

WHAT IS THIS?

by George Lawson

Candles flickered on the ceiling above a deep blue tablecloth. The after-dinner flecks of breadcrumbs and the edges of a sloppy green salad remained on the table, but they had been overlooked by the drama of the evening. After passionate, off-key group singing and brief liturgies, both of which used vocabulary that seemed like code words that belonged to a secret group, not a “Christian” community, the 15 or so University District youth, mostly students, took turns standing and facing one other.

This was the weekly “House Church” gathering to which I had been invited by the Ithaca House, a faith community in the University District of Seattle, Washington, in 1970. Ithaca House residents, Jon and Ann Ezelle, showed up for morning worship at the University Baptist Church in Seattle. As that church’s new pastor, I was thrilled with their presence and pleased when they returned two Sundays later. When I greeted them at the door at the end of the service, they invited me to attend their nearby community the following Sunday evening. I readily accepted, partially because, as a new pastor of a sizeable congregation with a rather prestigious church history. I was hungry for any new idea of church renewal that was fresh and different. In addition, I sensed that I was perhaps “in over my head,” by accepting the recent call to serve as pastor of the church, and I needed ideas to “make my mark” so to speak.

That evening at the dinner, each member stood, asked to “claim the promise” of one other person in the group. After affirming some quality or gift of the other, the individual stated that gift needed to be used to change the world in some way. I caught my breath in awe as I watched as “eyeball to eyeball” intentions or claims made to each person. After everyone had participated in this ritual, the group sang lustily, again with words that made some sense, but still seemed strangely out of context. Nevertheless, as a Baptist, with its traditional emphasis on individual accountability and direct personal calling, I noticed the energy within this group that was not apparent in my congregation. Now 50 years later, I recall vividly some of names from that evening: Bob and Teresa Lingafelter, Gay Bennett, Catherine Whitney, Patrick Moriarity, Justine Robins, Steve Brazen, Jon and Annetta Ezelle, Mark and Sara Phillips, Frank Soderlind, and a woman pre-med student, Bernie.

Two weeks later, two of the members of Ithaca House approached me about using University Baptist's facility to host a "Parish Leader's Colloquy (PLC)"-- a two-day course taught by staff from the Ecumenical Institute of Chicago (E.I.). "The class was designed especially for clergy," they stated, "and for those who were interested in methods of congregational renewal." Ithaca House community had "primed the pump" with me so I readily accepted the role of host pastor. Watching the staff, who flew in from Chicago and other parts of the country for the class, set up tables, chairs and décor, I realized that this course "meant business," i.e., everything seemed to be designed as understated and intentional. They set tables perfectly balanced, the seating spaced evenly, and a simple interest piece precisely in the center of the tables.

The sparseness and simplicity of the "E.I." culture, however, was not matched by the lectures. A large man named John Bagget was the assigned "First Teacher" and, when in the first lecture, he explained what he meant by God as "the up-against Ness" of life, some of the clergy's faces expressed bewilderment, and a repressed "shock and awe." Even the lectures and charting on grace and the glorious calling of the church as "pioneer" in the world seemed to do little to give the class members a sense of inspiration or peace. The only visuals I can recall, other than the unforgettable Picasso's "Guernica," turnout to be the sight of the Second Teacher, reading a paperback novel while puffing on a cigarette in the back of the room, plus the backside of John Bagget writing furiously on the blackboard, with his untucked shirt-tail flapping, revealing too much white moving skin. The two-day class ended with some profane expression of "sending out" from the teacher. I recall words something like, "You can embrace your great life as a sacrifice to change the world, or you can regard life as a pile of ..." and then the speaker immediately disappeared out the church door. As the various ministers collected their papers and notes and seemed to somewhat hurriedly exit the church, my mind worked hard to comprehend fully what had happened the past two days. Feeling a sense of bewilderment and fascination, I asked myself, "What is this?"

Providentially, the Ithaca House and an emerging "official" Religious House of the Ecumenical Institute of Chicago scheduled a second PLC and again someone asked me to have my church host it. Our deacons and I readily agreed. I was surprised to see that the First Teacher was John Bagget again, with the same untucked shirt tail, too much floppy skin, and the same savage attack on the blackboard. Only for me this second time around, notions and images that seemed alien two months

earlier settled into my mind and psyche. The question “What is this?” became slowly the statement, “My, this is life changing stuff.”

