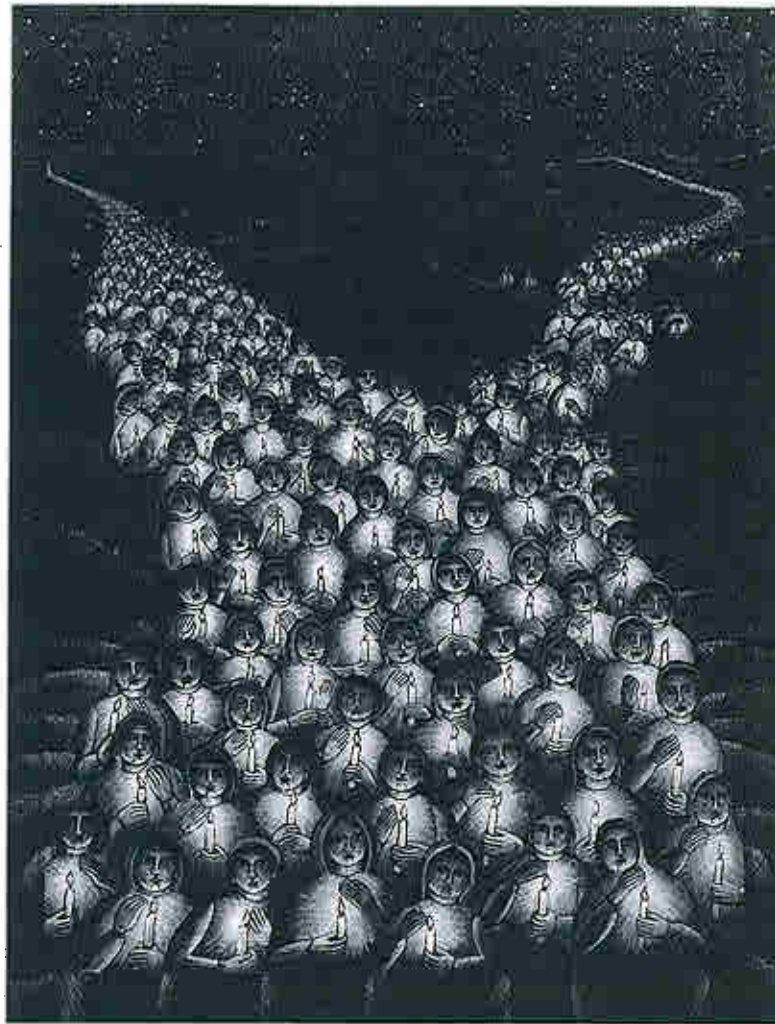


PRACTICING OUR FAITH

A
Way of Life
for a
Searching
People

"As wise as grand-
parents, a good
guide to living
within our
families and
communities
with integrity
and generosity."

—KATHLEEN
NORRIS
author of *Dakota*
and *The Cloister Walk*



DOROTHY C. BASS

EDITOR

Chapter 9

SHAPING COMMUNITIES



Larry Rasmussen

The perennial Christian strategy, someone has said, is to gather the folks, break the bread, and tell the stories.

It is as simple, and as disarming, as that. But within that simplicity lie complex questions. What shape ought the gathering to take? Do some sit in carefully designated spaces and the rest elsewhere? And who breaks the bread? Do all, or only some? For that matter, who tells the stories? Do all take a turn, or do people speak as the Spirit prompts? Are some interpretations and interpreters more authoritative than others? On what grounds? The apostle Paul, teacher of community, urged the Corinthians to judge all bread breaking and storytelling and congregating by whether it was “done for building up” the community. But that was not sufficient to answer all the questions in this fledgling church. Should prophets speak in tongues if no interpreters were present? Should women speak? Must all who speak acknowledge the authority of Paul? (1 Corinthians 14:26–40).

Apparently, the program of gathering the folks, breaking the bread, and telling the stories is more complicated than it first seems.

There are varieties of gifts, different roles, real tensions, significant conflicts. The ordering of community can give shape to the gifts of its members and provide space for the successful negotiating of conflict. The lack of good ordering can prevent gifts from being shared and allow tensions to fester.

