on relationships. Chaos and confusion are embraced and there is patience with the process of self-organizing. The moments of unknowing are seen as opportunities for new learning. People are encouraged to bring all that they know and feel.

Wheatley sees leaders differently as this definition again reminds us:

“Leaders who live in the new story help us understand ourselves differently by the way they lead. They trust our humanness they welcome the surprises we bring to them; they are curious about the differences; they delight in our inventiveness; they nurture us; they connect us. They trust that we can create wisely and well, that we seek the best interests of our organization and our community that we want to bring more good into the world.”²⁷

If we contrast this definition of leader from Wheatley with the general concept of the class leader as the one responsible for success, the keeper of the questions and process, and the judge of behavior and Christian progress we see a real difference in the role of leader. In many of the models for class meetings, it is the leader who also holds the power of interpretation of the group beyond the group through conversations with the pastor or a group of leaders. This assumption of authority coming from outside the group is also in contract to this new direction of group process.

We might also contrast the reason of the formation of the group. Early Class Meetings were part of the elaborate organization of a movement becoming an institution. Raising money, monitoring behavior, explaining the rules of the faithful and guiding conversion is probably not the reasons for formation in this age.

We seem now to need groups of people who commit to a bigger less-formed vision. Contemporary attempts to revitalize an aging church through small groups may need to take into account some new learning. Let me suggest four for our consideration.

²⁷ Wheatley, *Finding our Way*, page 30.

1. Limits of the group are established by the group after time together not as part of the packaged program.

Wheatley brings to mind a poem from A.R. Ammons that seems to put into a few words the issues that contrast the usual way we anticipate groups functioning within the church and this less programmed way.

*Don't establish the
Boundaries
First
the squares, triangles
boxes
of preconceived
possibility,
and then pour
life into them, trimming
off left-over edges,
ending potential:
let centers
proliferate
from
self-justifying motions!*

If groups are encouraged to self-organize and to assume real responsibility for the work at hand, they can then define the boundaries and the edges. If we hear the New Science, we might have to assume less control over the organization and agenda of those groups. If its defining purpose is about renewal of the church, raising finances, or maintaining the structure of the church communities then the New Science may be of no use.

The method of the World Café material that spends the majority of the planning time on finding the right question seems to be the secret of its success. Wesley's insight into the nature of his followers that brought forth the questions may be partly the success of that movement but what if our groups were allowed the freedom to define their own questions. What if groups were trusted to assume that what they need is within the group and that the divine is within each other and that they are keepers of the answers as they form the questions.

Focusing on the questions and the transparency of a commitment to finding answers may move the individuals away from the pettiness and paranoia that often divides.

2. Authority comes from within the group and not from a higher level of organization

Groups that have become conditioned by a hierarchical style of leadership are likely made up of individuals who have lost the ability to work with each other and only understand their need to satisfy the one in charge? Groups that have lived with lack of

transparency in the decision processes have difficulty trusting a more open approach to problem solving. Because autocratic leadership often makes decisions in a vacuum, many groups have come to realize that the decisions that they make have no authority and they have lost faith in the procedures established for getting work done. These dysfunctional groups will only change slowly to this new understanding of the group and will more than likely be confused by a more collaborative demand on their group. This process of changing the way a group functions can be time consuming and the resistance hard to explain.

This process can lead to charges of weak leadership, indecisive decision making and shirking of responsibility, all of which seems to miss completely the intended outcome. New commitments to a shared vision are essential but even more essential seems to be the restoration of trust and confidence that individuals have in each other and in the group as a whole.

Mutual accountability is promoted in David Watson's *Accountable Discipleship: Handbook for Covenant Discipleship Groups in the Congregation*.²⁸ This move in the 1980's is the direction that allows the group to function within the group. This seems in contrast to the class leaders reporting in to the hierarchical structure and being authority with power as well as leader.

3. The emphasis is on relationships and connectedness more than on individual success or progress.

Wesley and all of the attempts to reinterpret the Class Meetings for another time may have had different goals and expectations from the group (class meetings) then desired here. Could Wesley be a product of individualism as it formed itself in Europe? Could individual salvation/sanctification as the goal of the church be influenced by this move to individual responsibility and individual accountability?

If we were to attempt to use the New Science as a basis for group organization within the church we will need to deemphasize the individual and even the goals of the institution and to trust in the groups of individuals to discover together the purpose of their gathering.

4. Clarity and movement can come from chaos – there can be order without control.

Many groups that I have been part of really do not believe that what they do matters to anyone. Attendance is out of duty or a sense of responsibility and with no vision that what that particular group of people can really make a difference to the world. Moreover, since some of these groups are where one works, these ineffective groups are a huge part of life.

²⁸ David Watson's *Accountable Discipleship: Handbook for Covenant Discipleship Groups in the Congregation*. Discipleship Resources, Nashville 1984

Freedom to enter into organization, disorganization and reorganization, inviting the messiness of the struggle, learning to deal with the conflict that is inevitable, might be contrary to the order suggested by Wesley. However, this messy process affirmed by Wheatley²⁹ is similar to how Walter Brueggemann defines what he sees in the Psalter. Poems of orientation, disorientation and new orientation. The psalms that stay at praise are not real to the experience of the lived community. He identifies the lament (chaos) as a necessary step in the movement to a reconciled, whole community.³⁰ This chaos, lament is part of the process of discovery. Wheatley says, “Life often feels like a series of tests presented to us by hostile teachers. But this isn’t true. Life isn’t concealing solutions to problems; we’re not being tested to see if we get the right answer. Instead, life is exploring to see what works, to experience the pleasure of the unexpected and the unique.”³¹

If life is indeed intent on finding out what works and not what’s “right” then a solution is temporary and there are no permanently right answers. This post-modern read for how we work together is different from many of the suggested patterns of behavior that have been promoted by the church even in the past decade or so.

Where might we look?

There is something quite attractive about contemporary Quakerism, or at least the branch that follows Fox, Barclay and Penn to “unprogrammed Quakerism”. The single theological belief is that everyone possess internally some measure of a divine light that all can experience directly, unmediated by institution, clergy, scripture or ritual. This encourages the sharing within the group that has the potential to respect all and to assume that each has something unique to offer to the others.³²

Reliance on the Holy Spirit to be present within the groups not only trusts the individual but also seems to put a different trust on the spirit of God let loose within the world. Might we look to our Quaker brother and sisters for some assistance in authoritative responses to the world that comes from unprogrammed groups?

It may also be that the emerging/emergent Christian communities that are beyond denomination, very post-modern and less interested in control (doctrine or hierarchical) are also freer to be self-organizing. Groups of people gather, how they worship, and how they hold each other accountable and how they reach out into the world “emerge” from the group. This can become a sort of wisdom of the crowd mentality that creates shared worship. Of course, that movement of leaders and writers has now split in many streams.

²⁹ Margaret J. Wheatley & Myron Kellner-Rogers *A Simpler Way*, Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.; 1996.

³⁰ Walter Brueggemann *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary*, Augsburg Old Testament Studies) 1984.

³¹ Wheatley, *A Simple Way*, page 20.

³² Patricia Williams, *Hazardous Engagement: God Makes a Friend* (Quaker Universalism Fellowship 2006) for discussion of the contemporary forms of Friends.

New material indicates that many require not only rules for coming together but also indicate that there is indeed a creed and a correct way to vote.

If the church is to take advantage of what we now know about how relationship and connectedness creates messy but valuable possibilities, we will need to look for new ways to be together.

***Never doubt that a small group of committed people
can change the world – indeed it's the only thing that can.!***

Margaret Mead