

To and Through Pinopolis

The *real* church is the local church. I don't know where I got that idea, but I've never been able to shake it.

That place, those people you get together with on Sunday, that's what I mean about "real"—it is that tangible. That simple. Also, that preposterous.

Growing up white and Southern meant that that kind of church was a normal piece of the furniture of my life. Everybody I knew had a church. They were different, those churches, and most of them made jokes about the churches others had. I never really knew there were Jews until I was in high school. I knew there were Catholics, but I didn't know what that meant—I only knew they went to the place at the corner of Irby and Palmetto Streets.

Mother was the serious Christian in the family, and our brand was Episcopalian. Dad wrote checks and came on Easter, but Mother pushed and prodded my brother and me to Sunday school. Dad never took the institutional part of it seriously and wasn't officially a member for a long time—as a matter of fact it was years later, when he and I were talking about what I wanted to be when I grew up and I embarrassedly admitted that I'd occasionally thought about going into the ministry, that he made some shifts. He actually went to confirmation class, was confirmed, and ended up doing all the things a man like him could do: usher, vestryman, senior warden, lay reader. The whole ball of wax. I got the feeling that he hadn't thought much about it until he heard what I'd said. Apparently what I said meant something to him.

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Church was, as I said, just part of the furniture of life. Like school, playing football on Saturdays with friends in our yard, the Pecan Bowl. Exhaustive reading at the local library. And organizational leadership—student council, officer of the youth group, head of the parish acolytes (we were trained by my uncle Ben when he came back from World War II). I was on all the responsible committees and participated in the “right” causes—collecting money for good things, collecting scrap iron and toothpaste tubes for the war effort. Trying to be decent to people who were unpleasant or smelled bad.

It’s just what you did in South Carolina when you were my age. And you went into the woods and shot things with a .22—mostly cans and bottles, and at Christmas shooting down mistletoe from the trees for decorations. Occasionally going hunting for birds or squirrels. Guns were also just part of our furniture. I never shot anything big, like a deer. Tried, but failed. I was pretty good at “birds,” what we called quail. They took shotguns. I never was able to hit doves, but tried that several times too.

The church was where you met your friends. Other friends were in other churches, and it didn’t make much difference—we just rarely saw them on Sunday mornings. Sunday evenings we did—evenings were ecumenical. My future wife, Polly, said that in Marion, where she lived, what church you went to all depended on where the best dancers went to youth group.

The theology we lived with was pretty pan-Christian and not very heavy. We knew Bible stories, often told with fundamentalist leanings since most of our friends were Baptist, Methodist, or Presbyterian. Most of the pastors we knew were, like our rector, sweet men, who seemed unrelated to anything we knew. Several were widely disliked—like the Presbyterian guy who seemed to have a grudge against the Catholics, and we had friends who were Catholic. He got bad press from many of us when he took off on something about the Catholics in a baccalaureate sermon one year.

I knew we were Episcopalians because we had a special chair in the church for the bishop. Nobody else sat in it. I knew he was important because whenever he came we had special refreshments after church.

For all of us the local church was what there was. It was there. It was sort of ground zero for what we understood life was all about. And, to tell the truth, it was pretty inconsequential to many of us.

What it did, however, was help us focus on our own lives—our hopes and fears. We really *prayed* about things that bothered us. I mean we had—individually, though not in groups very much—intense dialogue with whatever we’d come to consider God. Dialogue about things we felt guilty about; things we were scared about; things we wanted desperately *not* to get caught about; things we just *had* to have; jams we needed to get out of. Usually nothing global—just stuff we had around us in life. When things turned out OK, we figured somehow God might have been involved. When they didn’t turn out OK, we didn’t tend to hold a grudge, we just figured “that’s how the cookie crumbles.”

In words I later learned in sociology—our world was local, not cosmopolitan. Our theology was not systematic, it was situational; it wasn’t rational, it was emotional.

But it was real and it was church for us. It was what faith meant to us. I may have, in later years, added a lot of frills to the mix and picked up more sophisticated language and concepts. I’m not sure, though, that I’ve moved very far from that original church—the one on Dargan Street, the one with the dark wood and high-pitched rafters, the one with the Victorian stained-glass windows, the one where I always sat halfway back on the left-hand side, comforted by seeing the back of Mamie Porter’s head a couple of rows ahead of me, seeing the Darbys up on the right in the second pew, Mrs. Griffith on the organ bench. The crowd from Mars Bluff often making up the choir. That beautiful soprano: She was so good she sang solos; so good she could be in the choir even if she was divorced. That was church for me.

Preparing for Formal Ministry

There was more, of course.

At home, my two Catholic cousins (sweet Dottie and Cynthia, who was the baby sister I never had) moved in with us in the forties. Uncle Ben came back from the war to stay at our house too. Dottie and Cynth’s mother had died. She was my mother’s sister, so both girls came to live with us.

