

What Kind of Church is THAT?

Rev. Dr. Michael Piazza

Foundation Sunday, November 18, 2018

I Corinthians 3:10-17/ Matthew 25:31-41

I'm fascinated by church architecture. I love to drive by a church and guess their denomination and a little about the who the congregation really is.

Architecture had a great deal to do with my coming here. I visited New Canaan often after we hired Philip Johnson to be the architect at the Cathedral of Hope. He was 90, so it was easier and cheaper for me to come here.



When Shannon, our executive presbyter and one of my doctoral students at Hartford Seminary, asked if I'd consider being your interim, I drove by on my way home from Hartford to Manhattan. I was surprised to find a modern structure in such a traditional New England town.

I sat outside for a long time wondering, "What kind of church inhabits this building?" The contemporary nature suggests the building houses a church that is less rigid and more relevant to the 21st century.



Of course, I noticed the rainbow flag. It wasn't hung well, but it looked like it had been there a while. So, I assumed inclusion was not a new value here.

When I got home, I checked out your website, which is the first thing anyone does when considering coming to a church for the first time. I went to the page about who you were and was excited to read:

Our Mission is to
LIVE SPIRITUALLY,
LOVE INCLUSIVELY,
LEARN CONTINUOUSLY, and
LEAVE A LEGACY

That is great! Under the heading "LIVE SPIRITUALLY" it says:

As a cathedral for the human spirit we strive to enrich the spiritual and cultural life of our community. We believe that all of life is a theater for the Glory of God. We celebrate the interconnectedness of the sacred and the secular, outstanding music and liturgy, an expansive Choir School, and innovative dramatic and visual arts.

Now, THAT is the kind of church I want to be a part of! Of course, I may have misunderstood the part about "drama" ...

Under "LOVE INCLUSIVELY" you wrote:

*As a congregation of inclusivity, we strive to **welcome all people** into the life of our church. We are a friendly caring church where all people are always welcomed, and differences are celebrated and respected.*

Under LEARN CONTINUOUSLY it says:

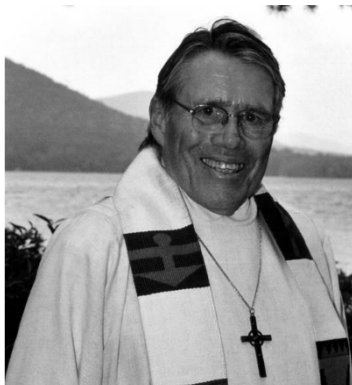
As a center for progressive Christianity we strive to nurture the development of resilient faith and noble values from earliest childhood, through adolescence, to mature adulthood. We are "a thinking person's church."

A center for progressive Christianity. Did you know that I am the founder of an organization called *The Center for Progressive Renewal*?

The section LEAVE A LEGACY says:

As a catalyst for social change we strive to make a meaningful difference in the world and leave it a better place than we found it... We seek to be the hands and heart of God, loving others by sharing our time, talents, and resources, as well as creating just social structures.

When I read all of that on the website, I was excited about being a part of this church's future. Perhaps I was naïve, but I believed you meant what you said. Fifty years ago yesterday, we laid the cornerstone for this building. This design expresses well the kind of church the website describes. Of course, I read the history of this church and found that inspiring.



Founding pastor Guthrie Speers's obituary says that he was, "a great voice for justice decency and humanity," and that he was "deeply involved in social issues, joining the marches in Washington and Selma, advocating for civil and women's rights, speaking against the Vietnam War, and pushing for equal rights for gays."

This made it sound like this was a church whose DNA was to be engaged in progressive values, building civil society, and working on the contemporary moral issues of our day.

With the contemporary building, the rainbow flag, the founding pastor's leadership, and your amazingly progressive statement on the website, I was excited to join you.

So, here we are, six months later. What do you think I've discovered after actually being here? Do we live out who our building, history, and vision statement say we are?

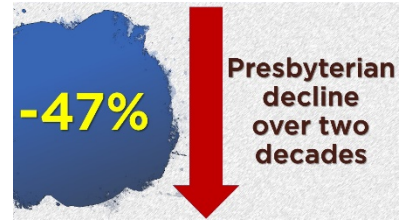
The critical questions we are trying to answer now are, "If that is **really** who we are, what should that look like in the 21st century?" and "What does progressive Christianity look like in New Canaan, Connecticut now and in the future?"

