

A JEW, A BUDDHIST AND AN ATHEIST WALK INTO A METHODIST CHURCH...

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“Amen! Right on! Hallelujah! Shalom! Salaam! Namaste!”

With these words, the community prayer at Glide Memorial United Methodist Church in San Francisco has just concluded. On any given Sunday, Glide is packed with church members, tourists, the curious and the seekers. More than two thousand gather: people with little to no religious background have had profound spiritual experiences here. Christians and non-Christians alike have found community and a spiritual home at Glide. Jewish persons make up about fifteen percent of the congregation. Practicing Buddhists as well as atheists have given their testimonies in worship. How is it that this United Methodist Church has engaged non-Methodist, non-Christian, non-religious persons *within its worshipping community* in meaningful ways? How is Methodist theology, reframed for a new age, able to communicate the transforming power of God’s grace?

HISTORY

Glide was founded by Lizzie Glide (1852-1936), business woman and philanthropist. In 1889, she attended a revival meeting and consecrated herself to a life of Christian service. A lifelong member of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, she devoted herself and her great wealth to missions. One of her projects was the purchase of two plots of land in the heart of San Francisco along with the establishment of the Glide Foundation, the purpose of which was to build, establish and support Glide Memorial Methodist Church, South as well as be a granting institution to worthy causes (one of which was Asbury Seminary). The church, which opened in January, 1931, includes a cornerstone with an inscription bearing Glide’s intent:

GLIDE MEMORIAL
EVANGELISTIC CENTER
“A House of Prayer for All People”
A.D. 1930

This was in part due to Lizzie Glide’s recognition that even in the early part of the 20th century, San Francisco was seen as “having the smallest percent of church membership in relation to population of any American city.”¹ She wanted this new church to be a place with a wide welcome and a “broad spirit of catholicity in keeping with a vital evangelistic program and message.”²

The church began with 70 members. Through its programming (which included prayer services, the distribution of pocket New Testaments, and a radio show), the church grew to over 800 members in 5 years. The church began to lose members to urban flight in the 1950’s. A robust

¹ Julian C. McPheeters, The Life Story of Lizzie H. Glide (Eagle Printing Company: San Francisco, 1936), 27.

² Ibid. 2.

endowment, however, allowed the church to have a strong pastoral team that was free to immerse itself in the growing social movements of civil rights and, later, anti-war, feminist and gay rights movements.

The Glide Foundation hired program director Rev. Lewis Durham in 1962. He spent his first year observing and studying the City. Together with the board, Durham noted: “1) the urban church and the city were desperately in need of leadership, 2) there was a paucity of ideas available to the church on how to minister to the city, and 3) new structures and models for mission were needed.”³ It was felt that Glide was in a unique social location to experiment with new and emerging forms of ministry. The critical result of this study and assessment was to move the Foundation from a granting institution to one of operations.

A year later, the board established the Glide Urban Center. Its mission was “1) training clergy and laity for mission to the city, 2) providing consultative services for urban churches, 3) experimenting in urban ministry, 4) establishing a center on urban life, 5) supporting specific projects in mission to the city, and 6) providing a team of specialists on the mission to the city.”⁴ Through all its programs, the commitment to allowing experimentation ran high. This allowed the staff to respond to new social movements and human needs rapidly and creatively. It also encouraged an ecumenical approach to outreach and services.

As a result, Glide staff were instrumental in calming communities facing riots (using a most unconventional method: hiring the young men of the communities to “cool it”⁵). The board gave broad license to addressing the needs of young adults, and sexuality in general and homosexuality specifically were topics embraced for study and teaching by the Urban Center staff.

Further creativity was enhanced when the Urban Center began to collaborate with secular organizations that shared the same values. This approach was taken because collaborations with church organizations were not met with success. An anti-poverty program and a haven for runaway youth were two of the successful programs to emerge through secular partnerships.

