

God at the center: What's church about?

by [Anthony B. Robinson](#) in the [April 6, 2010](#) issue

At a church leadership retreat, a tall man with a mustache and red suspenders stands up and says, “Several of us here find ourselves wondering if our church is still God-centered. It seems to us something’s missing.” At another retreat, a woman blurts out, “But what do we believe? That’s what I want to know.” Others in her group seem unnerved by her comment, as if an unwritten rule of discourse has been violated. But a few moments later, another woman adds, “Yes, I sometimes feel we’re not sure who we are or what we believe.”

I lead leadership retreats, and I often hear concerns about identity and belief. Sometimes the questions are framed more broadly. “How do all the programs or activities that we do as a church fit together?” or “What’s the center?” At one session, part of an exploration of one congregation’s strengths and needs, a middle-aged woman ventured, “I’m not sure I quite know how to say this, but I think what we are longing for is the experience of God’s presence.”

In a Minnesota congregation, people over 60 or 70 seemed comfortable with the church being a hub of social activities and community service. Those under 40, however, had been drawn to the church by a new pastor. They expressed a desire to talk “about God, about spiritual things.” One man said he would like to be able to speak with others in the congregation about his experience of prayer but lamented that “somehow that seems off limits here.”

It can take courage to say “I’m not sure we know what we believe” or “I wonder if our church is God-centered.” After all, these are basic issues of core beliefs as well as the basis for belonging to a particular congregation. Perhaps one way to describe what is going on is to observe that ethics—how we are to live, act and treat one another—sometimes becomes separated from theology, our beliefs about and experience of God, or that ethics trumps theology, reducing Christianity to being and doing good.

A slightly different way to put it is to say that salvation has been reframed as a sociological reality, rather than a theological one. Salvation is seen as having to do with being or becoming a particular kind of community or society. There's little explicitly said about who God is, what God has done or is doing, or what difference the latter makes.

How might congregations and their leaders respond to the concerns I have heard expressed? How might they put God at the center of the church? I offer some suggestions based on my own experience as a congregational leader and on my observation of lively, mainline congregations where God is at the center and informs vital ministries of service and public witness.

At Plymouth Church (UCC) in Seattle a series known as "Faith Journeys" has become a popular part of the summer menu. Each Sunday, for eight or ten weeks, one person is invited to talk about his or her faith journey. These members of the congregation are invited to reflect on their experience of God's presence in their life and God's absence, the people and events who have shaped or inspired their faith most, and the faith convictions they affirm and those with which they struggle. The series began with two questions: Would members of the congregation be willing to give such talks and would anyone come to hear them? Both questions found not just an affirmative answer, but an enthusiastic one. Moreover, in discussion following a person's "testimony," the responses tended to be less on the order of "I agree/disagree" and more "What you said spoke to me" or "touched me." The tenor of discussion was less head than heart.

This Seattle congregation was recovering the practice of testimony. Lillian Daniel has written about how a congregation she served decided that there would be "no more God-less announcements." If someone had something to say in worship it would need to have something, somehow, to do with God. While few mainline congregations may use the word *testimony*, they may still practice it when they invite people to speak about how they have experienced God's presence in their lives and in the church or in calls to action. (See Lillian Daniel, *Telling It Like It Is: Reclaiming the Practice of Testimony*, and Tom Long, *Testimony: Talking Our selves into Being Christian*.)

A related suggestion is to rediscover the practice of discernment. At Wellesley Congregational Church in Massachusetts, consultants told church leaders that a capital drive was unlikely to succeed because people in the congregation were

unclear about the “overarching purpose” of the church, or “what this was all about.” Church leaders put the fund drive on hold while the congregation engaged in a two-year-long process of discernment.

Members explored two questions: “Where do you sense God’s presence in the life of our church today?” and “Where do you sense God is calling us to go in the future?” As they listened to one another and to the prompting of the Holy Spirit, a core purpose statement emerged, one that has guided the church’s life since. “We seek in every way, in every setting, growth in faith.”

Another strategy for putting God at the center of the church’s life is to learn from people who have been a part of a 12-step or recovery group. Many people find their way to churches after their experience in a 12-step group, where they have encountered the famous first steps on the journey to recovery. The first step acknowledges human limits: “We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable”; the second step opens the door to faith: “Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity”; the third walks through the opened door: “Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.”

Most people who’ve been involved in Alcoholics Anonymous or other 12-step programs are cautious about saying much about it, perhaps to avoid the temptations of boasting or grandiosity. Still, their depth of experience can act as leaven in the loaf of a congregation’s life. People who have “worked the program” often possess a healthy degree of self-doubt as well as openness to God. “I’d be the last person to know what’s right for me,” said one veteran of AA. Her comment on Sunday sermons: “I don’t need every week to be reminded of my responsibilities, but I do need every week to be reminded of God’s grace.”

