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The skill of being a redeemed creature is a matter of learning to live as if our failures and betrayals could never extinguish the commitment of God to us and the capacity of God to make something of us. The art of ministry is grounded in the belief that God calls us to be agents of the divine delight God entrusts us with the job of witnessing to and diffusing the generosity on which all things depend.

Introduction:

"Is lifting a coffee cup in Christ's name a sacramental act?" Emery Percell posed this question in a 1983 article in *The Christian Century*. It is a simple question. Yet such queries have stayed with me over the years. I dare say most congregational leaders find themselves considering such matters as they attempt to parse the meaning of their responsibilities in congregational life and mission.

What are the "outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace?" Where is the sacramental dimension of contemporary ecclesiastical settings? What daily encounters signify God's continuing graciousness among the people? Are these evidences limited to the seven Roman Catholic sacraments or to the "Two Biggies" of classical Protestantism? Undoubtedly many Christians still hold that the word "sacrament" is only appropriately applied to those which come to us from the historic practices of the church or, as in the case of classical Reformation thought, only those ordinances which were instituted by Christ and performed by the original apostles.

Perhaps the question of what constitutes sacrament was more urgent a generation ago. With Vatican II, the notion of sacrament has been broadened. Persons such as Karl Rahner and Edward Schillebeeckx courageously broke new ground in suggesting that it was the church itself which was Christ's sacrament before and within the world. Does this mean we have experienced a devaluation of the importance of traditional sacraments? This was certainly not the intention of those seeking to extend the discussion. Rather, the church, particularly in its local manifestations, was said to express in every aspect of its life and calling, a means of sharing and receiving the sacrificial, universal and eschatological saving grace of a loving God.

Percell sums it up this way: "The implication is that the body of Christ is a sacramental presence that cannot be limited to the sacraments. Wherever the body (i.e., the church) is broken in love for the world, the Kingdom is presaged and made available to whomever will receive it. The church in its entirety receives the gift of salvation and in its witness proffers it to the world."
What this means is that spiritual renewal comes not just through the traditional sacraments, but through the church itself. How does a congregation play this role? What are its unique qualities which provide a sign to the world? Rather than trying to settle the issue of the nature of the traditional sacraments, the burning matter for our day is the question of how one recognizes the Spirit at play in the life of congregations. If this is correct, and I believe it is, the important practical question is by what means can the church be an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace? Seeing this as a truly urgent contemporary question, however, will mean a shift in focus.

In North America we have passed through a generation of hand-wringing over what response should be made about perceived decline of denominational Methodism. I say "perceived decline" knowing full well that some empiricist waits ready to challenge the comment with a stark statistical analysis about millions of members lost from the rolls, reduced revenues for benevolence and/or lower levels of influence in corridors of power the moment I pronounce the closing "amen" of this presentation.

Yet, what has been the result of this fretting over numerical decline? The sickening self-concern over the welfare of denominational patterns has proven to be a fertile field for consultants and "growth specialists." Strategies and consultants have multiplied, but what of denominational membership?

If forced to play by the rules of the empiricists (a role with which I am familiar as I am trained as a sociologist and worked for many years as a congregational consultant), I would want to quickly note that there is little evidence that the techniques and strategies being brokered and implemented have any real and lasting efficacy, especially if the larger cultural and sociological patterns are factored into the analysis. In point of fact, much of this "assistance" is based on a "deficit model" of congregational assessment which leaves the dynamic and complex matrix of resources found within the gathered Body of Christ "hidden" and/or under-appreciated.

I would argue that rather than bringing renewal, the constant "pulse-taking" has diverted our attention, increased anxiety, and caused us to miss a plethora of extraordinary sacramental gifts among us. An unintended consequence of all the research and advice is that what was designed to be helpful becomes additional stress for an already overstressed and self-absorbed system. Further, we miss the diversity of gifts among and within the life and ministry of our congregations because we are distracting congregational leaders from their primary task which is to "call out" and nurture communities of faith to holy, disciplined, accountable living. There are certain signs of renewal and hope which cannot be packaged and replicated because they are, in my estimation, uniquely sacramental expressions.

I will seek to identify these overlooked gifts, these "treasures in earthen vessels" in two ways: First, by looking in on the ministries of a small inner city parish and second, by exploring some of the "signs of grace" which emerge from these emphases of this congregation - capacity, community and creativity. It is believed that these, rather than
statistics about membership growth numbers, are occasions for and the vital signs of continuing spiritual renewal.

