

The State of the Local Church Experiment

Ecclesiasticus 2	Journey of Year One	What we learned in Year One	The First Year has been taken
1	2 3	10	11 15 16 19

1. I've been thinking a lot about how to talk about the state of the Local Church Experiment on the North American continent. My mind flashed back to a rather remarkable incident that happened to me last spring in the New Orleans consult. I was sitting back in the corner of the room and someone else was leading a workshop, getting out the significant events of the quarter. You were to name the most significant event and then tell a story about your journey, what happened to you that quarter. I was sitting by a rice farmer about 65 years old as they went around getting events, telling stories. He just sat there. I kept saying to myself, "John, you're a pedagogue, do something." We went around again and he still didn't say anything. Finally, I turned to him and said, "Don't you have any significant events?" He just looked at me. "Tell a story about what happened this quarter." I had this kind of bright-eyed, naive look on my face. And he just looked at me. I said, "Ok, just tell a Bible story, any Bible story that reminds you of the kind of experience that you had this quarter." I thought he could probably relate to the Bible. Nothing happened. We got through with the workshop and I got ready to leave. I had really been put down something fierce. As I turned to walk away, he tapped me on the shoulder. I turned and he said, "Ecclesiasticus 2." I said, "Oh, that speaks. Yes, sir."

2. I didn't even have a Bible with me, so I wandered off into the church, which was a Roman Catholic Church and found a Bible and turned to Ecclesiasticus 2 which is in the Apocrypha and I read it. I tell you that man is on to something.

My son, if you aspire to serve the Lord,
prepare yourself for an ordeal.
Be sincere of heart, be steadfast,
and do not be alarmed when disaster comes.
Cling to him and do not leave him,
so that you may be honoured at the end of your days.
Whatever happens to you, accept it,
and in the uncertainties of your humble state, be patient,
since gold is tested in the fire,
and chosen men in the furnace of humiliation.

Trust him and he will uphold you,
follow a straight path and hope in him.
You who fear the Lord, wait for his mercy,
do not turn aside in case you fall.
You who fear the Lord, trust him
and you will not be balked of your reward.
You who fear the Lord, hope for good things,
for everlasting happiness and mercy.
Look at the generations of old and see:
who ever trusted in the Lord and was put to shame?
Or who ever feared him steadfastly and was left forsaken?
Or who ever called out to him, and was ignored?
For the Lord is compassionate and merciful,
he forgives sins, and saves in days of distress.
Woe to faint hearts and listless hands,
and to the sinner who treads two paths.
Woe to the listless heart that has no faith,
for such will have no protection.
Woe to you who have lost the will to endure;
what will you do at the Lord's visitation?
Those who fear the Lord do not disdain his words,
and those who love him keep his ways.
Those who fear the Lord do their best to please him,
And those who love him find satisfaction in his Law.
Those who fear the Lord keep their hearts prepared
and humble themselves in his presence.
Let us fall into the hands of the Lord, not into the hands of men;
for as his majesty is, so too is his mercy.

3. Remembering that old wise rice farmer back in the corner, I knew right then the church was renewed. I think about where we were this time last year, we've been on a journey. It is something like this. I just point to the events of the Local Church Experiment as a way of marking my own journey.

4. You remember how it was, how it all got started. I suspect it was something like this. You were a clergyman or a layman out there somewhere being the church. Along came this prior, scrambling around the region, looking for people who were sensitive, responsive, able to leap tall buildings in a single bound, and interested in renewing the local church. It wasn't too long before he knocked on your door. He probably knocked at your pastor's door first. Then, he knocked at your door, and you got invited to this meeting, this church meeting where we were going to talk about church renewal a little bit, the Ecumenical Institute, etc. So you went to the meeting, and somebody came on and read the Bible to you. That's about all that happened at that meeting. They read the Bible and around the edges they slipped in this Experiment about the local church, the local congregation, and its renewal, and tactical systems. Well, that was the field visit.