All of us have some brokenness to work on and need healing. With this in mind, Glide Memorial Church (United Methodist) in San Francisco and the New Creation Community in Seattle created recovery groups that put housed and homeless, middle-class and poor, addicted and nonaddicted people together in small groups to work on their healing and recovery. The groups utilize both testimony and discernment practices, with people speaking of God’s presence in their lives and asking what God is up to and how they are to respond.

A fourth way congregations can put God at the center is by seeking a healthy balance between giving and receiving. Many mainline congregations with a strong ethical bent prioritize giving. They emphasize maxims such as “It is better to give than to receive” or “God has no hands but ours,” and members are encouraged to be givers, doers and leaders. Receiving is more difficult.

When I arrived at a church as pastor, I was told that on communion Sundays (four a year) attendance would drop by half. I suspected that for some reason communion was uncomfortable for members of this congregation, who preferred to be doing, giving and leading. The sacrament, after all, asks us to open our hands and our mouths and be on the receiving end.

I preached on John 13 in which Peter at first refuses to allow Jesus to wash his feet. “I understand Peter,” I said. “He was ready and willing to wash Jesus’ feet, to be a giver and a doer. He was not so comfortable being on the receiving end, having Jesus wash his feet. But perhaps Peter helps us see that giving may not only be more blessed, but also easier. Giving puts us in control. Receiving makes us vulnerable.”

Over time members of the congregation acknowledged their need to receive as well as give and found new joy and meaning in the sacraments. As they went about their many vital service ministries, they practiced reflecting on their work with three questions: What did you give? What did you receive? Where did you experience God in this?

Some strategies for putting God at the center of congregational life pertain more to preachers and teachers. Fleming Rutledge encourages preachers to pay attention to the subject of their verbs. She notes that human beings are too often the subject of the verbs in a sermon, and she suggests that *God* ought to be the subject instead. We are to preach not only about what we are to do but also about what God has done, what God is doing and what God can do. This is the stock-in-trade of African-American preaching, a tradition that seems to have no difficulty bridging the gap between theology and ethics. Social justice issues are central, but so too is the presence and power of God.

Preachers who wish to learn from this homiletical tradition may appreciate *Power in the Pulpit: How America’s Most Effective Black Preachers Prepare Their Sermons*, edited by Cleophus J. LaRue (Westminster John Knox), and the second volume, *More*

Power in the Pulpit. Paul Scott Wilson aims to renew the homiletical form of “proclamation” in *Setting Words on Fire: Putting God at the Center of the Sermon* (Abingdon). He writes: “People need not just information about God—they need communication *from* God. They need to hear God speaking. They need to experience the presence and love of God directing and shaping them as individuals and into communities of faith.” Wilson argues that proclamation is communication *from* God.

One pastor I worked with found that God moved to the center of church life when members asked her to teach a class on the creeds of the church. As a part of a noncreedal denomination, she was doubtful that people would be interested. I really didn’t think anyone would show up,” she said, “but we had 25 people every week for eight weeks.”

The pastor emphasized that in the creeds the church “is trying to get at the heart of the faith in brief, memorable ways” and, at different times in history, is trying to answer the question, “What do Christians believe?” She covered the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds, the Heidelberg Catechism, and more recent statements of faith from the United Church of Canada and the United Church of Christ. She looked at the creeds in historical context to get at the issues that people were struggling with in other times, and compared the Christian’s relationship with creeds to a cave explorer’s search for a secure “fixed point, a place to tie your rope, from which you can explore.” She used different creeds in worship and reminded worshipers that the creeds were not tests of faith but the attempts of our forebears to answer basic questions in their own time and place.

Not long ago I was scheduled to speak at Plymouth Church of the Pilgrims in Brooklyn, New York. A lay leader showed me around the building and related the church’s history. During the 19th century the congregation was led by abolitionist preacher Henry Ward Beecher, who led the campaign against slavery from the pulpit.

But in the latter half of the 20th century the church experienced steady decline. “Yes,” said my guide, “I feared that our church would close its doors and die. We were down to about 30 people, many elderly. But in the last ten years there’s been a kind of revival. There are lots of new people coming, younger people. We have reconnected with our community. There’s new life. Our minister had a lot to do with it. He got us studying the Bible. In fact,” he said, with a wry smile, “our minister can

sum up the message of the entire Bible in six words: 'I am God and you're not.'"

Apparently God was at the center of that church's life.