When reflecting on Glide’s methodology for mission, Durham wrote:

Glide may be described as a living organism which is intent upon responding to the needs of people in cities. This organism must have a lively sensory capacity in order to hear, to see and to feel the pulse of humanity in the city, it must have power, flexibility and understanding in order to be responsive, to be able to act and act quickly. This organism must have the skills necessary to be a catalytic agent, to help people move, to deal with their own lives. Finally, this living organism needs to be able to communicate, to proclaim the Good News to all people.⁶

³ Lewis E. Durham, Glide Foundation from 1962-1967 (Glide Paper: San Francisco, 1967), 2-3.

⁴ Ibid. 4.

⁵ Ibid. 6.

⁶ Ibid. 8.

It was as one organism relating to another organism--Glide to the City, staff to those in need--that Glide's programming emerged. Staff moved from careful observers to full participants in the situations and lives around them. Thus emerged "meaningful friendships" through which transformation of both staff and program participants occurred.

These deep relationships allowed Glide to become a bridge: between city power centers and the disenfranchised and between fragmented and oppressed groups and emerging communities. As a church, Glide was understood to be a trustworthy institution in the community, whose purpose was to be in service for reconciliation. From bridging diverse and often opposing groups, Glide was then able to mobilize for justice: "The symbol of the church—with all of its legitimatizing power, with its perceived objectivity and apparent lack of self-interest, and with its identification with what is commonly believed to be the good of mankind (sic)—is still a power which makes the church ideally suited for mobilizing the fragmented parts of a city into a movement or common force."⁷

It is important to note at this time how Durham understood the role of Christian symbols as they related to Glide's work. Christian symbols alone do not foster this reconciling work, it is through activity of the clergy engaged in the community, as well as the engaged community within the church building. Central to this engagement, "since 1966, worship at Glide has played an increasingly important role in the mobilizing process."⁸ Within worship, he notes that while Judeo-Christian symbols have meaning for people in the city

...new symbols need to emerge. A major task of Glide in the future will be to call attention to and to dramatize symbols which emerge from events in the city. New meanings and understandings will emerge from God's action in the history-making processes of our time. These new meanings will give direction to the city's people and offer them a new hope. Already Glide's short history with worship indicates profound meaning can be given to the lives of diverse people in the city if worship is set in a context that is contemporary and relevant.⁹

Central to worship at Glide has been to convey that God cares for and loves humanity: "Life is good—the command is to live."¹⁰ The Good News for men and women to hear that they are valuable. "This is a liberating and authenticating message to people in an age which tends to enslave and dehumanize man (sic). Glide does not authenticate. Only God can do that, can offer salvation. But the message that God cares for each person must be conveyed to all."¹¹

Because Glide reached out to groups on the margins of church and society, "Glide has been able to say, 'you count,' to people who have seldom heard the message."¹² As a result, by reaching out and developing relationships with groups like Black Panthers, gang members, homosexuals,

⁷ Ibid. 12.

⁸ Ibid. 13.

⁹ Ibid. 14.

¹⁰ Ibid. 13.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

or prostitutes, Glide has been able to extend a sense of worth, dignity, and agency to people who have been marginalized.

LITURGY AND WORSHIP: THE WORK OF THE PEOPLE

From this active engagement with communities and social movements of the 1960's, a unique worship life began to emerge at Glide. This was, in part, due to the diverse community that began to gather for worship each week. One of Glide's pastors noted: "In addition to the kinds of people you see you in the church, Glide attracted schizophrenic, euphoric, depressed, and hallucinating people."¹³ Laurel Glass, a Glide trustee, put it this way, "We're bringing the Word of God to people who would not otherwise hear it."¹⁴

But what was that Word? What liturgical style and language transcended the differences of race, class, educational levels, sexual orientation, gender identity, addictions/recovery, political persuasions, and social agendas? Glide increasingly rooted its worship life in the African American tradition, with spirituals often rewritten for a new era of liberation¹⁵. Liberation

¹³ From the memoirs of Rev. John Moore, pastor of Glide, October 1, 1962-June 30, 1966. Undated document. Glide archives.