5. Then we had the December Training School--a hundred people showed up here last December. I remember the order went around in shock for at least three weeks. I didn't work in the local church experiment then. I was working with kids after school before I got assigned to the local church experiment. I remember somebody saying something like, "They're really coming. We're stopping everything. All the offices are closing." We stopped everything for three or four days, and did nothing but that. Remember those smoked fish we had for breakfast one of those days? It was one of the strangest meetings. I don't remember a thing that happened. I just remember that a bunch of people got together for what seemed like a week. We all

decided we were going to renew the local congregation. I put that down innocuously in my mind as December Training School.

6. Then there was that January first celebration. It was a great celebration, including singing "All Life is Open" for 45 minutes. That sort of thing happened all over the continent, they tell me.

7. Then we moved into the winter. You remember the winter training program. Thirteen 4-hour Tuesday night meetings, lots of weekends, and that solitary office. Fred Buss likes to say, it was 12 weeks of context and one week of methodology. We got to the end of the winter quarter and it was Holy Week. And it was time for what we called tertiary actualization to begin. I never figured that out. By this time I was working in the local church office, and I remember that one of our symbolic leaders in the order came to the office and pointed out, "You guys have a great system here, but nobody knows how to do tactics. I think we should send the priors some sort of methodology for doing tactics, and I've decided you guys are going to do it." And so we went aside, and began to work on the methodology for tactical actualization. That is one of the most horrendous events I've ever participated in. We worked 18 hours a day and got nowhere for two weeks. The deadline got closer and closer and closer. Finally, we decided we were going to blitz this thing through in one night and mail it the day after tomorrow, and we did. Everybody's been working with that ever since.

8. Tactical actualization really began--twelve tertiaries every week. At first it was fun, wasn't it? Liturgical formulation, corporate structures, and advanced studies all seemed kind of appropriate. It must have been along about the tenth week, we began to get telephone calls. "Hi, how you doing down there in Houston? Oh, Oh, you think they might die. Well, hang in there, it's a good methodology. It's comprehensive, it's inclusive." It was like that every day and we started taking turns answering the phone. But we went all the way through the quarter. We made it.

9. Then summer came. Everybody was tired and we knew it. So we did gestalted tertiary actualization. Now that was an easier way of doing it, wasn't it? And we suggested things people ought to do, you know, sojourn in the house, be a pedagogue, go to Summer '71. One hundred and fifty out of galaxies came here for Summer '71. You'd walk down the hall, and you'd get stopped by someone. Patty Morton would stop you and want to talk to you about her local congregation. Then you'd walk down this hall and you'd run into Bob Hanson, and he'd want to talk about his local congregation. We met over in the South House about three times down in the basement and talked about his local congregation.

10. Then about August a kind of dawning realization happened. It was like, now it's after Summer '71 and our vacation, and we bought the clothes for the kids to go back to school, and school is going to start which means the priors are coming back. On my--we haven't done anything. Those of us in the local church office thought, Well we'd just pass out the next quarter's manual and call the priors and see how things are going. We got out here and, there was a paralysis. I couldn't get anybody to do anything. We wanted to plan the whole quarter. It was like, I had to make a new decision about the local church experiment because, for me, I had been reassigned to the local church. This was the moment of decision. I mean for all of us. We had done our field visit, we had been to Chicago, we had done our tertiaries, and so on. We'd seen all there was to see. And it was like all you could see was tertiaries into the sunset. But people decided, didn't they? Do

you realize that we have more people at this Advanced Training School meeting right now than we had in the December Training School last year, and that for me is a sign of remarkable kind of decision on the part of the whole movement.

11. Then you've talked about the state of the experiment. You have to talk about what we learned in year one of the local church experiment. I'd like to say that finally that's not an adequate category, because it's not what we learned, it's what you and I decided to do, and to be. Very quickly, I think the first thing we discovered in year one is that the crisis in the church is not the problem. The problem is something like this: Are human beings the kind of selves who can make the decision to stand and embrace and move through the chaos? We did, and we have, and we are. Something like that happened in the first year. And it's actually just a question of selfhood and decision. And it happened. How do you talk about the fact that you saw clergyman after clergyman, and layman after layman decide to move beyond cynicism and despair? They decided to stop griping about the church and invest their life in its future. And you know, that's the kind of changing that denominational officials understand. That kind of thing is understood. You don't even have to tell them how many. You just have to say one did it, and they are shocked.