Or have we decided to abandon this identity and just haven't taken down the website?

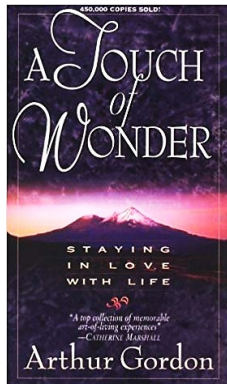
- Does the way our rainbow flag hangs indicate how we really feel about radical inclusion?
- Have we changed our mind about our worship being contemporary, relevant, lively, and inclusive?
- Do we still advocate for the marginalized and oppressed like Guthrie challenged us to do?
- Is this a place where we might be challenged to do justice, love mercifully, and walk humbly with God?

I don't know the answer to those questions, but I can tell you that how we answer them will decide the future of this church *and* if this church has a future.

Fully half of mainline churches in this country are likely to close in the next 20 years because they are boring and irrelevant. The other half will find an energized, passionate faith that attracts the next generation that wants to join a community determined to change the world. **Which will WE be?**



Will we be the kind of place our children and grandchildren need and want, or does “legacy” simply mean keeping the church alive long enough to have our funeral?



As some of you know I grew up on the coast of Georgia. Most of my family still live there. Perhaps that is why I love Arthur Gordon's book “A Touch of Wonder.” It is a semi-biographical tale of rearing his children on the marshes of intercoastal Georgia. It has been at least 30 years since I read the book, but one story that stuck with me all this time is his description of one Saturday afternoon. This is how I remember it:

Gordan's wife had gone shopping, and, soon, their three young kids were clamoring for something to do. He resisted, wanting to watch football, but they harassed him until he agreed to take them in their small boat across to a small uninhabited island.



The boat was hardly on the sand before the two older girls and younger boy were off in search of adventure. Bounding along with them was their Shetland sheepdog. Soon, they all heard the dog barking and ran to see what he had found.

The dog barked at a great loon that was stranded and covered with oil. Clearly, the loon had dived into the water after a fish and come up in an oil slick that now covered her wings.



"Daddy," asked the middle girl, "will she be alright?" Gordon knew the bird would either starve or become a meal for some other animal, but he didn't want to say that. "Daddy we have to do something."

"Like what?" said Gordan.

"We have to clean her off," and, without waiting, the kids ran off to the boat to see what they could find.

Soon they were back with a towel and some rags, but, after getting bitten and scratched several times each, they discovered they weren't doing any good.

"Daddy we have to take her back to the house and clean her there."

"I don't think there is room in the boat for us, a dog, and a thrashing bird."

"But we have to try" they said as a trio. So, Gordan threw the towel over the great bird's head and wrestled it into the boat.

When they got home, Gordan was glad his wife was not home because he knew she would have killed him if she saw an oil-soaked bird in her clean, white bathtub. Still, with a combination of water, rags, and various elixirs, they managed to get most of the oil off. Gordan was convinced that it was the blood from the scratches and bites on their hands that did most of the cleaning.

Finally, he put the towel back over the bird and got it, the kids, and the dog all back in the boat. When they got to the little island, they set the loon free. She stood for a few minutes, preening her feathers back in place, and then set off swimming out to a sand dune where other birds were gathering for the night.

The two girls ran off to play, but Dana, the youngest, stood there with his father watching the loon. Slowly, Dana took his father's hand and said, "Daddy, she would have died, wouldn't she?"

Gordan replied gently, "Yes Dana, she would have died."

After a long pause the little boy said almost in a whisper, "And to think, we almost didn't come."

I tell you this story for two reasons. First, although New Canaan may not have many starving or homeless people, half of our town has no church home. Their bodies may be well fed, but their souls may be withering. Without us, there are people who have no welcoming spiritual home. They are homeless, starving for hope, community, and purpose.

Today's Gospel lesson is a judgement story. Sheep and goats are separated, rewarded and punished based on how they treat those Jesus called "the least."



The truth is there is plenty of the goat in us all. We are both sheep and goat. So, it isn't that God will separate THEM and send THEM to hell fire and us to heaven; I think this is Jesus' promise that, someday, the goat part of us will be burned away and the good sheep part will be welcomed home by God.



The other reason I tell you this story is, well, the other day as I was struggling, lonely and uncertain, I felt the hand of God reach down to me, and I noticed that hand was covered with scratches and bites. I am certain that some of them were mine.