¹⁴ Gerald Adams, "Glide Memorial's Special Karma," *California Living*, April 25, 1971, 14.

¹⁵ Examples include:

We Are Climbing for Our Freedom (adapted from We Are Climbing Jacob's Ladder)

We are climbing for our freedom
We are climbing for our freedom
We are climbing for our freedom
People on the move

Children, do you want that freedom (2x)
People on the move

We are moving, wait no longer (2x)
People on the move

Rise, shine, seize your freedom (2x)
People on the move

Sing, shout about that freedom (2x)
People on the move

Keep on working for that freedom (2x)
People on the move

Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around

Ain't gonna let nobody turn me round
turn me round, turn me round
Ain't gonna let nobody turn me 'round
Gonna keep on a-walkin', Keep on a-talkin'
Marchin' on to Freedom Land.

theology, which has at its center God's preferential option for the poor, was reframed for San Francisco in the late 1960's and '70s.

Traditional Christian language was translated for a post-Christian, pre-Christian, disenfranchised, multi-faith community. One of Glide's ministers in the 1960's wrote:

In a sense we don't have to use the word Christianity. We do not have to use the words of religion at all. The religious words like grace, for example, are loaded for most of us. They mean something else. They do not talk about our situation. They talk of a kind of world with which many people even within the church no longer have much rapport.¹⁶

The Word of Christianity is here even if the words are not.

We may not even have to use religious words. Instead of grace we might use the word acceptance. In the words of Martin Luther, "I, the unjust, am made to be just. I become that which I am not". In the words of Paul Tillich, "I accept the fact that I am accepted." There is a moment which all have experienced unless they are psychotic. There are moments when we feel accepted. We don't know how, we don't know why. We cannot

Ain't gonna let no violence turn me round
turn me round, turn me round
Ain't gonna let no violence turn me round
Gonna keep on a-walkin', Keep on a-talkin'
Marchin' on to Freedom Land.

Ain't gonna let no racism turn me 'round
turn me round, turn me 'round
Ain't gonna let no racism turn me 'round
Gonna keep on a-walkin', Keep on a-talkin'
Marchin' on to Freedom Land.

Ain't gonna let no deception turn me round
turn me round, turn me round
Ain't gonna let no deception turn me round
Gonna keep on a-walkin', Keep on a-talkin'
Marchin' on to Freedom Land.

Ain't gonna let no self pity turn me 'round
turn me round, turn me 'round
Ain't gonna let no self pity turn me 'round
Gonna keep on a-walkin', Keep on a-talkin'
Marchin' on to Freedom Land

Ain't gonna let no recession turn me 'round
turn me round, turn me 'round
Ain't gonna let no recession turn me 'round
Gonna keep on a-walkin', Keep on a-talkin'
Marchin' on to Freedom Land.

¹⁶ Donald Kuhn, The Church and the Homosexual: A Report on a Consultation (Glide: San Francisco, 1965), 24.

predict them. We may be walking along a path and suddenly we are one with everything we see about us. We know in a moment that we are accepted.¹⁷

Rev. Cecil Williams was first hired in 1963 to be the Minister of Outreach. His position evolved to become the Minister of Celebrations and Community Involvement (while in retired status from The United Methodist Church, he is currently the Minister of Liberation and celebrating his 50th anniversary of ministry at Glide). He described the impact of Glide's worship (renamed Celebrations): "We're taking lonely, alienated, starving, craving people and we're trying to free them to be full human beings."¹⁸

Describing Glide Celebrations, another pastor on Glide's staff, Rev. Lloyd Wake, wrote:

Glide Celebrations cannot be defined, explained or described without losing something of the meaning and impact of them. This is why the Glide staff is so reluctant to respond to questions about the why and the what of celebration. A more valid answer to these questions is, "Come and experience them and let them be what they will to you." Rather than provide a rationale for Glide Celebrations (almost a contradiction in terms), this statement intends to describe the human condition to which Glide Celebrations respond. To begin where people are has been Glide's operational style.