This solitary parish would likely never be singled out by North American church growth specialists for study. It is unlikely to be promoted as a "teaching congregation" (using contemporary church growth parlance) or as a model to be analyzed and written about in the many studies which pretend to foretell the shape of things ecclesiastical for the next millennium. However, I believe the life of this small, little known parish is both singularly evocative, and at the same moment, not all that different from hundreds of other parishes, United Methodist and otherwise.

From these narrative pieces I hope to provide a view of three expressions of ministry, a view which is profoundly sacramental. I will dare stretch the point by suggesting these are also examples of Trinitarian means of grace found in contemporary parish life in North America.

I. Means of Grace

Any spiritual descendant of John Wesley considering sacramental matters will soon be reminded of the sermon "The Means of Grace." Wesley discusses the function of the ordinances and their relationship with the experience of assurance among believers.

Not too many years ago one of my parishioners greeted me at the close of a worship service. He was a university professor of history and doing research on early church leaders in the United States. I was expecting him to give me one of the normal comments from those who were leaving worship: "Good morning," from those who had little to say, or "Interesting this morning," coming from those who didn't think much of the sermon, or "Excellent message" coming from those whose generous spirit and good manners often superseded any real critical talent.

At any rate, the fellow startled me by asking two abrupt and tricky questions even as he began to shake my hand. "Did Wesley believe the sacraments were saving ordinances?" Caught off guard, my mind whirled for a succinct response, but he plunged ahead to the second more difficult query, "Is your view of the sacraments different from Wesley's?"

In all of my years of shaking hands following worship I had never been asked either of these questions! With dozens of folks standing behind him waiting to make their "nice day" and "interesting message" comments, did he really believe I could come up with a ten-second answer to these two? What right did he have to do this to me?... and in a receiving line! Well, this was one of those moments for which my seminary training had not prepared me -- I had no glib response.

"Of course Wesley held that the sacraments were saving ordinances," I responded, (not wanting to deal with the matter of Wesley's shifting views regarding baptism at such a moment). "But there was always the question of assurance of salvation which is present in his thought," I continued. "Let me get back to you with regard to your second question,
that matter of how I differ from Wesley." I had rallied to some response. So, it was in this way that the matter of saving ordinances was framed for me in a contemporary parish setting.

Wesley's sermon *The Means of Grace* precedes the Second Vatican Council in affirming that Christ is the sacrament to the world through the fellowship of believers. He speaks of "waiting in the way God has ordained and expecting that he will meet one there." Like the early leaders of the Reformation, Wesley wanted to leave room for the Word as a sign and means of grace, but he went further.

As is typical of his thought in other places Wesley speaks of Inward Holiness and Outward Holiness and identifies prayer, study of scripture, the Lord's Supper, preaching and good works as means of grace. He understands that these are all potentially important to one's assurance of salvation. Wesley writes, "And thus he continues in God's way -- in hearing, reading, meditating, praying, and partaking of the Lord's Supper -- till God, in the manner that pleases him, speaks to his heart, 'Thy faith hath saved thee; go in peace.'"

Is this a tightly reasoned Biblical formula Wesley gives us? Does he provide a periodic table of all the sacramental elements? Or give an algebraic pattern as to how one proceeds through life appropriating these various means of grace? Well, no. Listen as he moves to the conclusion of his sermon:

"Yet as we find no command in Holy Writ for any particular order to be observed herein, so neither do the providence and the Spirit of God adhere to any, without variation; but the means into which different men are lead, and in which they find the blessing of God are varied, transposed, and combined together a thousand different ways. Yet still our wisdom is to follow the leadings of his providence and his Spirit; to be guided herein (more especially as to the means wherein we ourselves seek the grace of God) partly by his outward providence, giving us the opportunity of using sometimes one means, sometimes another; partly by our experience, which it is whereby his free Spirit is pleased most to work in our heart. And in the meantime the sure and general rule for all who groan for the salvation of God is this -- whenever opportunity serves, use all the means which God has ordained. For who knows in which God will meet thee with the grace that bringeth salvation?"

