

Gospel ventures: Learning from new forms of church

by [Stephanie Paulsell](#) in the [November 15, 2000](#) issue

Mainline to the Future: Congregations for the 21st Century, by Jackson W. Carroll
Transforming the Mainline Church: Lessons in Change from Pittsburgh's Cathedral of Hope, by Robert A. Chestnut

The other day, on a crowded subway, I glimpsed an ad featuring an attractive, curly-haired young woman. She was leaning over the back of a chair and laughing in a quietly pleased sort of way. I wondered what she was advertising. Furniture? Clothing? Miracle shampoo? At the next stop, as passengers stepped off the train, I leaned over to see what the photo urged us to buy. No, it wasn't shampoo. It was church. "Vineyard Christian Fellowship. Going to church was never this much fun."

Such advertisements, aimed so precisely at a particular demographic group, are a hallmark of what Jackson W. Carroll calls "posttraditional churches," and they point to some of the most contested issues between these churches and the mainline. The posttraditionalists worry that those outside the church will not be drawn inside unless church can be made entertaining and fun. Traditionalists worry that such approaches present the life of faith as just one more consumable commodity.

Posttraditionalists argue that congregational life, including worship, must adapt to contemporary tastes in order to reach the unchurched. Traditionalists argue that too much adaption will obscure what is mysterious, prophetic and holy—in short, what is countercultural about Christian faith. Posttraditionalists accuse traditionalists of allowing aesthetic tastes shaped by social location to keep the unchurched at arm's length. Traditionalists accuse posttraditionalists of abandoning a rich musical heritage.

Jackson Carroll and Robert Chestnut attempt to move beyond these anxious debates to ask what we can learn from the new forms of church emerging around us. Their books are addressed to their brothers and sisters in the mainline—both those who are chafing under the pressure to embrace neo-Pentecostal forms of church life in

the service of church growth and those who are intrigued by the new forms but have no idea how to integrate them into liberal Protestantism.

Carroll's is the gentler voice. He wants to allay the fears of readers, reminding them that innovation in worship and congregational life has been a vital part of the history of the church since its earliest beginnings. He wants us to evaluate and learn from the new forms instead of feeling threatened by them.

Chestnut takes a more apocalyptic tone: if we want the mainline to survive, to renew itself, to bring the gospel to seekers outside the church, our churches will have to become "entrepreneurial." With his eye on the parable of the talents, he writes, "The gospel is venture capital, and if we don't venture with it, it will be taken from us."

Following Robert Schreiter, whose groundbreaking work (*Constructing Local Theologies*) showed how theologies are shaped by the context of particular communities, Carroll wants to pay attention to local ecclesiologies. His refrain throughout is a riff on a line from Barth: "There is no intrinsically sacred sociology of the church." In a postdenominational age (which both Carroll and Chestnut agree we are in), the place to look for "clues to renewal and vitality," Carroll argues, is in the new and creative ways particular communities strive to embody the gospel in particular social and cultural contexts. Though not all these ways are worthy of imitation, Carroll thinks we should imitate the boldness with which new churches are "exercising the freedom that we are given in Jesus Christ to develop ecclesial practices that are both faithful to the gospel and appropriate to the social and cultural challenges of posttraditional society."

The social context of Pittsburgh's East Liberty Presbyterian Church is precisely what convinced Robert and Jan Chestnut that Robert should accept a call to become its senior pastor in 1988. A majestic church which, in the years before World War II, was situated in the midst of a thriving business district, East Liberty experienced a steady decrease in membership after the war. Whites began moving to the suburbs, and a badly planned urban renewal project resulted in the closing of many businesses and the creation of a moat-like traffic circle that kept African-Americans enclosed in a decaying neighborhood.

The congregation responded to its changing context by opening a shelter for homeless men, a food pantry, a soup kitchen, after-school tutoring programs and a

summer camp program for neighborhood kids. It held dinners so that the members of the congregation and those served by the church's ministries could eat together and get to know one another. Church membership, however, continued its slide. And while the membership of the church was somewhat integrated racially, it was much less integrated socioeconomically.

Chestnut saw here the seeds of the kind of ministry he longed to lead: urban, interracial, multicultural and deeply involved with the local community. But he warned the call committee that if he became their church's pastor, they would have to be ready for radical change.

East Liberty had then and still has today an endowment larger than that of many seminaries. In his first year, Chestnut was able to work with an advertising and special events budget of \$75,000. To provoke the change he believed East Liberty needed, he was able to marshal an army of consultants on everything from marketing to worship to conflict resolution. This is not the story of the renewal of a typical church, but of a large, well-endowed urban church, a city cathedral. But Chestnut insists that there are lessons here for other churches as well.

Like Carroll, Chestnut wants us to learn that "progressive, ecumenical, mainline Protestantism," the tradition in which he firmly places himself, cannot afford to ignore what more theologically conservative, entrepreneurial churches have learned about growth and renewal. Those churches, he tells us, have found that in order to thrive and grow they must provide worship, music and programming that attracts those outside the church. We've got to stop satisfying ourselves, he argues, and begin to try to imagine what will draw in those who are hungry for some connection to a life beyond themselves, but who have not seen the church as a place that might answer that hunger. He believes the parable of the talents calls us to view the church as "a new business start-up, a small-cap, high-risk, aggressive-growth venture," an entrepreneurial institution that dares to make radical changes in order to reach out to those outside its walls.

