

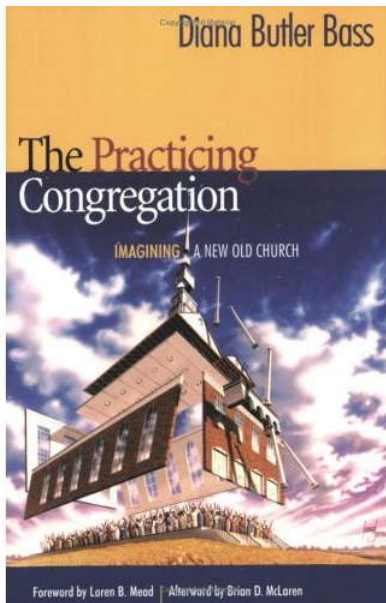
Book Review

The Practicing Congregation: Imagining a New Old Church

By Diana Butler Bass

Forward by Loren B. Mead, Afterword by Brian D. McLaren
Herndon, Virginia: The Alban Institute © 2004.

126 pages, including footnotes and discussion questions.



The bookshelves groan under the weight of historical and social science studies that analyze the predicament of mainline denominations in North America. The same bookshelves are crushed under the weight of leadership books that promise that their pages will help the reader re-invent their congregation. What we seem to be short on, however, are studies that describe the nature of mainline congregations that have emerged out of this predicament to become something new and vital for today's age.

Diana Butler Bass' book, *The Practicing Congregation*, is such a book. As she states in her introduction, the book "does not argue that mainline churches should change. Rather, it argues that mainline churches are changing and have already changed". She calls this new kind of mainline congregation "the practicing congregation"

This is not a "how to" book. Rather it is the story of an emerging trend in mainline congregations who have begun to take seriously the making of meaning in their congregational life by choosing to become highly intentional about how they will practice church. Based on a wide survey of a very diverse group of congregations, Bass highlights the nature of this growing cohort of congregations that have been becoming more numerous since about 1990. These congregations are characterized by: moderate to liberal theology, a focus on spiritual authenticity, an acceptance of pluralism, a faith life rooted in community, and a discomfort with the culture of the wider society. These congregations, seeking to re-discover their core meaning, have tended to reach back into their tradition to re-traditionalize themselves in a way that brings greater vitality to the congregation. What Bass has found emerging in these practicing congregations is not one common form of church, but rather a rich mosaic of understandings and practices which speak to the particularity and creativity of each individual intentional church. Along the way Bass sets her findings in the context of an excellent, straightforward overview of the historic experience of the American Mainline Church in the 20th century and the observations of sociologists of religion over the last generation.

Of particular note is Bass' helpful description of the function of tradition. She argues for an understanding that brings tradition and change into dialogue in a way that is able to again reappropriate what is valued from our roots in a way that enlivens in a relevant way today. For Bass this is substantially the inspiration for these practicing congregations. This is not only a helpful idea for traditional congregations that are

considering change, but also a very practical approach. In this regard Bass is helping us see that there are a number of mainline congregations that are actually putting into practice the idea of “Ancient Future Faith” that has been highlighted more in theory by authors such as Leonard Sweet and Robert Webber. This book also captures in a more general way the impact intentionality can have in the life of a congregation, which is illustrated more specifically by the missional church movement (being led by The Gospel and Our Culture Network) and publications on intentional spirituality such as the works of Dorothy Bass, Dallas Willard and Craig Dykstra.

Bass makes it very clear that congregations that adopt a practicing habit are not doing this as a church growth strategy. Indeed, these congregations eschew market-driven models of congregational life. Yet she notes that in the focused desire to appreciate and practice a growing authenticity, many of these congregations are experiencing growth as a by-product. It would appear that this intentionality in church life is finding an appeal among some church seekers.

This is a very, very hopeful book. In a readable form, it provides a body of evidence that the mainline church is finding a renewed well-being. It sparks the imagination of the reader in what may be possible even in the reader’s own congregation. This is a very important book for clergy and congregational leaders to read and digest. For those who want to go further after reading this book, look to “From Nomads to Pilgrims: Stories from Practicing Congregations” (edited by Bass and published by Alban).

After a few decades of confusion about its very nature, the new mainline church seems to be appearing. This book is highly recommended for anyone who wants to understand its look and would like to join the pilgrimage.

The book’s introduction is on-line at the Alban website:
http://www.alban.org/pdf/chapters/Intro_AL295.pdf

The website for the Project on Congregations of Intentional Practice can be found at:
<http://www.practicingcongregations.org/>

Peter Coutts, for the Centre for Clergy Care and Congregational Health © 2006

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