The shaping of communities is the practice by which we agree to be reliable personally and organizationally. This practice takes on life through roles and rituals, laws and agreements—indeed, through the whole assortment of shared commitments and institutional arrangements that order common life. In one sense, then, shaping communities is not just a single practice of its own. It is the practice that provides the choreography for all the other practices of a community or society.

CONSTITUTING A WAY OF LIFE

Christian congregations require governance, as Paul knew so well. And so does society at large. Indeed, the issue of shaping communities may be *the* issue confronting society today, only one instance of which is congregational gathering. After all, how *do* we order life together in a world with a nasty tendency to fall apart? Who gets to make the decisions about how we assemble and for what purposes, about dividing life's basic goods ("bread"), and about writing the standard account of what is going on and why (*the* "stories")? In whose hands does effective power reside? What kind is it? How is it used, and to what ends? Who benefits and who pays? Who frames the issues and directs the kind of attention they get? How does information flow, and who orchestrates the responses people make, as well as the environment within which they act? These are the issues of community governance.

Governance is a crucial part of our life together for at least two reasons. One reason is simple: life is a mess. It is not *only* a mess, but it is a mess. Some of it is a mess all the time, all of it is a mess some of the time, and disordered houses do not stand. Just as our bodies do poorly without food, bodies politic do poorly without governance. Communities, in order to *be* communities, must be ordered, cared for, led. The other reason is equally vital: governance is necessary for the

positive flourishing of life. Proper ordering, as any gardener, cook, orchestra conductor, or housekeeper can tell you, is basic to good living. Sheer randomness is not the highest state of being. Thriving, not to say surviving, requires the creative ordering of freedom.

The particular shape that any community takes is already a creation and reflection of its way of life. As gifts are received, roles assigned, conflicts handled, and practices lived in certain ways, a community lives out its own way of being in the world. Through governance, a way of life is constituted (as in *Constitution*). The practice of governance is the soil in which all the practices of a community are rooted and nourished. Coordinating a community's practices through good governance helps to make its way of life clear, visible, and viable.

COMMUNITY GOVERNANCE AND LEADERSHIP

Good governance requires good leadership. Good leaders bring different people with different knowledge and gifts together for joint performance, and they do so in a way that draws out the strengths of people while rendering the weaknesses as irrelevant as possible. Leaders are thus choreographers of a sort. They help people identify the challenges they face and untangle the issues entailed in them, and they do so in a way that gives people work appropriate to their skills and on a scale and at a pace they can tolerate. When it is well done, such choreography generates homegrown leadership around identified challenges and makes for creative rather than destructive responses to common problems. Good leaders also clarify the purpose, values, and goals of a group, and thereby help to set its tone and create its ethos.

Because we inhabit a curious historical moment, our need for creative governance is particularly acute. We are not confident that the past is a reliable guide that can simply be extended into the future. Yet we cannot tell what may emerge to take its place. Ours is thus one of those proverbial "times between times." We lurch from crisis to crisis, and at the same time have to work out more viable ways of living together on largely untested turf. A moment like this cries out for leadership, not least because the scale and interdependence of our

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Some years ago a famous novelist died. Among his papers was found a list of suggested plots for future stories, the most prominently underscored being this one: "A widely separated family inherits a house in which they have to live together." This is the great new problem of mankind. We have inherited a large house, a great "world house" in which we have to live together—black and white, Easterner and Westerner, Gentile and Jew, Catholic and Protestant, Moslem and Hindu—a family unduly separated in ideas, culture and interest, who, because we can never again live apart, must learn somehow to live with each other in peace.

MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.,
Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?

problems are out of sync with the capacities of our institutions to address them adequately.

The practice of shaping communities, while always necessary, takes on a certain urgency in such moments, when it has to stretch toward the creative in the very moment it faces mounting constraints. Social experimentation becomes unavoidable in a time like this. But good outcomes do not. To negotiate such a season even reasonably well requires able leadership and high levels of citizen participation.