Glide Celebrations provide the powerful integrated force for people caught in the web of technological society. They have helped to eliminate the chasm between intellect and emotions so that people feel themselves to be whole persons. The artificial barriers between intellect, spirit and body are removed, and spontaneity has been both encouraged and affirmed.

Another condition to which the Celebrations respond is the rejection of traditional religious symbols, practices, and values by many, especially young people. Young people have experienced the oppression of these traditions. At the same time, many have doubts and a sense of despair about the future. Having rejected the past and having no certainty about the future, their overwhelming concern is for the here and now. Personal fulfillment and social goals such as freedom from oppression and a world with peace and justice must be achieved now. Passively waiting for future fulfillment is a copout. Religion must speak and respond to contemporary human conditions. Speculative definitions about God, Christ, heaven, hell and the future are totally irrelevant.¹⁹

Key to transforming Glide worship to Glide Celebrations was the removal of the cross from the sanctuary. The Glide building at one time boasted the only revolving neon cross in North America,²⁰ which could be seen for miles around San Francisco. The sanctuary also possessed a large lit cross, which dominated the worship space. In 1969, Cecil Williams removed the cross from the sanctuary. As the Glide pastoral team continued to meet people on the margins and respond with creative programming, Williams felt that the cross in the Sanctuary disempowered

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Adams, 14.

¹⁹ From an unpublished statement about Glide Celebrations by Rev. Lloyd Wake, 1975. Glide archives.

²⁰ McPheeters, 29.

the community from deeper engagements. “‘To know God is to do justice,’ I would say, but behind me, the cross said the opposite. The cross told everyone, *Give up your power. Let God take over.*”²¹

“Of course, Christ died for our sins on that cross...[but] as long as we allowed racism, homophobia, and other kinds of bigotry to exist, we were still crucifying Jesus on that cross. We were still yelling, *Crucify him! Crucify him!* As long as we crucified Jesus, we did not have to understand why we crucified folks we really despised—any folks who were not like us.”²²

In particular, a homeless drunkard who spoke in Celebration beneath the cross helped solidify Williams’ thinking on the cross:

To Bart [the homeless man] and a lot of people, the cross wasn’t just a symbol of oppression—it *was*—the oppression. Instead of standing for the unconditional love that Jesus brought to a new community, the cross makes people feel guilty because Jesus died for our sins. And what a crazy concept *that* was: Jesus was crucified for challenging the status quo, for being different, for showing the world how to be accepting and loving of all people. He was liberating people like the lepers and the blind and the poor. He was freeing the outcasts and the disenfranchised and the mentally unstable. And he was teaching people responsibility so that *they* could atone for their wrongdoings...

...All that week, thanks to Bart, I rethought my own assumptions about the cross. *How* had it become so enslaving, so removed from human experience? Because it had cut out the poor, the disenfranchised, the upstarts, and the lost. It had abandoned anybody who thought or acted differently.²³

The following Sunday, Williams preached on the cross:

See this big cross up here? Well, it is not affirming what it should. The cross should be about giving life, not the taking of life. It should inspire, not belittle. It should reflect the love that Jesus’ life brought us, not reject the love and keep us all quiet. The cross signifies suffering, yes, but it also means a new life coming out of that suffering. And renewing life is what we are about.

So I want you to know that I am going to take this cross down. The cross needs to be among the people, in the streets where the Barts of the world suffer. The church keeps trying to tell us that the cross is here to save humanity. But the truth is, only humanity can save the cross.

