

The Systems That are Congregations
A Document written by Taylor Burton-Edwards for a Google Discussion group,
followed by a personal e mail exchange
between Taylor Burton-Edwards and Marcy H. Nicholas

A Note of Introduction from Marcy H. Nicholas, Ordained Elder, UMC

Taylor Burton-Edwards is the Director of Worship for the UMC through the General Board of Discipleship, based in Nashville. Since last March, I have been in conversation with Taylor about the system that we call the congregation. This conversation began when I returned from an evangelism conference. I am a UM pastor of two small churches, and after this conference, I wanted to do some door to door work in my community, just to introduce myself and the church and hand out a brochure and a UM tract. I was lamenting the fact that no one in my church wanted to do this with me, and Taylor said that basically congregations are not set up for evangelism. I was stunned because if congregations don't do evangelism, than what institution does. Thus began an ongoing conversation in many venues between myself and Taylor about congregational systems, church history, discipleship, worship, and more. What follows is Taylor's understanding of the system that we call a congregation. And that understanding is followed by an extensive email conversation that Taylor and I had in December as sort of a follow up to this piece.

So you do need to read this before the email conversation. Please notice the distinction Taylor makes between congregations and church and between the ideas of exclusivity and inclusivity. In general, what Taylor is saying is that there was a time when congregations were what we might call intentional faith communities, but that time passed away 1400 years ago. Unfortunately, seminaries, certain scholars, judicatories, and even laypeople are still hanging on to this notion that congregations can be that intentional (monastic-like) institution and that the leaders of the church—seminaries, professors, pastors, and judicatories—are supposed to try continuously to turn them into such institutions, when the truth of the matter is, we will be hitting our heads against the proverbial wall, time and time again. What Taylor says here can maybe liberate us from injuring ourselves further and can help us start thinking about (1). directing congregations to do better what they do well (the four competencies) and then (2). creating those possibilities for lay Christians who do want to pursue the Christian life more seriously.

The Systems that are Congregation by Taylor Burton-Edwards

The congregational format of Christian community is not designed and has not been designed now for at least 1400 years in most places in the West to produce significant spiritual growth or discipleship by the majority of its participants.

This doesn't mean that church-- which I understand to be a larger term that embraces all forms of Christian community-- cannot do this. It means congregations are not and have not been designed, by and large, for the last 1400 years, to do that well. Basically, since the sixth century in the West, the church has primarily offered two (and really only two) serious pathways for intensive formation and deployment of disciples in the mission of Jesus Christ: preparation for ordained ministry and monastic orders.

That wasn't always the case. The three-year catechumenate, still affirmed as a basic norm at Nicea in 325, was providing such intensive formation for everyone who sought baptism. But by the sixth century, unless you lived at the fringes of the former Western empire, there really were no converts because, presumably, everyone was admitted near the time of birth via baptism. You did still have some sort of doctrinal formation (catechesis reduced to being able to answer certain doctrinal questions and recite the creeds) correlated with what would later be known as confirmation. But that hardly substitutes for what the catechumenate had been.

Combined with that, before Christianity became THE legal religion of the Empire (late 4th century, the work of Theodosius, not Constantine!), its worship was not a public ritual at all. You couldn't just wander in and expect to be welcomed. Indeed, in many places there were deacons whose job was to "bounce" such wanderers who didn't have the proper letters of recommendation. The church was a fairly closed society-- not secret (like the mystery cults), but also not open to all UNLESS they had first completed the catechumenate. While Christianity was this more or less closed society, accountability to live the way of Jesus begun in the catechumenate could be continued in its life in a number of ways (and was, from all records). In other words, you didn't enter easily, and you didn't stay in full communion easily.

Going public necessarily changed that. When you are THE public religion, then everyone HAS to be able to get in and stay in with less difficulty. Accountability shifted from the laity (including the clergy) to primarily the clergy. Processes developed for the laity to work out their conflicts with each other became shifted to the domain of the clergy alone, the precursors of the Roman Curia. Formation became more "after the fact" than preparatory, and more about being more or less on the same page morally and theologically as everyone else. The reshaping of the congregation from a close-knit community seeking to grow and minister in the name of Christ to THE public religious institution in most places simply necessitated such changes. Discipleship and spiritual growth in any intense way would be the realm of the clergy, the monks/nuns and those called saints-- no longer the basic expectation of all who practiced or participated in the (now public) rituals of the Christian faith.