A case involving a copper plant near Tacoma, Washington, provides a helpful example, Ronald Heifetz reports in his book *Leadership Without Easy Answers*. William Ruckelshaus, head of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in 1983, had to resolve a serious conflict: the copper plant was a major polluter in the Northwest, but it was also an important employer, with an annual payroll of \$23 million. Jobs, the local economy, and health were at issue, and under the Clean Air Act of 1970, Ruckelshaus and the EPA had the authority to decide the plant's fate. But Ruckelshaus declined to use this authority and instead insisted on a process that would involve the community at large in the decision. He explained why with a quote from Thomas Jefferson: "If we think [the people] not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion."

Going beyond the law's requirement for hearings, the EPA organized a series of public workshops that included plant workers, union representatives, local citizen organizations, and environmental groups. This format provided participants with education about plant emissions, incidence of disease, and the local economic implications of various possible courses of action, as well as time for prepared testimony and open deliberation. What the community eventually decided was not in the minds of Ruckelshaus, local EPA officials, or the citizens themselves when the process started. The collective decision was that Tacoma's economy needed to diversify and that this process must include retraining for present plant workers. The community had decided for itself what it wanted for the future.

Heifetz comments that Ruckelshaus's adept leadership rested on several principles. First, Ruckelshaus identified the gap between the reality people faced and their aspirations—their "adaptive challenge." He helpfully kept attention focused on the issues created by this gap throughout the process. Second, in facing this adaptive challenge, Ruckelshaus helped regulate the level of distress that inevitably emerged as difficult issues were confronted. He did this by providing a structure that let the people educate one another (and the EPA) in the course of a well-paced deliberative process. Third, he had devised a strategy that shifted responsibility for describing the problem and devising solutions from the EPA to the primary stakeholders themselves—namely, community members. Within the boundaries of the law, authority and trust were thus largely relocated to the community, as was responsibility for creative actions.

THE COMMUNITY OF JESUS

Christians look to Jesus as an example of leadership and to the early Christian communities as places of exemplary participation. The narratives about Jesus provide models for life-giving governance, but often in surprising ways. The practices of governance Jesus commended did not match the prevailing versions and evidently were not supposed to. Rather than shaping his followers into the usual hierarchy of power, Jesus constituted his community around power turned upside down.

A dispute also arose among them as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest. But he said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves."

LUKE 22:24–27 (COMPARE MATTHEW 20:25–28, MARK 10:42–45)

Consider a passage that appears in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. It is very near the end of Jesus' life, and the disciples are arguing. "Which of us will be the greatest?" they ask, jockeying for position. Jesus tells them that the shape of authority in his community is different from what they assume. His is an upside-down kingdom whose ways contrast with those of "kings" and "benefactors." In his reign, he tells them, status distinctions are reversed.

What happens when we turn to the early Christian communities? Is the upside-down instruction of Jesus reflected in the communities that took his name and told his story as their own passion? No single or even dominant model of community governance seems to exist among first Christians. The practice of ordination, for example, is simply not a New Testament issue, although the ordering of gifts and effective forms of good leadership most certainly are. Paul's churches, for example, have local leaders, who may well have been the owners of the houses where Christians met to worship. Yet there is no common governance form across the Pauline communities. Paul often names community workers and gives thanks for them in many places, and they apparently are called to preside by the community. Judging from his letters, however, not a one bears a title or wears a badge. We can only conclude that uniform governance practices did not exist.

Both Jesus' own radical pattern for shaping communities and the great variety of governance forms adopted by early Christian communities make it difficult to give Christian governance a label that fully describes it. However, Heifetz, who has studied leadership

across several cultures, offers a phrase that can be useful for describing the varieties of early Christian governance: "creative deviance on the front line." It is deviance because it does not accept standard forms of ordering life as normative, even when they are dominant. It is creative because it seeks a positive alternative form. It is on the front line because it lives in the tension between our own time—what the apostle Paul called "this present age"—and another yet to come. We could also call this governance style "community democracy" if it is clear that such a style depends on shifting leadership, high levels of member participation, the capacity of its organizers and troublemakers to see through the dominant ways of doing things, and a collective ability to offer alternatives.