What is clear is that Wesley saw many ways the Spirit was at work in the world, among the body of Christ and within the hearts of believers. This, I could later assure my professor friend, meant that my view of sacramental presence found much resonance with the view of Wesley. Yet finding common ground with Wesley is of limited value toward discovering the shape and substance of contemporary signs of God's activity in our world. As Wesley suggests, the blessing of God is "varied, transposed and combined together in a thousand different ways." This doesn't help much in designing an annual ministry program for a local church or writing one's Charge Conference report!
Where may we see, in congregational life, the outward signs of God’s activity among the people? It is in reflecting on this question, at least with regard to the contemporary North American church, I come to the conclusion from my pastoral experience that capacity, community and creativity are central signs of God’s gifts of grace within a local congregation. True, at first glance, these may appear to be end products rather than means of grace. Wesley warns about focus on ends rather than means of grace early on in his sermon. They are, however, more substantive and generative.

Capacity, creativity and community may initiate and sustain a congregation’s ministry. They are more than the ends of grace-filled activities, but, of course, they may be penultimate. I hold that they may well be the result of, or marks of, sacramental activity. But they are of particular benefit as they also serve as signposts along the journey of faith. These may be viewed as three ways to live as if The Great Love-Story of human history is true. Over the past quarter of a century, I have participated in and/or designed dozens of empirical studies and “interventions” of congregational life, but it is from my experience as pastor that I have gained the perspective of recognizing the sacramental aspects of the congregations life in the world.

One does not have a beloved community, a congregation which signifies God’s saving intentions for humankind, just by declaring one to exist... but there are disciplines one can follow which will make such a community more likely. The experience of life together among believers may be (typically is) generative of renewed manifestations of community at other times and places. Community, capacity and creativity point to the eschatological hope -- the realm of God among us and the salvation promised to all who accept by faith the lead of the Crucified and Risen One.

Alan Jones, Dean of San Francisco’s Grace Cathedral, reminds us that spirituality is the art of discernment, of finding connections, of exercising the discipline and great patience to discover the wholeness given to us by God in Christ. He writes: “We are voyagers toward meaning, toward the double mystery of God and of ourselves, the mystery of Immanuel -- God-with-us. We are not, therefore, examining the mechanism of a clock, nor are we exploring the inner workings of a computer. These tasks require skill and knowledge which human beings can acquire in time. Rather we are examining everything, and if we insist on approaching this task in the same way we would a clock or a computer, we are doomed to fail.”

Over the course of the past several years I have kept up an active correspondence with several younger United Methodist pastors. Michael Mather, pastor of Broadway Christian Parish in South Bend, Indiana has been one of these correspondents. This small congregation is situated in a poor neighborhood but its ministry outreach is significant. South Bend, home of Notre Dame University, is a city of approximately 150,000 located some ninety miles east of Chicago. One of the cities identified as being in the North American "Rustbelt," South Bend's economy has been shifting from manufacturing to more service-based employment. Although there is a strong Roman Catholic presence, there are well over a dozen United Methodist churches in the area.
Listening to the stories told by this pastor and members, I have gained a renewed appreciation of the sacramental dimensions of local parish life. From nearly one hundred pieces of correspondence and from interviewing several persons familiar with the life in this parish, I have the challenge of selecting just a few illustrations which might illuminate the place of community, capacity and creativity in this congregation.

II. Capacity

By capacity I mean the sense that we are shaped by and for the divine. We are made with Imago Dei, the image of God imprinted within our very genetic structure. All have the capacity for blessedness. However, this is not simply another "human potential" initiative, nor simply a renewed appreciation of the capacity of each person to come to faith and achieve personal goals. More profoundly, this rests in what is perceived as the capacity of God to honor human vision in a wearying, demanding setting.

Capacity, then, has to do with the divine imprint within each person and the faithful actions of a gracious God. In terms of each human being and community, capacities can accrue. There is the possibility of building up the spiritual capacity accounts within a community. In this sense, capacity involves viewing the world with a belief in God's abundance... whether this is expressed in the feeding of 5,000 on a Galilean hillside, the experience of "power" in the early church as reported in the book Acts, the shift from "client to citizen" in urban neighborhood development strategies or an awareness of the "funds of knowledge" present in impoverished immigrant communities in the United States.

Mather speaks of his earliest days as pastor of the South Bend parish. This was a parish with a wonderful heritage of careful worship and generous outreach with the poor of the neighborhood. There were deeply committed lay leaders and a rich history of compassion and justice ministry. This pastor saw greater opportunity ahead. He writes of long lines of people seeking assistance, congregated on old church pews which have been moved outside under a shade tree to provide seating for those who would come asking for food from the church's food pantry.