Before Christianity became THE public religion, the congregation as such had four basic "institutional" structures:

- a) Worship-- not open to all
- b) Catechesis-- serious formation for all comers in the way of Jesus first, doctrine later
- c) Charity-- care for the poor, the sick, prisoners, widows, etc.
- d) Reconciliation-- processes for working out conflicts within the community

After Christianity became THE public religion, the congregation as such also had four basic institutional structures, but they were a bit different:

- a) Worship-- now public, open essentially to all comers who hadn't violated public norms and so gotten themselves excommunicated
- b) Teaching Basic Doctrine-- primarily, the Nicene Creed and its attendant doctrines through worship and a modified post-baptismal catechesis
- c) Pastoral Care (which included charity-- though much of this was actually done by the monastics more than the congregations)
- d) Being a good institutional player in the local community (maker of connections, influencer of decisions of other sources of power)

Note, the congregation as a congregation shifted its basic institutional competencies. That shift was a shift away from every participant living as a disciple of Jesus engaged in God's mission. It was a shift toward that function being reserved to monastics and clergy, by and large, plus the VERY occasional "saint" (who was often either a monastic or clergy or both).

That didn't mean the church as such-- in the largest sense-- quit forming disciples and deploying them accountably in Christ's mission. It did mean the church as church didn't do this primarily through the congregational format of Christian community-- but rather through monasteries, clergy orders, and, later, societies. It also meant the number of people connected to the church went up (presumably nearly everyone in the former empire), while the percentage of those people who were active disciples of Jesus plummeted.

So, congregations haven't been focused on making disciples and deploying them in God's mission as a basic norm of participation in the community called congregation for about 1400 years.

Meanwhile, other forms of Christian community HAVE had that sort of focus over time. These include a number of the monastic orders, a number of the "societies" and "guilds" related to but not controlled by congregations that began forming in the 13th century, and later, organizations such as the class meetings and societies of the Methodists in England and North America (mid to late 18th century in England, pre 1784 in North America), and, today, groups such as Emmaus and Cursillo 4th Day groups, campus ministries, and even some other "parachurch ministries," missionary support groups (like United Methodist Women among United Methodists) and house churches, in a way.

Who in what structures can accomplish what best? The Wesleys figured out that no amount of coaxing English congregations to produce folks who were growing in holiness of heart and life was going to catch on. It just made congregations really mad. They also caught on that societies per se didn't work. It was the class meeting-- those smaller bands of sisters and brothers of 9-12 people each-- where real accountability and real growth could begin to take place. The people in these groups he required, as a point of entry and continued membership into the society, to maintain a vital connection to a congregation ALSO. He understood, at least before 1784, that the full expression of church wasn't EITHER the society/class meeting OR the congregation, but BOTH/AND. I want to believe he continued to believe that Methodists in North America would find some way to keep the systems of society and congregation functioning in parallel, but I'd argue the rules of systemic inertia won out once the societies became, in effect, full service congregations-- something THEY were not designed to do or be. So what you got was over-functioning to accommodate the demands of functioning now as congregations, and steadily increasing under-functioning of the former societies and their emphasis on accountable disciple formation and deployment.

That our congregations, as we have them retain some of their "discipling DNA" (even if in a necessarily recessive form) is part of why we think we might still expect what are now thoroughly congregations, intended to be open to all who want to join with few expectations we'll follow up on, might still have the capacity to form disciples, too. I'd argue they don't. We're glommed in structure and confused in mind. We can and should re-differentiate these things. The results will be far better with far less conflict.

This is the email exchange between myself and Taylor Burton-Edwards. You will find my original email below, followed by Taylor's responses, in which he has cut and paste my original questions.

From Marcy Nicholas to Taylor Burton-Edwards:

Since the system of the church has been what it is for 1400 years, then I would love to hear how you would structure the Christian congregation community. The committees that we have in the UM system, as I read them through the lens of your information, are really trying to hang onto that DNA of the first 600 years of Christianity, which it can't do, those Nurture, Outreach, Witness slices. It seems to me that based on the four competencies you outlined, we should have:

1. a worship committee or team, to make worship as high quality as possible
2. Some kind of Christian Formation experience for the young, for confirmands, for new members, for professing Christians, and something ongoing perhaps (what that would look like--I don't necessarily mean even weekly bible studies, but maybe refresher courses on theology, sacraments, etc.) I wonder how you understand courses such as Disciple Bible Study fitting in here for instance.
3. a pastoral care team--not sure if we mean the same thing here--but I'm assuming, visitation of shut-ins, hospital, weddings, funerals, not so much mission and outreach, except maybe to fund missionaries, supply needs for foodbanks. I remember you saying something about Bishop Schanse's risk-taking mission, that you don't think congregations are really equipped to do this. However, some presence in the community to know when people are in need and where they can be helped for instance.
4. Some kind of networking committee--to point people in the right directions

Plus of course SPRC, Trustees, and Finance.

