



## **Human Organizations, Some Quick Thoughts**

This section will be shorter than the two previous ones. There's really just one point. As time goes on organizations or institutions (the church is one kind of organization), like human beings, tend to run down and get a little stiff (even rigid). I'll bet you know what I mean. We grow accustomed to doing things in a particular way and assume that this is the only way to do it.

The apostle Paul called the way we do things, and even our institutions, "clay pots." The clay pots might be interesting, even beautiful, but they don't matter ultimately. What matters ultimately, said Paul, "is the extraordinary power" that "belongs to God and does not come from us." (II Corinthians 4: 7) Organizations, their structures, rules and ways, are important and can be attractive and inspiring. They deserve our respect and care. But they are clay pots. If they aren't good for holding or carrying the extraordinary power of the gospel, then we may need to mend our pots or get new ones. Our Protestant mainline churches are beautiful clay pots that were designed for a different time, the period of American Christendom and modernity. Now we need to add some new pots or maybe use the ones we have differently.

John Gardner, who was once the U.S. Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare, and who founded "Common Cause," put what I'm trying to say quite brilliantly. In organizations, wrote Gardner, "Motivation tends to run down. Values decay. The problems of today go unsolved while people mumble the slogans of yesterday. Group loyalties block self-examination. One sees organizations whose structure and processes were designed to solve problems that no longer exist. If regenerative forces are not at work, the end is predictable." The good news for the church is that there is a "regenerative force." We call it "the Holy Spirit." The bad news is that sometimes we get so rigid or so scared that we, as Paul cautioned churches not to do, "quench the Spirit." Churches, like individuals, can grow rigid or they can be resilient.

There are two related challenges that come to us because of the huge changes in culture we have so far discussed. One challenge is to re-connect with the "extraordinary power that belongs to God and does not come from us." Organizations are renewed when they rediscover or discover again as if for the first time that primal source of power and energy that comes from God, from the gospel, and from the Scriptures. Unless that happens, we can create and try out all the new strategies and structures you want and none will make any real difference. If, however, we reconnect with our basic energy source in God, the gospel and the Scriptures, then we face the second challenge, which is to use our old clay pots in new ways and maybe to create some completely new ones.

Let me give an example or two of using our clay pots in new ways for a new time.

During Christendom we worshiped on Sunday mornings at 11:00 a.m. We worshipped on Sunday because the early church saw Sunday as "the Lord's Day," and the first day of the new creation. We worshipped at 11:00 because that's when the Emperor said to worship. So on Sunday at 11:00 all good Christians, living in a Christian society, went to worship. Personally, I love that. I was raised with it. It is how things are supposed to be. But since we don't live in Christendom any longer, not everyone sees things like I do. For "missional" purposes, however, I could see worship on Wednesday night. Or, we might recall that the biblical day goes from evening to evening (not morning to night) and have a service on Saturday evening. I am not recommending any of these changes in strategy (new or different clay pots). I am recommending that congregations ask themselves, "In a new world what strategies and structures best serve our mission or purpose?"

Here's another example: advertising. During Christendom, advertising by churches not only made no sense, it seemed gauche, tasteless. We assumed that everyone knew who we were and what we did. Advertising seemed like "spending money on ourselves," when our money could be better used for charity. In Christendom, that may all have been true, but we don't live there anymore. Advertising can be a way of getting the word out, extending an invitation and practicing hospitality. So the U.C.C. "Still Speaking Initiative and its message, "Whoever you are, wherever you are on life's journey, you're welcome here," may seem strange to some who, like me, were formed by Christendom. But to the majority of the population who are post-Christendom, it may be a real help and a loving word.

### *Part Three: Questions for Reflection and Discussion*

1. Name one long-standing structure or strategy that you think is still effective for your church?
2. Name one long-standing structure or strategy that you think may no longer be as effective as it once was?
3. How do you feel about advertising by the church or denomination? What makes an advertisement more or less effective in your judgment?
4. Can you think of an instance in your congregation where, in John Gardner's words, "Group loyalties block self-examination." What would help make honest self-examination possible?