The pattern was the same for each recipient: they were to fill out a complex government form with information about employment, family size, marital status, etc. Once the forms were filled in, they were all carefully placed in several large filing cabinets. "We never really looked at them again," he writes. "It was all too overwhelming. I mean -- what do you say to a woman with four children who has $600 in income and $1,200 in expenses every month?"

Reflecting on the whole pattern of exchange and the role of the church in its setting, this young pastor summed up their efforts as simply collecting a "file cabinet of poverty." Instead of discovering the giftedness, the capacities of the people, this congregation like thousands of others had fallen into the trap of keeping account of people's scarcity, of how little they had. A certain boldness was missing. Who would stand and say, as Peter did in...
the earliest days of the church, "I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk" (Acts 3:6 NRSV).

He writes: "But on Pentecost Sunday we decided to do things a little differently. We read that passage that Peter read, from the Prophet Joel, 'And I will pour out my Spirit upon ALL flesh -- and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young folks will see visions and your old folks shall dream dreams.'"

"We decided that since we were a church, we didn't have to use the same old forms that the government was using. We could do something that attempted to recognize and name the blessedness, the en spiriting of the people who graced our building. We could do something different -- that was our freedom."

This was the turning point for the congregation. Rather than keeping books on the scarcity around them, it was decided to keep track of the gifts of the spirit given to the persons of their community. They developed a new questionnaire, one which sought to discover the banks of knowledge, the wealth of experience, the gold mines of ingenuity, the fountainheads of imagination and hope present among the people. They were asked about basic skills - cooking, child care, practical nursing experience, auto mechanic skills, gardening, carpentry, playing a musical instrument; and they were also asked about aspirations and visions for their families and communities.

It turned out to be a seven-page questionnaire which ended with three provocative items as follows:

- "What three things are you good enough at that you could teach someone else how to do them?"
- "What three things would you like to learn that you don't already know?"
- "Who besides God and me is going to help you get out of the mess that you're in?"

The questionnaire turns the old ways of doing business upside-down. No longer is the view that the "impoverished client" is coming to the church where the "enlightened professional" will provide assistance. Rather, a person's capacity is assumed, community is encouraged and creativity is honored. Within months, the church building was hosting classes in everything from Quilt Making to Basic Auto Repair, Bible Study and Mexican Cooking.

One of the first persons to fill out the new questionnaire was a small Mexican-American woman named Adelle. Adelle's large extended family, living in a tiny house, struggled for basic necessities. On the capacity survey, Adelle said she was a good cook. She was asked to prove this by cooking for the church staff and leaders. The pastor gave her "a loan" to buy supplies and the use of the church kitchen. These meals were a hit.

A few weeks later a local civic group was scheduled to use the church as part of their study of poverty in the community. In making arrangements for a day-long meeting, the group asked if their caterer could use the church kitchen. The pastor, continued to seek to build..."
capacity for Adelle and the community. He said, "We have our own caterer and would prefer you use her." Adelle cooked and again all were impressed! By now Adelle had cards printed up which read "La Chapperita (The Little One) Catering." Today, Adelle has a restaurant in the city of Elkhart. It is called "Adelita's Fajitas." The years have passed, and this story is retold along with many others, as one of the signs of hope springing from the congregation's Pentecost experience.

Other stories abound - an eighty year old man learns photography, women were trained to visit neighbors providing basic nursing attention, youth who have learned basic life skills. Rather than the food pantry being a place where differences between people, or deficits, were recorded, it was transformed into an occasion for building bonds among people, even as it called attention to a formerly unseen and un-utilized abundance. The "food pantry surveys" are not filed away, never to be seen again. Anyone who wants to see them may, and they are a valuable resource for weekly staff meetings and the congregation's monthly missions committee meeting. When someone offers to come and help at the congregation, they are given access to these surveys and encouraged to work with folks in areas of common interest.

Mather writes: "We made a conscious decision NOT to put the information on our database so that we would be forced to sit and talk with one another about the great abundance that we have in our midst... we ask ourselves each week if there are any new ways for us to help people pull together."