And then three other issues:

1. The issue of leadership or training leaders. When I asked about books on leadership to read with the laity and you wondered why a pastor would want to do that, were you implying that there's no point to developing leaders in a congregation? Or that congregations are not the place where this happens?
2. The issue of growth. Of course, in every conference, Bishops and cabinets want pastors to "grow" their churches. How do you understand growth based on what you've been saying about the history of congregations? How do congregations grow based on this framework?
3. And finally, I'm rereading Peterson's *The Contemplative Pastor*. I would say that he is certainly not looking through church systems with the same lens that you are. It seems that there is still this incredible disjuncture between what the church has been, as you say,

for 1400 years, and those others, such as Peterson, Nouwen, Lathrop, Brueggemann, who are still relying on that monastic tradition or at least an understanding that congregations can be intentional faith communities.

From Taylor Burton-Edwards to Marcy Nicholas

MN wrote: Since the system of the church has been what it is for 1400 years, then I would love to hear how you would structure the Christian congregation community. The committees that we have in the UM system, as I read them through the lens of your information, are really trying to hang onto that DNA of the first 600 years of Christianity,

TB responds: *Right. Methodism itself-- the societies/class meeting/bands-- was embodying these elements of real, face to face nurture in the faith, accountable outreach and bold witness very well. Congregations, not so much. So we've got this corporate memory that we, as Methodists, SHOULD be doing all these things, but we've misplaced the expectation that these things would realistically happen onto structures that, in effect, never have done this sort of things well (unless, that is, we're talking about those congregations that have continued to live as more or less accountable societies since they were or chose to be on the fringes of dominant culture).*

MN Wrote: which it can't do, those Nurture, Outreach, Witness slices. It seems to me that based on the four competencies you outlined, we should have:

MN Wrote: 1. a worship committee or team, to make worship as high quality as possible

TBE responds:

Yes-- particularly a worship planning team with a strong grounding in helping congregational worship be its very best, hitting all five "slices" of what congregational worship is for-- worship that is Sacramental, Liturgical, Indigenous, Connected, and Embodied. When I do "Passionate Worship" workshops, I tell folks to start with the SLICE or SLICES where their current strengths are, and build out or add on from there. The goal over time is to get all five.

MN wrote: 2. Some kind of Christian Formation experience for the young, for confirmands, for new members, for professing Christians, and something ongoing perhaps (what that would look like--I don't necessarily mean even weekly bible studies, but maybe refresher courses on theology, sacraments, etc.) I wonder how you understand courses such as Disciple Bible Study fitting in there for instance—

TBE responds:

What I note in the presentations I make on this is that in effect what happened among Methodists in North America at least is we picked up the Soteriologically-focused teaching of the Societies initially, and taught that rather well for a time (though, by not focusing this on the creeds, since Wesley deleted that article, we in effect taught this outside the context of a larger theological grounding), but that by the end of the 19th century that essentially began fading into the background as well, so that, in effect, we've not been teaching theology in any intensive way now for about a century or so. It seems to me that the congregational format is compatible with teaching basic theology to all-- and less competent in teaching "practical soteriology" (the working out of our salvation), but that the societies/class meetings/bands did that piece rather well. So in effect, we're at a place now where we need to reconstruct both. As for Disciple, I think it does a decent job of re-introducing folks to scripture and some basic biblical theology. It's valuable in that way. The trouble with it, of course, is that folks tend to get stuck on studying and being part of that group rather than focused on living the faith or following Jesus themselves. It can be a good first step to something more-- but that something more needs to be more clearly identified beyond another Disciple study-- perhaps something like a Covenant Discipleship Group. AND I think that something more needs to be defined beyond the congregation as such-- which is what I see Elaine and Scott talking about.

(Here, Taylor is referring to Longing for Spring: A New Vision for Wesleyan Community by Elaine Heath and Scott Kisker about the new monastic movement in the UMC.)

MN wrote:

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TBE responds:

Right, this function really is about caring for each other within the local congregation, primarily. That doesn't mean outreach projects are excluded-- but I think that means they likely belong more in the bailiwick of #4, being a good institutional player, than #3, some system of mutual care.

MN writes: Some kind of networking committee--to point people in the right directions

TBE responds:

Networking would be part of the role of this group/function (I don't think this is necessarily a defined group per se, but rather an identification of a function that perhaps a variety of groups seek to carry out-- as is true of the other three). The larger mission is being a reliable institutional player in the local community. That includes being a good "corporate citizen" and "steward" of the institutional assets of the congregation. "Societies" and "classes" might be involved in "hands-on, face to face" care with persons who are struggling. The congregation would be involved in helping create and sustain community-wide safety nets, "systems of care." But those systems of care are not exclusively related to the poor-- could include cooperatives for the arts, for neighborhood improvement, all sorts of things that enhance the life of a larger community.