The practice of community governance as community democracy and creative deviance on the front line was born in Judaism. Both the Jesus movement and the first Christian communities were Jewish, with deep Hebrew roots. Even when Christianity grew among Gentiles and broke from Judaism, its Scriptures, its form of church organization, its sacraments, and the God it believed in all derived from Jewish Christianity. It embraced Judaism's sense of a covenant relationship with the one God, who had heard the cries of the Israelites in slavery and responded to their suffering. And it embraced the imperatives of Israel's community practices first fashioned in Sinai. These were imperatives to redress social inequities, protect the vulnerable, keep the power of privilege in check and under critique, steward the gifts of earth as a God-given trust held in common, extend hospitality to the stranger and sojourner, and consider the enemy's welfare on the same terms as one's own.

The Gospel materials reflect practices that display this Jewish heritage as Jesus and his movement embodied it. Discipleship (joining the way of Jesus) is decidedly egalitarian. People who are routinely excluded elsewhere are included here. Pride of rank is rejected and has no place. Followers are to teach all they have learned to all who will hear, but no particular deference is given scribes as teachers. Rather than being offered front-row seats at Jesus' gatherings, disciples are invited to enter more resolutely the way of service, even suffering. Some speak of Jesus as King, but he himself refuses the title. His position is more like that of a prophet—without favorites, without secure establishment, without honor or privilege, and without

followers who possess any of these. Foxes and birds often have better housing.

At the same time, some formal practices of Judaism, such as ritual cleanliness, and some informal ones, like social barriers related to class, gender, and ethnicity, are largely disregarded in community practices around Jesus as leader of a radical Jewish renewal movement. His teachings on wealth and poverty continue the prophetic challenge to pursue justice, especially for the poor, as the foundation of social life itself. Exorcisms, healing, and feeding ministries mean freedom from common bondages and a discovery of people's own dignity and powers for day-to-day survival and life in God. The last are first. The least are subjects of attention and honor, and carriers of gifts and responsibilities. Leaders are community servants, like Jesus himself.

The fact that Jesus did not hold any office and was neither king nor priest was crucial. The "body" of people gathered around his body was made up of ordinary people, distinguished from one another not by status but only by their varied gifts and contributions, the variety of services they rendered one another in their common life. Because of this, the theologian James Mackey has argued, the whole idea and experience of the Body of Christ—a name for the church since its earliest days—implies a profound "democratization" of power. It makes room for the exercise of a variety of ways to care for one another and the world. This radical inclusivity has its source in Jesus.

Jesus' own source was God and a life utterly centered in God. But it was the God of the Jewish community and its practices—practices that empowered the Jews to be a vanguard people, a witness to the nations, and a foretaste of things to come for all creation. Differently said, a people practicing creative deviance on the front line.



Feminist moral theology is utopian, as all good theology is, in that it envisages a society, a world, a cosmos, in which there are no excluded ones.

BEVERLY WILDUNG HARRISON, *Making the Connections*

THE CHURCH AS ALTERNATIVE COMMUNITY

The earliest Christian communities were such a people. They were "a new humanity," part of a new world order, a "third race" (beyond Jews and Gentiles) transcending ethnicity and nations, and the "first fruits" of a new age coming to birth in the midst of a dying one. In all these self-understandings, the communities identified themselves as an alternative way of ordering life together. This shows up in their governing practices as they deviate from and reimagine prevailing arrangements. Both men and women are chosen as local leaders (Romans 16:1–15). Conflicts are handled by gatherings of councils that try to work toward consensus (Acts 15). Room is always declared, if not always permitted, for the unplanned eruptions of the Spirit in the gathered assembly and for the exercise of gifts, as validated both by direct experience of the Spirit and community deliberation (1 Corinthians 14). And at this early stage of community democracy, liturgy is the collective work of all Christians, service belongs to each, and the title of minister is one they all share. Special gifts of community members—"charisms"—are there for the sake of building up the Body of Christ as community.

But this is not the whole story. New Testament letters are also full of tensions. Communities lived uneasily between loose democratic governance (some of it fueled by the expectation that the world would soon end) and a tighter order that came to be focused on the bishop's office in each city. Ambivalence was always present: should Christians accept and adapt the existing versions of governance in the wider society, or ought these be rejected outright as Caesar's rather than God's? By the fourth century, however, governance and leadership of a certain kind triumphed, largely because Christianity gained status as a universal imperial faith in an empire walking the edges of disintegration. To state it without nuance: stability won out over change, hierarchy prevailed over egalitarianism, male-held office triumphed over gender equality, power was more centralized than dispersed, and social, political, and economic privilege lodged with the few rather than the many.