III. Community

It should not come as a surprise that as we Christians explore our personal capacities, we are led to the question, "How will we help people pull together?" Parker Palmer observes: "We are formed by lives which intersect ours. The larger and richer our community, the larger and richer is the content of the self. There is no individuality without community; thus, the surprising finding that an affluent suburb with all its options, but without community, may nurture individuality less than a provincial village with few choices but a rich community life."16

Like capacity, community is a gift of God to us, as well as a challenge to the individual to discover God's intentions for human exchange. Sister Joan Chittister writes: "Community is a very human thing. We do not expect perfection here, but we do expect growth, in ourselves, as well as in others... Life with someone else, in other words, doesn't show me nearly as much about his or her short comings as it does about my own. In human relationships I learn how to soften my hard spots and how to reconcile and how to care for someone else besides myself. In human relationships I learn that there is no substitute for love. It is easy to talk about the love of God; it is another thing to practice it... Alone, I am what I am, but in community I have the chance to become everything that I can be."17

Community at its fullest is a gift, and yet community is not a choice. The question is never whether or not we will be a part of community, it is rather, what will be the
character and health of the communities in which we participate. Even the desert hermit has choice as to what communion will occur with the natural world around and the spiritual realm within and beyond. Community cannot be prefabricated, and yet it is already a reality. The church was built for community - for many little communities of support and accountability. Ideally a congregation should be an "ecclesiol(a)" (small church) within the ecclesia."18

Yet I fear Robert Wuthnow is correct when he writes: "The church, as it has evolved in the Twentieth Century, is in many ways ill suited to provide community... the church is an administrative convenience, created unwittingly by a combination of its history and the programs planned by its leaders. If community is going to take place there at all, it must occur against high odds."19

Whenever people share geography, language, economy and ritual, they are in community, but of what character and quality? What is the nature of community where people share Christian faith? How will it be a sign to the world of Immanuel -- God abiding or "tenting" with us? Community is designed for hospitality. Genuine Christian community is that setting where space is created and there is room enough for strangers to become friends.

Henri Nouwen suggests: "Community is characterized by two things: one is forgiveness; the other is celebration. Forgiveness means that I continually am willing to forgive the other person for not being god -- for not fulfilling all my needs. I, too, must ask forgiveness for not being able to fulfill other people's needs... So I forgive you since you can only love me in a limited way... the interesting thing is that when you can forgive people for not being god, then you can celebrate that they are a reflection of God."20

There are many examples of healthy communities characterized by forgiveness and celebration within Broadway Christian Parish. There was the evening neighborhood pre-teens arrive at the church just as a small prayer group was meeting. Amid giggles and squirming taunts among the youth and discomfort yet patience of the adults, there comes a miraculous moment when one young man shares a prayer concern and then another prays and then another. The prayer meeting end in common voice praying the Lord's Prayer. The youngsters struggle to "get the words right" for the disciples prayer. This is a generative time -- community is being reborn, a new common experience, a shared ritual has been created.

One particular letter from the pastor referred to the congregation as a "de-tox" church.21 A new member of the congregation had been through several alcoholism programs and after considerable discussion with his wife, decided, with the assistance of the congregation, to end drinking. A small group from the parish spent time praying for the family. Several others, especially two other recovering alcoholics, spent time sitting with the man while his wife was at work. A weekly schedule was developed. The parish became known fondly among those involved as the "de-tox church." Again, community is born and renewed.
During this same period, a brick had been tossed through a window of an interracial couple who attend the congregation early one morning. The Sunday following, the incident was shared. One of the parents became so agitated she couldn't remain in the worship service. Her anger carried her to the front steps of the church where she could smoke (and fume). As it happened, that was a day when her son was assisting with the Eucharist. The boy knew where his mother was and asked the pastor to join him as he carried the sacrament to her on the front steps. It surprised her... her anger could not separate her from this community.

When the benediction was pronounced, the pastor went to the woman who was still outside the door. He asked her to do just one thing. "Would you please bring that brick with you to worship next week so that we can put it on the altar as a sign of the brokenness and sin of our community?" She seemed to like the idea; in fact, the pastor was surprised by the assurance and comfort this seemed to bring.

Mather closes this letter with the observation: "Hey, which class in seminary were they supposed to teach you about this [setting up a congregational de-tox program or bringing a brick to the altar as part of prayers for reconciliation]? I don't remember it, but then, again, I coulda been sleeping!" Clearly neither this congregation nor its pastor sleep through many opportunities to build or renew community. They offer "life together" as a vital sign of Christ present among the people.