When the Ecumenical Institute (E.I.) asked University Baptist Church to join with three other churches in a “Local Church Experiment”, I jumped at the opportunity. The other interested churches joining the four-church Galaxy became Phinney Ridge Lutheran, Blessed Sacrament Roman Catholic, and Maplewood Presbyterian. The clergy and a few lay people from each congregation joined together to become a four-church “Local Church Experiment” connected to E.I. We joined together, weekly, and on an occasional Friday evening and Saturday to sing and pray, eat, and workshop strategies and tactics for the renewal of our individual congregations. Often invisible to the rest of the congregation, constructive and subtle changes occurred in our churches, like discussions of the value of the church year calendar, more response and participation of members in worship, honoring and celebrating individuals and families, stressing service to our neighborhood, including food banks and youth hostels; and of course members of the “cadre” of each congregation enjoyed a sense of collegiality and visioning (of what the local church might become) that heretofore had been denied them.

As a pastor of one of these select congregations, I regard the almost three years that I was involved with the Local Church Experiment as the greatest years of my life. For the first time I could see the local church as a locus of measurable faith reformation and as a key agent of social change. Back in those days, I jumped out of bed in the morning, shouting “Praise the Lord, Christ is Risen. He is risen indeed!” and singing with a burst of energy and anticipation, driving or walking to the church to check on the status of each strategy and tactic on a large wall chart, and calling cadre members and other galaxy pastors to check on tactical progress and, when appropriate, encouraging them with their inevitable setbacks. The weekly Galaxy gatherings bound our corporate life, absolved our perceived failings, and girded us for the week ahead. Occasional reports from other Galaxies across the globe reminded us of the universality of the mission in which we were engaged. “What is this?” was flipped to “I cannot imagine anything clearer or more powerful.”

After several months, however, the honeymoon was punctured by the “elephant in the room.” Because little thought had been given to transparency and communication with the broader congregational membership, many in the congregations grew suspicious of the Galaxy activities and regarded its members

as elitists. My popular new associate pastor, after returning from a PLC, announced that he was so offended by the content of the seminar that if I were engaged with E.I., he would do all he could to undermine me as pastor. I plunged into despair. A collegueship and friendship turned into sweating nightmares overnight, and my church's visible participation in the Galaxy ended.

The cadre members experienced being demoralized and frustrated. The congregation quickly took sides and when those that I had led in worship, visited in hospitals, counseled, married, and led in youth and adult retreats, invited me to a meeting promoted as a "just get together" conversation, I was greeted at the door by 40 or so members. They angrily told me to resign as pastor as soon as possible. I felt deceived through false pretenses by those I had given pastoral care. It seemed I had rather quickly gone from the highest point in my life to the lowest. I drove home alone on a dark, rainy Seattle night, quietly sobbing, and asking no one in particular, "What is this?"

Dis-illusioned with the local church, I somewhat reluctantly joined a late August 1973 caravan of vehicles from Seattle to Chicago to accept assignment to the staff of the Order Ecumenical. This period was in the very early stages of what the Order Ecumenical called "The Great Turn to the World," i.e., moving on from the Local Church Experiment and E.I., toward the Institute of Cultural Affairs (ICA), and as I understood it, a global campaign to teach methods like Town Meetings and LENS, in a non-sectarian, secular context.

In my heart I asked "What is this? Not so fast. The 'Big Turn to the World' may be premature. Why not take the intellectual and methodological power of E.I. to make corrections in the Local Church Experiment before abandoning one of the most significant models in modern church renewal? Is the Christian church really an impediment? Wouldn't extracting the use of Christian symbols take away our historical power and prevent our dialoguing with other traditions and the secular world?"

However, my hesitant pleas were a "cry in the wilderness" as E.I. leadership set the new missional focus into motion with plans, model building and staff assignments.

My heart and soul never latched on to the new directions of "Turning to the World" with awakening events like Town Meetings and LENS. In July of 1977, I quietly slipped away in the middle of the night from my prior's role at the Newark

Religious House in my battered 1957 Volkswagen Beetle and pointed it toward Seattle.

About a year later, as a financial consultant in Fairbanks, Alaska, I ventured tentatively into a Sunday service at the First Presbyterian Church of Fairbanks. The minister proved to be dynamic, the music okay, the congregation pleasant. But I departed worship in a state of depression. I realized that I had been in, and remained in, a deep seven-year inner journey that was not complete. I did not return to any worship service until two years later in Seattle.

Currently, I enjoy assisting churches and sharing what I have learned, but the hot passion is gone. I watch main-line churches age and decline and reflect on the essence of the Galaxy experience. I still ask, "What is this?" Perhaps many of us in the Order Ecumenical missed a great historical opportunity to truly renew the local Church. And maybe--just maybe the initial enigma of Ithaca House and the Parish Leaders Colloquy of 1970 initiated something that could not be fully appreciated until now.

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