That means *you* are the cross. You bear responsibility for the suffering and the hope of new life, and you are the ones seeking transformation. The cross is all these things

²¹ Cecil Williams and Janice Mirikitani, *Beyond the Possible* (HarperOne, New York: 2013), 128.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.* 132.

because Jesus brought unconditional love to the cross, and the cross is you. When you walk among the people, your unconditional love renews us. It frees us. It resurrects us.²⁴

The bare wall where the cross once hung quickly became filled with images of people: Glide's light show, which continues to this day, was born. These images included

people embracing, protesting, playing with kids, giving the '60's peace sign, talking to police—just everyday life, joyous and morose, gritty yet life-affirming. . . If you were addicted or recently out of jail or chronically poor or homeless, and you thought, as Bart said, that nobody cared, seeing images of people like yourself living from one moment to the next could be profoundly moving. And to see humanity *visibly* flowing across the wall where the giant cross used to hang was to feel that God, or whatever spiritual force lived in all of us, become a living force in our lives because we had the eyes to see. We were the cross.²⁵

Taking down the cross resulted in backlash from many Methodists across the country. For many, it was the last straw in what they saw as a long string of offensive actions. But a local Episcopal priest came to Glide's defense, "I see the cross where people at Glide do. It resides in the hearts of the elderly poor, the gay youngster, the dope freak, the pimps and prostitutes and Brooks-suited squares who attend Glide's celebrations and activities."²⁶

However, without the cross, altar, and other typical religious imagery, Glide's doors opened more widely to believers and seekers: Christians, former Christians, and non-Christians of other faiths. The staff reflected this diversity with the addition of Abraham Feinberg, "Rabbi-in-Residence" (1972-1976).

As diversity grew at Glide, Celebrations began to reflect this trend. Language as well as sacred texts from other traditions have been incorporated into Sunday Celebrations. While rooted in the Christian (and specifically Methodist) tradition, this wide welcome has resulted in a spiritual awakening for countless individuals.

BUT IS IT METHODIST?

In 1967, Rev. Lewis Durham wrote:

Glide is solidly grounded in the institutional church. By chance, it is grounded in Methodism, but it probably would not matter if it were grounded in another denomination. This means Glide is able to utilize the strength of an historical institution. It means the historical symbols of the Church are a part of Glide's history and being. Glide has all the power available to it that comes with the Gospel of Good News.²⁷

But could any other denomination have given birth to a Glide? What is it about Methodist theology and doctrine that provided the framework for Glide's programs, community life, and

²⁴ Ibid. 132-133.

²⁵ Ibid. 137-138.

²⁶ Rev. Robert Crome, San Francisco Examiner, Letter to the Editor, July 19, 1971.

²⁷ Durham, 14.

worship form? How does this shape a ministry that invites an engagement with those of other faiths and no faith?

Methodist's theological hallmark is that it is a practical theology. Wesley's desire was to enable men and women of his day—particularly those living on the margins—to encounter scripture in a way that assisted them in an experience of God's grace that would utterly transform them. This move towards holy living was not meant just for the individual alone. "Solitary religion is not to be found there. 'Holy solitaires' is a phrase no more consistent with the gospel than holy adulterers. The gospel of Christ knows of no religion but social; no holiness but social holiness."²⁸ Holy living was a communal experience, buttressed by small societies which met for encouragement and accountability.

Wesley brought the Gospel not only to where people were geographically located, but also socially. It was a Gospel that was embodied. God's grace was encountered through the love of neighbor which was responsive to human needs. For the sick, he provided access to medical care; for orphans, he established homes and schools; for the hungry, he provided food, and for the poor, he provided opportunities for self-sufficiency.²⁹

It is this practical theology—informed by the intersection of the Word of God with the lived experiences of God's people—which has resulted in the form and content of Glide's ministry. San Francisco has been a home for the poor and marginalized—a place where the outcasts of cities and towns across the country as well as refugees from other nations have found sanctuary. Like Wesley, the ministers of Glide have had an experimental/entrepreneurial orientation to ministry as they responded to human needs and hurts. For those whom institutions have either failed them or contributed to their outcast status, a new, indigenous model of ministry was needed: one that could enable an experience of God's grace without the baggage of traditional church expression which had prevented access to this experience.