IV. Creativity

Like community, creativity is an inevitable human activity. Not only is it inevitable, but it is also potentially dangerous because as human beings, created after God's image, we are tempted to forget first causes. We are tempted to believe our imaginings are ends in themselves. We tend to love the images we create rather than the truth to which they point. Alan Jones writes: "Human beings cannot help but live from their creative imaginations. Insofar as we are truly human, we are all poets and priests. We are all, like Hermes, intermediaries between spirit and matter. We all make things. We all sacrifice them to some god or other. We are manufacturers of... goods, spiritual and intellectual as well as physical."22

We have no choice but to create. We were destined to work, but work set in term of one's capacities as part of a community of faith is far different from our easy notions of private enterprise. At the triangle points for early Methodist itinerancy, the Foundry in London, the "Orphan House" at Newcastle and the New Room in Bristol, Wesley established centers where creativity was nurtured. Creativity in such settings is not about "getting ahead" but rather about how one celebrates the gifts of capacity from the creator, how one becomes more fully human, how one builds up community and how one makes the world more just.

Imagination is about rescuing life from boredom (acedia). It reflects the divine when it celebrates the connection among people, creation and their God. To avoid the temptation
of idolatry - the worship of the gods created by our own hands and in our own images - imagination requires participation in a community of accountability.

How does one elicit and/or encourage creativity? It seems to be "caught" before it can be "taught." The South Bend parish is rich with examples of creative congregational life. In reflecting on what I have seen and heard, my list of creativity-encouraging parish venues includes an artist-in-residence who has taken over several formerly underused church school classrooms. Here the artist has a number of activities including a program to assist folks in dealing with crises in their lives from addiction to sexual abuse to incarceration. Groups from a nearby half-way house come to the church for these art classes.

Still aware that I was missing a number of the creative activities of the parish, I asked the pastor to send me a "brief" listing of "a few" of the places where imagination is expressed. He sent back a list of over forty activities including gardens, musical groups, videotaping projects, housing projects, economic development and health care efforts. Among the recent additions to this creativity is the congregation's own internet web site which is filled with photos taken by the youth, art work, and descriptions of the mission goals and achievements of this remarkable congregation.

Nothing captures the commitment to foster imagination as clearly as does a summer youth initiative which hires young people as "Animators." Three years ago three youth approached the pastor saying they needed summer jobs. Mather took a leap of faith and said, "Sure, we will hire you to be community 'animators of the spirit'." The pastor invented jobs for these youth, and then called on some of his friends (yours truly included!) to pay for his improvisation.

Shortly after the decision to have neighborhood "Animators," a letter came sharing the joy of creativity-in-action. The young people met with the pastor and decided they would begin by canvassing the neighborhood. Again they wanted to move beyond doing an inventory of poverty or scarcity. They were eager to discover ways to encourage the imagination dormant within the community.

The youth first simply took the survey to other youth living within one block of the church. These were the questions: 1) How long have you lived around here? 2) What do you like about living around here? 3) What would you like to be changed? 4) What three things are you good enough at to teach someone else how to do? 5) What three things would you like to learn that you don't already know? 6) What friends of yours would join you in doing something in your neighborhood?

In the summer of 1995 Mather wrote:

_They came back yesterday afternoon with thirty surveys filled out. We sat down to talk. One young man said he wanted to learn about boxing. Marie says, 'My next door neighbor is Harold Brazier's father (Harold is a professional middleweight who grew up in this neighborhood) -- I could ask Mr. Brazier if he would help him!_
A young woman put down that she wants to "learn how to be a treasurer." Another young man puts down that he wants to learn carpentry. Lots of them put down that they are good basketball players. Marie and Brian say we should have a basketball tournaments. I say, "great idea," but inspired by one of my teachers I say to them, "But don't you do it." 

"What?" they say. I suggest they should organize these folks to do it by gathering them together here at Broadway to talk about this. (I provided the refreshments). I told Brian and Marie to say to the ones who say they have artistic talents -- "you make the posters and signs." And then, say to the young woman who wants to be the treasurer that she will be the registrar and treasurer for the basketball tournament and then say to the young man who put down that he likes to ride his bicycle around the neighborhood with his friends, that they are responsible to get the word out about this.

Marie says her mother wants to help coach and it is agreed that the basketball players will organize themselves into teams. Brian and Marie go and talk to the business association and ask if they'll sponsor teams (they take the registrar along). The young man interested in carpentry is responsible to get everything set up (including score board and benches) with the help of a neighbor who is doing refurbishing work on his house.

The tournament came. Brian and Marie helped folks who said they wanted to have a cleaner neighborhood organize crews to "pick-up" for the special day. The tournament was just the beginning of cooperative, creative work by the youth.

