

REFLECTIONS ON THE LOCAL CHURCH EXPERIMENT (LCX) OF THE
ECUMENICAL INSTITUTE 1971-1973

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In January of 1970 I was called as interim minister of the University Baptist Church in Seattle. Shortly thereafter, recall being invited to a Sunday evening "House Church" at a student community home known as "Ithaca." The members seemed to be 5-6 years younger than I, mostly university students and brimming with energy and intentionality in their decision making, accountability and worship. Some of them would show up at my church for Sunday morning worship and it became clear to me that this group possessed an excitement and non-pious focus on service that held a magnetic attraction for me. Some names that I recall include Bob and Teresa Lingafelter, Jon and Annetta Ezelle, Patrick and Justine Moriarty, Sara and Mark Phillips, Steve Brazen, and Catherine Whitney, among others. At Christmas time of 1970 Ithaca disbanded, but not before a Parish Leader's Colloquy (PLC) was conducted by E.I. in October, 1970 at my church, University Baptist Church. I think that the inspiration and groundwork for this seminar for clergy was laid by Ithaca members. It was the first step (unknown to the attendees) of planting the seeds for a "Galaxy" of four churches as a part of the developing Local Church Experiment. John Baggett was the first teacher for the PLC. I had never experienced such a disciplined teaching methodology, including rituals and singing, or such an unusual, strange, shocking and yet fascinating theology. After reflecting on the PLC, I experienced the emotions of excitement and disbelief. I helped recruit another PLC shortly after the first and was surprised to see John Baggett show up as first teacher again. But my ~~adrenalin was pumping because I urgently wanted to make some sense of the course, and experiencing it again, even with the same teacher, was what I needed to satisfy my deep curiosity.~~ When the second PLC was completed I was convicted of two principles that sustained me in the journey ahead: 1. The releasing dynamic of relinquishing "two-story universe" theology and the growing into what I thought was a more potent "de-mythologized" Christian doctrine and, 2. The real

possibility of a local congregation using methods to work and act corporately, rather than individually. When Jim and Lynn Bell, Priors of the Seattle House, approached me about our church joining Maplewood Presbyterian, Phinney Ridge Lutheran and Blessed Sacrament Roman Catholic in the "Local Church Experiment" with E.I., I jumped at the chance. What flowed over me was the belief that I was now responding to what seminary had trained me for, and perhaps what I was born for. The sense of calling, mixed with quiet euphoria, were possessing me as joined as I, along with a few members of the congregation who had recently taken RS-I, joined with like clergy and laypersons from the three other congregations to form the "Galaxy" of the Seattle area Local Church Experiment in January of 1971.

To over-simplify, and to recall from a very fuzzy memory, the four "cadres" would meet weekly over a pot-luck, in one of the participating churches, and engage in a structured evening of rituals, singing, prayers, "ORID" meal conversations, and report on and celebrating the past week, followed by each congregation building a plan for the coming week to implement tactics that were printed in something like a "Tactical System" with 13 major tactical arenas created by E.I.. One of those arenas was "Liturgy." For my Baptist congregation, "liturgy" meant starting with using church year colors, symbols, responsive readings and each LPX member singing hymns lustily in worship, regardless of their ability to carry a tune. Before LPX, I used to use hymn singing as a time to organize my thoughts for the sermon, but that changed and I would sing as loudly and as enthusiastically as possible, modeling for the congregation the importance of singing corporately. We would also meet every two weeks, starting on Friday night and continue all day Saturday continuing the same kind of weekly tactical work, undergirded with a special emphasis or inspiring theme for the weekend. The impact of the LCX on the four congregations is difficult to measure. For University Baptist, I think using some of the methods in corporateness, decision-making and celebrations affected the congregation positively. Consensus resolution of divisive issues and stressing the importance of each individual through "sending out" persons to a particular mission was always inspiring for the congregation and the "sendee." The feed-back

that I received usually reflected a heightened sense of intentionality in whatever task, even if recreational in nature, by the recipient. I think that the congregation gained an understanding of the idea that in whatever or wherever one is engaged, a difference can be made in the world if a missional context is set first.

The real story of the LPX is perhaps not what happened to the congregation, but how it influenced the lives of the LPX leadership or cadres in each congregation. When we showed up at the weekly gathering, and you looked around at the others, it always dawned on me at least, that we were part of a special local church renewal group whose members had a common understanding of the new theological insights that we were growing into, and had bought into a type of worship, corporateness, methodology and "revolutionary" vision that bound us together like unlike any church related endeavor in which we had previously engaged.. All of this bound us together. We had victories to report and certainly set-backs, but together we tended to stay centered and thoughtful. One woman from our church broke down sobbing in frustration in one of Saturday afternoon workshops, only to recover and join heartily in the weekend closing, rather than leaving. That was a tribute to our deep desire to hang together. In our galaxy we had a couple in their 70's with their daughter and son-in-law, and their faithfulness and desire to work together as family and with age diversity inspired all of us. My two years as a galaxy pastor were easily the two most fulfilling years of my clergy service. I still miss it, even though by 1973 or 1974 there seemed to be a lot pain and misunderstanding between galaxies and many of the congregations. Suspicion and resentment toward the LCX seem to take hold as the endeavor was regarded as cliquish and secretive. There were many "dark" stories across the country that resulted in the disbanding of LCX in many cases. My Associate Minister, after attending a PLC, told me that he was "declaring war" on E.I. and its influence in our congregation. After awhile, working together became untenable, I resigned as pastor, joined the Order, the congregation split, and my associate replaced me. It took a few years to process the pain of that unhappy drama. Talking with other LCX participants from across the country, I

heard similar stories. Nevertheless, the LCX was a personally transforming journey for which I am immensely grateful.

In the near future, I would like to share some more about learnings derived from those years, what I would have done differently, and experiences from the post-LCX period while in the Order.

To be continued.

George