12. We learned something about what it means to embrace our heritage as church men. Another thing that we learned was that you work through the present structure. You know that up till now there had only been two modes of church renewal. There was the style where you pulled people out of several local congregations, got all the good guys together, and had them run over here and do something kind of important like social action kind of stuff, that didn't have anything to do with the congregations. The other method was to pull people out of congregations, give them all clubs and send them back to their local congregations to beat everybody to death. Now we have moved beyond that. You hear people talking about dealing with the Ladies Aid. Can you imagine, we are working through the existing structures.

13. Then about the Word. It's hard to talk about what we learned there. But people recovered what it meant to live out of the Word of Jesus Christ. It's like even the social actionists began to see that that social action concern for the world was rooted in the Word, that you couldn't do a thing unless you were rooted in the Word. You couldn't even get out of bed regularly. Then there were the methodologies of the spirit. A year ago I didn't even recognize the gospels. And now we've been through Luke and Matthew and Mark, and the Psalms. Then there's the canonical hours and all those great prayers. Something like that is where we've been this year and what we've learned about.

14. Remember reading those documents from the World Council of Churches and stuff about "oneness in mission" and "unity in mission." We saw that. We saw that that is the way it is. When Washington DC sent in that first sodality report that said there were 38 people present at the galactic sodality who ranged in ages from 18 to 82 with three urs present, black, yellow and white, I knew the church was renewed right then--young and old, different sociological strata, united in a common task. That's what it means to be the church. It's like that's the journey we've been on, that's the things we've experienced, that's what we know down in the depth of our being.

15. Year one has been lived, has been done. The effect of men and women's decision to live this year is incalculable. I mean it's like this. Do you remember in Patton the scene where several men are gathered around a tank with a map, and they all look sort of confused and don't know what to do? Then all of a sudden the camera

switches across the river and you hear, "Commander, what are you doing?" And they all say, "It's Patton!" And he says, "What's the problem over there?" They say, "Sir, we can't get across the river." He says, "Listen, you move three hundred yards to the right and move these tanks across this river right now...and put your helmet on!" And all three times I saw that movie the commander put his helmet on, wrapped up the map, jumped in and took off. And by the time the tenth tank went across the river, the guys were saying "What was the holdup anyway? Why didn't we do this in the first place?"

16. And that's exactly what's happened in the local church. It's the decision of that first body of people to step across the river. By the time, the fourth wave of churches come, there won't even be a question about which way you need to go. That's where we are. You know, year one is taken. That's been lived, not just lived through, but LIVED; not without blood and sweat and tears, but it's been lived and it's been done.

17. The question now is the future. There it is--1976, 2007, or whatever date you want to use. The question now is our decision to move on, to continue on, to forge ahead, to jump the next river. It's like when we reach 1976 you're going to look down on some corner somewhere, and there's going to be some local church that's reconstructed, and it'll not only be one corner but it will be several corners. And everybody in the church will have to deal with the fact that a body of people decided to renew the local congregation. Everybody else in the church then can just make a decision about it themselves, whether they want to or not.

18. The amazing thing about that for me is that once you've done that or once you know that, it's not a time for pride. It's a time for gratitude. It's a time for singing the praises of the Lord. You didn't do anything. By the grace of the Lord, huh, we've lived the first year, and the future stands before us. That's done, that's finished.

19. With that let us pray together a prayer of gratitude. Oh thou great mystery whom we call Father, who has given us our lives and shall at some future moment take them from us, we give thee thanks for the journey to the present moment, for the heritage of the saints and martyrs and the church of the past and for the promise of the future. We pray thee to continue with us and allow us thy continued favor. Give us courage and confidence and obedience and endurance. We pray through the one whose very being was the style of faith made flesh, even Jesus the Christ our Lord. Amen.

--John Bengel