Each year new projects are hatched based on what the young people suggest through their surveys. Each summer new animators encourage this community to be creative. Murals cover the walls of neighborhood buildings and visual art fills the church building. Over fifty children joined in producing a four-by-eight-foot mosaic composed of broken glass shards swept up from the streets and alleys. The mosaic which includes the words "You are the light of the world" presents a striking image of the community the neighborhood is called to become. It is a sign of hope in the midst of poverty.

V. Conclusion

For most North American Christians these emphases of capacity, community and creativity are rather foreign notions. In places where numerical decline continues and focus is anxiously centered on finding some strategy for renewal, these emphases clothed in "home-grown" stories of hope and renewal offer an alternative way of proceeding.

Worship attendance at Broadway Christian Parish continues to grow, nearly doubling in the last five years. Yet the seeking of numerical growth does not dominate the congregation's agenda. It has become increasingly clear that this local parish finds confirmation of faith as it seeks patterns of disciplined living, accountable before God.
Too many of us have been generous to a fault with every church-growth and worship-renewal strategy which crosses our desks. The quick fix and the outside expert have replaced the daily disciplines of accountable relationship with other believers. I am increasingly convinced that a way forward will mean understanding the genius of Wesley and his call for accountable, holy living. Meaningful, enduring strategies emerge from the life of the community and not the other way around. Until we set about forming and renewing basic communities of accountability within our parishes, we will wander about from one quick fix to another.

New gadgets, techniques and tactics may continue to distract us and tempt us to forget our proximate community, the capacities of all persons - neighbors and strangers, and our shared call to creativity. We tend toward being overdeveloped physically (technologically) and underdeveloped spiritually, or as the hymn writer puts it we are "rich in things and poor in soul." Broadway Christian Parish is a demonstration that renewal maybe found right where one is planted. I am reminded of the Zen image of a man "riding on an ox, looking for an ox." We have been given abundance in our history, our congregations and our communities and yet we fail to see it -- instead we perceive only scarcity. We need renewed vision... a faith transplant.

I would set forth these three elements as renewal points, vital signs, marks of God's continuing presence among us. Apropos to our general topic, these may be seen as Trinitarian. There is capacity reflected as God the Father/Mother, The Generative One, who endows each of us and our communities with spiritual/divine potency. There is God the Son, The Incarnate One, expressed in the everyday reality, dilemmas and dreams of life together as Christian community. And there is The Holy Spirit, The Imaginative One, celebrated in the creativity of God's community at play.

I will not at this juncture push the Trinitarian notion further, paying heed to the warning of Harry Emerson Fosdick who is reported to have said, "Those who do not believe in the Trinity are in danger of losing their soul, but those who try to figure out what the Trinity is are in danger of losing their minds."

Trinity is mystery, no doubt. The need to speak paradoxically about the unity and diversity of this mystery is also a way of saying how we experience God. We discover the means to know something of God in multiple dimensions. Here we speak of three. Our language is of that which is already received, that which abides with us and that which signals new possibilities. We remember the gifts already bestowed, we wait with a sense of God's abiding presence among us, and we prepare for the coming glory of creation yet to unfold.

How will we celebrate and witness to these dimensions? What of sacramental life today? One piece of correspondence from the Rev. Mather came to me as a moment of clarity in the spring of 1996²⁷ Mather told of a troubled young woman we will call Theresa who was struggling with cocaine addiction. She was invited to the church by neighbors who were trying, as Mather reports, to "rescue" her.
Dear Phil,

On the first Sunday at Broadway Christian Parish there was a litany of welcoming me, as their new pastor. Different people from the congregation came forward bearing various gifts -- they were a Bible, a loaf of bread, a bottle of wine and a bottle of aspirin. (Three guesses at which one was used up first and the first two guesses don't count.)

One of those bearing gifts that day was Theresa. I still remember that I had first noticed her at the communion rail that morning. One of her "rescuers" was kneeling beside her and when it came time to serve Theresa communion, this neighbor physically pulled Theresa away from the bread I was beginning to hand to her. I thought there must be some good reason for this (foolish me) and proceeded along the rail.

After worship I sought out the neighbor and asked her why she did this. Her answer was that Theresa had not been baptized and we don't serve non-baptized people communion at Broadway. 'We do now,' I told her and went off in search of Theresa. I found her and told her she was welcome at the Christ's table -- and that when she wished to be baptized I would be glad to take care of that, but in the meantime there was a place for her at the table. She demurred saying that she didn't feel she was good enough, but I insisted.