He also wants us to know that this venture will not be easy—that, as congregational consultant Peter Steinke says, pain is a necessary part of change. When Chestnut began the difficult work of trying to help the church sort out which aspects of its traditional service reflected its core theological commitments and which merely reflected the class and cultural tastes of the majority of the congregation, he and his family suffered. Threatening messages were taped to the front door of their home,

hurtful rumors were circulated and Chestnut was nearly fired.

He stayed, but his wounds are still tender, which might account for the occasionally troubling nature of his descriptions of the conflict. For example, his analysis of the opposition of some of his African-American members to the inclusion of gospel music in the Sunday service sounds condescending. He interprets their opposition as their need to distance themselves from “their own cultural heritage” and seems not to consider the possibility that these members did not want their white minister to define for them what it means to be an African-American Christian. But the lesson he wants us to take from the narrative—that it is impossible to lead a congregation through change without conflict—is well taken.

Most important, Chestnut wants us to learn that even the strengths of the mainline—its emphasis on social justice, on God’s transcendence, on reasoned faith—will be diminished if it ignores the human longing to draw near to God. He believes that a major reason for mainline decline and Pentecostal growth is that mainline churches have been reluctant to offer people opportunities to experience God’s presence, and even more reluctant to talk about what it might mean to have an intimate life with God. The story of East Liberty at its best is a story of how mainline Protestantism can illumine the connections between social justice and spirituality, between the transcendence and immanence of God, between Christian faith and the faith of others—and the connections between head and heart, body and soul.

I must admit that the “small-cap, high-risk, aggressive-growth venture” language does not sing to me. It brings to mind neither the trustworthiness called for by the parable of the talents nor the kind of risks Jesus asks us to take. It suggests something to be made use of, something with which to turn a profit, rather than something which might change our lives. This doesn’t mean that churches shouldn’t advertise. It means that we should learn to reinvigorate our own language—the language of risk, commitment and trust—rather than looking to the stock market to provide a language for us.

I wonder how devoted Chestnut himself is to the entrepreneurial language he has picked up in church growth seminars, for he also argues that church boards should develop spiritual processes of discernment by which to conduct their business rather than “mimic the business procedures of corporate America.” Chestnut is at his most convincing when he follows his instinct that what will draw seekers to the church and

keep them there are opportunities to deepen their sense of God's mystery and presence, and to find resources for drawing near to God in the midst of everyday life.

For all his emphasis on learning from neo-Pentecostal churches, the most striking changes at East Liberty do not stem from that tradition. The most thickly described "innovations" are rather ancient forms of worship recovered for the contemporary context: chant (in the form of a weekly Taizé service), anointing of those seeking healing, and labyrinth walks. These contemplative, bodily practices have been a large part of the church's renewal and growth.

Of course, one church's innovation is often another's longstanding tradition. Carroll reminds us that the changes we see on the religious landscape by no means go in one direction only. Carroll reports on an Assemblies of God congregation that became Episcopalian and on evangelicals who became Orthodox. "Posttraditional society," he writes, "does not mean the end of tradition. It means instead a world in which traditions can be claimed, rejected, reinterpreted, or even invented, but not simply taken for granted and uncritically followed." Indeed, those who most want to submit themselves to ancient traditions are often converts to—that is, choosers of—the tradition they embrace.

The challenge that new, emerging forms of church present for the mainline is not as simple as how we might integrate praise choruses into the 11:00 a.m. service. The challenge is that we can no longer take our way of doing things for granted. We must ask ourselves: How does our life together, in worship, service and fellowship, reflect our central convictions about who God is and what God is calling us to? What does it mean to be faithful? What does it mean to share the gospel? What does it mean to be trustworthy stewards of God's gifts? The new forms of church have reopened these questions in vital ways. It is the work of mainline churches to engage these questions as deeply and richly as they can.

"Going to church has never been this much fun." When I saw that advertisement on the train, I thought two things. First: That kind of advertising might actually work. We've been well trained to respond to ads. The people that ad brings into the church might come for the fun and stay for something more lasting and profound.

But I also thought of a friend who, three weeks after being raped and badly beaten, attended a church service. And what she found there, in the hymns and in the

readings, was something she had not found anywhere else: language potent enough to give voice to what was in her heart. Why, O Lord, do you stand so far off? Why do the rich still oppress the poor? Why do the wicked prosper? Why is there so much violence in our cities? Why, oh why have you forsaken me?

The subway ad would not have drawn my friend back to church. She wasn't looking for fun. She wasn't interested in being entertained or being distracted from her pain. What she found in church was a way to join her voice to the voices of all who have ever cried out their heart's anguish to God. She sang the psalms with all who have ever sung them: with Israel in exile, with Jesus on the cross. Where else but in the church could she have done this?

As we seek to find ways of sharing the gospel with a culture accustomed to the speed and flash of the Internet and the thrill of consumption, I hope we can "go forward," as Carroll puts it, "remembering." Remembering that our faith bears a vision of human life that goes beyond consuming. Remembering the words and songs and silences that can receive those whose hearts have been broken, those whose bodies have been violated. Remembering that we have inherited language spacious enough to gather up all that human beings experience, language robust enough to speak the truth of our lives. That language is enfolded in different ways in different contexts: in gospel music and chant, in oil for anointing and in silence, in chorales and hymns and dance. Church often *is* fun. But it should never be trivial.