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The Church as Learning Organization
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Church. We hear the word and we may think of mainline denominations or independent groups, or the people among whom we gather. We may think of the work being done in the community by a specific group, among those unable to help themselves, for example. A simple word, yet not without the power to elicit extremes of emotion from intense joy to unconcealed aversion to unveiled disinterest. I know that the church is the body of believers worldwide and so much greater than the relatively small group of people gathered in that particular building just around that particular corner. For me, however, it is that group which comes to mind when I think of the word “Church,” as well as the many other such gatherings that I have been a part of over time, in the various places where I have lived.

I’ve been involved with “the church” for as long as I can remember. It’s what my family did on Sundays; where we went. So as a child, we got dressed in our “Sunday clothes” and headed off to Sunday School or when I was older, Sunday Service. But it was not only Sundays. It was Friday evening youth meetings; Thursday night choir practice; tea parties, Fairs, Easter and Christmas programs and practices; setting aside clothes and food for those in need; hosting at our home people from faraway places; helping our mother bake for yet another event. Church was/is a significant part of who I was/am.

But what of those emotions I first mentioned. Over the years, I’ve run the gamut from elation at being there to questioning why the world isn’t a better place and so, doubting the relevance of the church in a messed-up world, and wondering why on earth I was there. I’ve thrown myself into its activities and programs. I’ve walked away many times, disappointed and dejected, always hoping for more, much more. Convinced that more was possible. Convinced that more should be expected. So, I’ve swung from being in the thick of things to observing longingly from the periphery, until I’ve finally come to accept that the periphery is not where I belong. I cannot leave. No, I will not leave. But, why do I stay?

It’s true. One’s belief system, the lenses through which one views the world, colors everything, consciously or not. So, what in my worldview leads me to stay? At a time when attendance, membership and involvement in churches are dwindling, particularly in the mainstream denominations, such as the one to which I belong (the United Methodist Church), why have I chosen to remain? What is it that I believe?

Faith and doctrine aside, I believe in community. I believe in personal interaction. I believe in dialogue. I believe that change is possible.

I believe that as individuals or groups of individuals with a common vision interact, as they talk with and among each other and share information, knowledge is created, meaning becomes clearer, learning takes place and, as a consequence, more and better can be accomplished.

This is not a utopia. I believe it is not only a desirable goal, but an achievable one. It does not happen overnight, but is in a constant state of creating itself. And, the place where this can take place, the place where more and better can be accomplished has been described as the learning organization. I believe that the church has the makings of a learning organization.
The term was coined by Peter Senge (1990), who describes the learning organization as a community “where people continually expand their capacity to create results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together.” Senge emphasized that the success in becoming and growing as a learning organization was derived from developing specific capabilities. So, what are these capabilities? They include:

- Building a shared vision, necessary for learning to take place.
- A commitment by the individuals to continual learning and to creating what is important.
- A willingness to examine and challenge the existing belief and value systems of both individuals and the organization.
- A commitment to team learning where groups of people interact and dialogue and work together.
- Insight that change can take place as we impact and are impacted by our environment.

I believe that these capabilities already exist within the community called the church: nascent in some; neglected in others, their value unrecognized; intentionally thrown out in many. The church is a community involved in very specific work. This community called the church is built on a set of shared meanings that are intimately bound up with the practice of the work itself, the purpose that the work serves and for whom, and with the ongoing development of its individual members. I contend that as the church pays attention to and develops these capabilities, significant positive change within our environments can be expected.

So, if I believe that the church is capable of effecting exponential change, which I do, why have I walked away many times, disappointed and dejected, hoping for more, demanding more. The answer is always the same: people, other people. Huge egos, small dreams, square pegs in round holes, lacking knowledge, not committed to the mission, not clear about the vision, too different. These are just some of my reasons. I could continue, but the answer remains: people.

The problem with that answer is that I am one of those people. To someone else, I know that I am one of those “other people,” getting in the way of change taking place, getting in the way of dialogue so knowledge and meaning could be created, getting in the way of more and better being achieved. So now, I stay. I stay because I believe and have come to accept (not without struggle) that misunderstanding and even not understanding at all, are also part of the process of making meaning, part of the process of making a difference. And, that if knowledge is socially constructed, if making meaning requires social interaction, and if this is who the church is—a group of peculiar people, with peculiar personalities and peculiar experiences, never coerced but choosing to remain among each other—then I must accept the thorns with the roses.

Truth be told, the thorns are necessary. They affirm and confirm that the hard work of smoothing out the rough edges is taking place and that over time, increasing degrees of beauty will emerge. So, I choose to stay. I choose to be a part of this caring, fickle, supportive, adversarial, seemingly amorphous group. Where there is a shared vision, where existing beliefs and values are being challenged and learning encouraged and supported, then change will occur. I choose to stay for the promise of that more which I know is possible.

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