Over the next several weeks I tried to preach hard on grace (is that like "military intelligence"?) and for the next several weeks I was saddened to see Theresa remain in her seat while others came to the table. Finally, one Sunday she came forward and received and looked happy to do so.

But things did not go well for her. She continued to fight with her addiction and with the demands of raising five children by herself. The children ran with rough crowds; they were active in street gangs. She moved her family back and forth between Chicago and South Bend, but recently she lost their home and moved into the center for the homeless where she's been drying out again.

This Saturday morning about eight a.m. she knocked on our door. I answered -- still in my night shirt and invited her in. She was wrapped up against a pretty chilly morning in South Bend and had a large cup of coffee with her. She'd gone for a walk from the center for the homeless and had wound up at the parsonage. The last time I saw her was four weeks ago when she brought her crack pipe to me before worship on Sunday morning and asked me to lay it on the altar and pray for her. So we had -- the whole congregation. That afternoon she was kicked out of the drug rehab program she had entered just hours earlier and now she was at the center for the homeless. And now she was at my door.
So we sat at the kitchen table, talking over a cup of coffee. Really it was more like I listened. She talked about lots of things, but mainly she just talked. She wondered if God could love someone like her... someone who seemed of such little value in our world. I thought about the crack house just a block away and how much she must have wanted to turn and walk over to that house and knock on that door. Maybe she had and no one had answered. But I doubt it. In my mind she stopped at our house, so she wouldn't stop at the crack house.

I thought of her neighbor pulling her away from the communion bread and I realized that this time no one was pulling her away from the crack house. It was just her... and God. And the Broadway Christian Parish parsonage, serving as a communion rail -- a respite from a weary and demanding world. That hour or so at our kitchen table was a little bit of the season of God's ordinary time in the midst of Lent. Nothin' special. No bells and whistles. No incense. No death bed conversions nor dramatic actions... just two friends at table together, sharing coffee, sharing hope. Hopin' to find themselves there, again.

peace,

+mike

Is lifting a cup of coffee in Christ's name sacramental? I would answer unhesitatingly in the affirmative. Without diminishing the significance or power of Eucharist or baptism, I believe the answer to this question must be a resounding "Yes!" However, before we rush out and purchase coffee urns or enlarge our fellowship halls, we should remember that it is not the coffee or the conversation but rather the church's life which is sacrament.

Robert McAfee Brown writes: "In a sacrament, life is for a single moment the way it is supposed to be in all moments." Whenever we act as the Body of Christ so that "Christ may dwell in our hearts by faith with thanksgiving" we are joining in sacramental life.

As we retell the Christian story of abundance and hope, we accept the reality of community around us and work to abide creatively in this place of fellowship. We wait acknowledging our gifts and yet we wait for the final unveiling of God's ultimate purposes. As we lift these cups, we affirm that we are the means of grace to each other as we acknowledge capacity, take on the sacrifices and satisfactions of community, and encourage one another toward accepting our co-creative responsibilities.

peace,

+philip amerson
ENDNOTES


4 Percell, loc. cit.

5 The phenomena of "deficit analysis" of a social context or institution has been presented by various authors including John McKnight and Luis Moll whose works are cited later in this paper.


7 Ibid., p. 394.

8 Ibid., p. 395.

9 Ibid., p. 378.


12 Acts 3:1-10 is a great testimony to the capacity of God in the midst of daunting circumstance.


15 Mather, Michael, from personal correspondence with P. Amerson, 12 July, 1994.


21 Mather, Michael, from personal correspondence with P. Amerson, 28 August, 1995.


23 Mather, Michael, from personal correspondence with P. Amerson July 17, 1997.


25 Mather, Michael, from personal correspondence with P. Amerson, June 20, 1995.

26 This is a reference to correspondence between Robert Greenleaf and P. Amerson, July 1987, in which Greenleaf (author of works on "servant leadership") writes in response to an idea presented by Amerson, "Great idea. Don't you do it!" Greenleaf was thereby encouraging a leadership style which allows others to take responsibility for a shared vision.

27 Mather, Michael, personal correspondence with P. Amerson, March 18, 1996.

28 Percell, op cit., p. 940. Percell answers: "Yes -- in the loving communion of those who remember the Christian story and who await the fulfillment of God's creation, the drink is lifted to his coming."