Even so, the radical impulses that run from the origins of the people of Israel through the movement around Jesus and its

extension in the communities of first followers never lost their hold. Through the centuries, renewal movements that hark back to the Gospels and earliest Christianity itself have appeared again and again. In the Middle Ages, monasteries, convents, and religious orders such as the one founded by Saint Francis of Assisi spoke in these tones. In the sixteenth century, Martin Luther preached that all the baptized are members of the priesthood of all believers and lifted up daily work as a holy calling. Later, many other movements, including Baptists, Quakers, Mennonites, Methodists, and Congregationalists, had their origins in this kind of renewal. Today, renewal of this kind continues among Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant Christians around the world. It can be seen, for example, in the base Christian communities of Latin America, the house churches of Asia or Eastern Europe, and the renewed strength of lay ministry in the churches of the United States.

When such renewal comes, common qualities surface again and again. These qualities are in tension with governance and leadership dynamics of a more orderly sort, where power is concentrated along clear lines of authority and function. The qualities that make for community democracy and creative deviance include these:

- A sense of divine power as the power for peoplehood
- A basic equality that dignifies the varied gifts of varied members
- Forms of address that tend more toward “brother” and “sister” than titles
- A sharing of resources with a view to need
- An effort to cross social boundaries for a more inclusive community
- An uneasy relationship to every dominant order, every “Caesar”
- An empowerment of all members, either as laity or within a new religious order
- A conviction that somehow all this is good news and a vanguard example for the wider world

Authority and *servanthood* are words that are used in these communities. But in comparison with their use in society at large, they are wholly reimagined and recast. In a community of equals, their mean-

ing is reordered. And in this community, members come to understand another word of Jesus: “I do not call you servants any longer . . . but I have called you friends” (John 15:15).

THEN AND NOW: OUR ADAPTIVE CHALLENGE

Where does this Christian vision of the practice of community governance leave us as we face the complex issues of ordering community and society today? What does the experience of the origins of Israel, of Jewish and Gentile Christianity, and of periodic Christian renewal offer for our own efforts at governance and leadership?

Our own historical season at the end of the second millennium of the Common Era bears an eerie resemblance to the time when Christianity began on the three continents of the Mediterranean basin. Like that time, ours is a “Hellenistic” era—diverse, cosmopolitan, multilingual, multiracial, multicultural, multireligious, fragmented, eclectic, riddled by extremes of all kinds, and more than a little violent. We often feel dislocated and off-center, just as people did then. In the world of early Christianity, the solidity of empire was giving way, and new configurations were in the making, many of them bedeviled by chaos and confusion. Almost everyone worried about moral degradation. Not a few sought new, saving communities and ways of life, whereas others simply could not conceive that the Roman Empire would ever come to an end.

What the first Christians offered such an age was not only a common loyalty but also a certain way of leaning into a turbulent world with their own particular practices. True enough, they could not make up their minds about many things they deemed important. Full agreement was definitely not their strong suit! But they had a faith full of feeling, energy, conviction, and the willingness to experiment imaginatively with inherited practices, traditions, symbols, and stories. They related all this to real human needs and—perhaps most important of all—offered a place of high participation to community members from all ranks and with diverse gifts. They adapted governance practices and traditions they knew, but they also initiated new ones when, in their judgment, these kept faith with the way of Christ and made for the upbuilding of community in the Spirit.

Theirs was the spirit of an anticipatory community that could give present form to a hoped-for future through a range of adaptable practices. These were Spirit-led people shaping the specifics of community order as they went. Their way of life was created and amended out of life together in worship and in shared participation in other practices, in light of the great reversals of Jesus.

None of this means these communities were beyond corruption or even entirely right for their time and place. These were ordinary people who displayed the petty, ugly side of all human communities. There is no need to romanticize them; we need to learn from them, not copy them. Indeed, their own example instructs us to test the spirits in our time, as did they in theirs. When we do, we will surely find significant differences between our situation and theirs. Yet "creative deviance on the front line" and "community democracy" are a powerful legacy and process, which need to be interpreted and renewed in every age. And not least in a turbulent, searching age such as our own.