MN writes: And then three other issues

1. The issue of leadership or training leaders. When I asked you about books on leadership to read with the laity and you wondered why a pastor would want to do that, were you implying that there's no point to developing leaders in a congregation? Or that congregations are not the place where this happens?

TBE writes:

My reticence has to do with "leaders for what?" Yes, pastors of congregations should work at developing leadership for the institution they're charged with administering, no question. But they shouldn't confuse that with forming disciples, as if the two are necessarily synonymous. For congregational leaders, the underlying tool set, I think, is systems work, a la Friedman. The folks you work with may have all kinds of talent, but they won't be able to use that to get things done well inside a congregational system unless they really get systems skills into their toolkit. All that said, we still do have some obligation, if we're going to be Methodist friendly, to develop folks for leadership in making disciples as well. And that's a different skill-set. Some systems stuff, too, but far more focus on helping groups live out covenant concretely.

MN writes:

The issue of growth. Of course, in every conference, Bishops and cabinets want pastors to "grow" their churches. How do you understand growth based on what you've been saying about the history of congregations? How do congregations grow based on this framework?

TBE responds:

Congregations grow in their capacity, not necessarily in their numbers (especially where there just aren't that many people to begin with). That is, congregations that are getting better at all four areas of core competency are in a congregational growth mode. Those that aren't are in stagnation or decline AS congregations. Methodist-friendly congregations ALSO can measure and describe the growth happening to people and communities because folks are "referred out" to groups where accountability and personal growth/missional engagement happen hands on.

MN writes: And finally, I'm rereading Peterson's *The Contemplative Pastor*. I would say that he is certainly not looking through church systems with the same lens that you are. It seems that there is still this incredible disjuncture between what the church has been, as you say, for 1400 years, and those others, such as Peterson, Nouwen, Lathrop, Brueggemann, who are still relying on that monastic tradition or at least an understanding that congregations can be intentional faith communities.

TBE writes:

With God all things are possible... but not all things are, with us, equally likely. Peterson, Lathrop, Brueggemann and Hauerwas all live under the delusion that congregations as such can and should look like the early church. My point is precisely that that is a delusion. It's not a delusion that the ministry of the church as a system/network might look like that, taken as a whole, but it is a delusion, again unless the congregation lives at the fringes, that the congregation as a public institutional system can, itself, do now what "congregations" pre-6th century were doing. They're fundamentally different animals in very different habitats. We have to respect that. It's a "failure of nerve" (not to mention a category error) not to.

MN writes:

How does one overcome this idea that the congregation can do all and be all? Maybe we are dying because we are trying to pay attention to too much, instead of these four competencies.

TBE responds:

You might share "Longing for Spring"...

Here's what I think about congregations, though. I think they know in their guts that all this emphasis on attendance and discipleship generally gets them nowhere. I'd think if you went in and said "Let's be the best congregation we can be together" and then talked about things they know how to do well (the four areas, probably the weakest of which is teaching basic theology), and strengthening those, and then adding elements where they're not up to speed yet, that would cut out a lot of anxiety about "being a dying congregation" and really give them some energy to focus on doing well with who they are and what they have. It would also help them relax enough to quit overfunctioning and allow others (such as missional or discipleship groups outside the congregation per se) to be partners in ministry with them.

Now, there will likely be a few there, and who knows where they might be in the congregation's authority structure, that have bought the company line about the "urgent need to overfunction" because "the local church is where it's ALL at" and expect you to do the same. But my strong hunch is that, realistically, most folks really do know better. They've just been operating inside a system that doesn't yet.

MN writes: But then what do you do with that mission statement about "making disciples for the transformation of the world..." They hear this over and over again,

TBE responds:

Yes, that IS the mission of the church-- as a whole-- the network.

Congregations are PART of that. The statement that they are the primary venue where that happens is factually, even statistically, mistaken.

Every time I've asked groups to identify where they experienced a deep transformation in their discipleship to Jesus, the vast majority (2/3 to 80%) have indicated this has happened in a context OTHER than the congregation per se. So it's not like the congregation can't do this entirely. But clearly, it's not terribly efficient to focus the energy there.

MN writes:

Would your answer about the mission of the church as a whole be the same regarding the membership vows, that these vows are taken in light of the whole church not just the congregation?

TBE responds:

Yes and no on the vows.

Yes, in the sense that I think these vows do apply to the whole church, not just the congregation.

No, in that I think the entity that can actually help folks live these is NOT a congregation, but something more like a class meeting as part of a Methodist society. And our version of professing membership is really more compatible with what membership in a Methodist Society used to be (pre 1784) than what membership in a congregation is. Baptized membership actually corresponds more closely to what congregational membership can realistically be and do.