Grace, at Glide, is talked about as "unconditional love and unconditional acceptance". When the truth of this reality sinks in, that one is loved and accepted regardless of race, class, HIV status, sexual orientation, gender identity, ability, educational level, political persuasion, immigration status, arrest record, addictions, and spiritual path, a spiritual awakening sets in motion transformation. At Glide, there is little talk about sin and salvation. The language of the people is "we are all in need of recovery from something." Our addictions prevent us from living into our fullness as God desires. Like Wesley's societies, small groups known as "Recovery Circles" provide support, accountability, feedback, and encouragement to continue on the path to recovery.³⁰

²⁸ John Wesley, *The Works of the Reverend John Wesley, A. M.* (New York : J. Emory and B. Waugh), 593.

²⁹ *Health and Healing in the Ministry of John Wesley*, <http://www.quicktopic.com/40/D/axJ7fZUabXCT.html>. Accessed 22 July 2013.

³⁰ Glide's recovery model rejects the 12-step condition of anonymity and powerlessness. African Americans are already invisible and experience a lack of power in society. "What was needed by the addicts at Glide was not anonymity and surrender, but recognition, a voice, an acknowledged heritage, and to take responsibility within a spiritually extended family dedicated to recognition, self-definition, rebirth in recovery, and community." (David E. Smith, Millicent E.E. Buxton, Rafiq Bilal, and Richard B. Seymour, *Cultural Points of Resistance to the 12-Step*

CONCLUSION

Glide receives church visitors from around the world who want to study and learn from its ministries³¹. A question often posed to the Glide staff is “How can we be Glide?” A simple review of Glide’s history and social location as provided in this paper would suggest that it is impossible to replicate Glide anywhere else. However, Glide’s wide welcome can be replicated everywhere. It starts with a ministry committed to meeting people on the margins of one’s community and allowing the shape and form of ministry to evolve from that intersection of God’s Word with people’s lived experience. It involves a willingness to welcome everyone across the threshold of community, utilizing language and symbols that connect rather than alienate.

Methodist tradition and theology are uniquely suited for this kind of engagement in a multi-faith (as well as no faith) world. Methodist theology provides a framework for personal and communal transformation while tradition reveals that Methodism has been at its best when it has possessed an entrepreneurial spirit that has enabled ministry to be a means of grace for people in need.

Tourists may not quite understand spoken English at Glide, but what they hear is untranslatable in any language, because it is spiritual. Everybody in the audience is no mere observer or onlooker but a participant in one big affirmation of life. The program is not just a show or a concert but a true Celebration of life and of the different languages we speak.

I think this is why visitors to Glide feel so much emotion when they attend a Celebration. They’re struck by the diversity of people clapping and singing and sharing all that high energy coming at them from the stage. It’s not that life is easy—more often than not, hard work and crises hit us every day. Rather what you sense at Celebrations is the will to fight back, to find and affirm the person you know yourself to be...you feel overwhelmed by the possibility of unconditional love as if for the first time. People stand up and tell us what’s happening to them in Glide’s programs—how they’re learning to forgive others (and themselves) for incidents too horrible to believe. Others recount, as I sometimes do in my sermons, despicable events in the news that we as citizens of the world must confront and understand. Gradually all the differences in the room are both celebrated and set aside, and all that is felt is our humanity, our soul, our hope for a just world.³²

Recovery Process, www.cnsproductions.com/pdf/12step.PDF. Accessed 22 July 2013). Each recovery circle at Glide ends with a reciting of Glide’s Terms of Faith and Resistance: 1. I will gain control over my life. 2. I will stop lying. 3. I will be honest with myself. 4. I will accept who I am. 5. I will feel my real feelings. 6. I will feel my pain. 7. I will forgive myself and forgive others. 8. I will rebirth a new life. 9. I will live my spirituality. 10. I will support and love my brothers and sisters.

³¹ Glide has more than 80 programs, including a free medical clinic, bible study, free meals program (which requires the assistance of at least 60 volunteers *a day*), prayer circle, permanent supportive housing, gay/bi men’s group, Unlearning Violence program, Godly Play for children, HIV testing and counseling, and a world-renowned music program, to name a few.

³² Williams and Mirikitani, 299-300.