SETTING THE TABLE OF COMMUNITY

But what are the steps we need to take today in the choreography of shaping communities? How should we now gather the people, break the bread, and tell the stories?

The rites, sacraments, and patterns of the gathered congregation provide a focus for thinking about how community is ordered among us. Take the eucharistic table, for example. Decisions on who gets to sit at the table, in what places, and in accord with what table manners are reflective of the order of a community—in the church, but also in the wider social order. So are choices about who cooks, who serves, who cleans up, who breaks the bread, and who initiates and steers the conversation. Which bodies are present at the table and which are absent matters immensely, as does their health or lack of it. One does not need to be a keen student of society to realize that table fellowship itself is a reliable map of economic well-being and discrimination, political order and differentiation, and social hierarchy and caste. Table governance shapes communities. The practice is distilled in how we take, bless, break, and give bread to one another.

Just as social systems organize themselves in relation to a structure of authority, focusing attention at the head of the table, our social commentators do so as well. Leadership may more often emerge from the foot of the table, but that is not where we spend most of our time looking.

RONALD HEIFETZ, *Leadership Without Easy Answers*

We can adapt and create governance and leadership practices, then, by answering questions like these: Do our practices welcome all to the table? Are the discriminating distinctions drawn between people in society considered of no account here, and how do we show that in the way we regulate our life together? Are the guests in turn called to be the hosts? Are means created and encouraged by which each participant can find gifts for meeting the hungers of the world? Are children as well as adults, and old as well as young, welcome participants? Does the organization of general community life—and not only the celebration of Eucharist—encourage leadership to emerge from the foot of the table? Do the ways in which we organize life together ask for participation that nurtures significant levels of personal commitment and responsibility, on a scale and in ways people can handle?

Consider one concrete example as but a glimpse of innumerable possibilities for the creative shaping of communities. Imagine yourself sitting, as I did, amid a congregation deliberating "business": what our response to recent neighborhood safety and security problems should be; who would represent the congregation in a community coalition trying to secure low-income, occupant-owned housing; what changes in the congregational budget were necessary because of unexpected expenses; and when the annual congregational retreat should take place and who would plan it. Different issues brought different responses in the meeting, from heated argument and disagreement to shared laughter and common insight. Somewhere in the midst of free-flowing exchange, the pastor quietly lifted the cloth from the vessels on the small table to the side of the meeting's presider, prayed the eucharistic prayer, asked one of the musicians to lead a simple chant, and gave the loaf to the person closest with the

words, "The body of Christ, broken for you." Then the cup and "The blood of Christ, shed for you." Each fed the next, repeating the salvatory and orienting words while looking directly into the eyes of the neighbor they had just argued and laughed with. A song followed, then everyone went back to deliberating what was to be done and who would do it. Yet these were not exactly the same persons and community as before. For one thing, the sharing in the sacrament oriented their discussion anew. They sought actions commensurate with this action.

To think outward from the Eucharist about shaping communities is only one example of what can be done with any and all of the focal practices of congregational gathering—baptism, confirmation, remembrance of the saints, and all the festivals of the liturgical year. These can become fertile places for discernment together about how the life-giving way of life that we seek needs to be ordered.

What links the church's example of "creative deviance on the front line" with examples like that of Ruckelshaus and the EPA is a patterning for cooperation made possible by a guiding vision. A model of governance that forces everyone to do the same thing is rejected. Multiple experiments are encouraged, and leadership emerges from the foot and sides of the table as well as the head. Innovation arises from the diversity of members, just as unity issues from joint action.

The shaping of communities where good governance and able leadership can emerge is less a single practice than a continuing process by which all the other practices described in this volume are oriented to the upbuilding of community. The key, besides some imagination, is high levels of personal involvement and commitment wed to mutually shaped community leadership. By embodying these in its own life, the church can help society at large to find its way amid the adaptive challenges of this historical moment—and all as part of a certain steady rhythm that gathers people to tell stories and break bread together.