During the war I got out of town each summer—because of the war, resort hotels couldn’t get college students as bell hops, so I spent four summers in Cashiers, North Carolina, working at High

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Hampton Inn. While there I went to the little ramshackled mission church across the road. It was there, so I went. That's what you did on Sundays. As a matter of fact I went over on VJ Day and rang the church bell.¹

I fell in love with the mountains in those summers, so I decided to go to college in the mountains too. Sewanee was an Episcopal college, on the Cumberland Plateau in Tennessee. But I went there because it was in the mountains. Not because of academics or church—it was just what you did.

Those were the years of falling into and out of love, or lust, or whatever else was bubbling at the time—but I hit the wall, permanently, at eighteen. When I found Polly, or she found me, everything changed. I cut college a year short and did a quick and dirty master's degree at the University of South Carolina so I could get a job and get married when she graduated in 1951. Problem? She was a Presbyterian, and church had become pretty important to me. Turned out to be no problem. She fell in love with Anglican stuff—the prayer book, the literature of England, and me. So we ended up—me as teacher, she as secretary to head of school—married, Episcopal style, in the same church I was baptized in. And would later be ordained in. I was twenty-one, she was twenty. We settled in Columbia, and our first child arrived almost immediately (nine months and seventeen days later—and both sets of parents counted in those days. Shoot. Back then *everybody* counted.) He was baptized in the same parish we'd been married in before I was ordained there.

I'd found my way as a teacher at the Opportunity School run by Miss Wil Lou Gray, a pioneer in adult education. She was a South Carolina character, known all over for her passion for educating the school dropouts, of which South Carolina was jammed full. Her ideas of education were, well, advanced. She believed the dropout students should study Rome and Athens, but they also ought to visit the places as they studied them. After the war she told her friends in South Carolina (who included Jimmy Byrnes, then secretary of state) she was going to Washington to ask for a surplus, decommissioned battleship to take her students around the world. Her friends knew better than to try to dissuade her, so they sent her off on the train to Washington with fried chicken, sandwiches, and cold drinks. When she came back a week or so later, they greeted her and asked how the trip had gone. "Did you get the battleship?" they asked with barely hidden smirks.

“No.” she said. “You know those people in Washington. They don’t have any imagination. But they did give me an airport they didn’t need any more!” They did—Columbia Army Air Base, 1,000 acres just outside the state capitol (it ended up as the campus of the Opportunity School, of the Area Trade School, *and* the commercial Columbia Airport).

Ever since, I have been careful not to scoff at friends who go off with crazy expectations.

Ministry was still on my mind, but pushed way back, partly for uncertainty, partly for hormones. But it grew stronger over the two years of getting to know the lives of the adult students I was teaching. I discovered they needed much more than English literature to get through life, and I suspected that religious faith might be part of it.

Polly and I went to the Episcopal cathedral in Columbia, but it was really just a parish church. While teaching, I had had two years for voracious reading—much, much history (I remember enjoying even Gibbon! And Benvenuto Cellini and Winston Churchill), but no theology I can remember. I had to push the edges of the deep things in life too. One of my teaching colleagues committed suicide and it fell to me to manage things I had not dealt with—cutting a body down, managing a distraught family, organizing a funeral.

In 1952, though, we headed off to seminary in Virginia. The major influences there were Reuel Howe in pastoral theology, Clinical Pastoral Education at St. Elizabeth’s Hospital in Washington, fellow students (ten of us formed our own senior seminar to deal with stuff that wasn’t on the seminary’s agenda), and a two-year, five-couple group through which we introduced our spouses to the experiential learning we’d discovered in CPE. That group tested us all in group therapy.

I’d always done well in academics, so I did well at seminary, but I did not fall in love with theology. Biblical studies, yes, and even more, studies in pastoral care. Seminary was something I had to do before I could go back to try to lead a local church.

Parish Ministry in South Carolina

Dean Zabriskie at the seminary knew everybody and every place in The Episcopal Church. H shouted across the campus to me in the

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final months of my seminary experience: “Loren, do you know where the bishop is going to send you yet?”

“Yep,” I replied. “He’s sending me to Pinopolis. He says it’s a growing industrial area just outside Charleston.”

“Oh, yeah,” Zab replied. “That’s ‘Hell Hole Swamp,’” he added, apparently trying to be helpful. It wasn’t. As a matter of fact, it led me to have a healthy distrust of what bishops would tell me henceforth.

Actually it *was* in Hell Hole Swamp—the coastal area below the Santee River, in the middle of the area in which great plantations had grown the indigo and rice that made pre-Civil War South Carolina both very, very prosperous, and also the center of the slave economy. This country, before the Civil War, had been the center of slavery in the state.²

During Prohibition, the area was also famous as a landing place for illegal imports of prohibited liquid goods from the Caribbean, and for some gang warfare about all that. In a New Deal hydroelectric project, the plantations had been flooded, and the plantation owners had moved to the high ground of Pinopolis.³

When I checked with the South Carolina State Department of Development for further information, I discovered that in spite of what the bishop had told me, the entire county in which Pinopolis was located (Berkeley County), which had some 30,000 inhabitants, had a total of *three* who were engaged in what the county described as “industry.” You now know more of why I take the words of bishops with a grain of salt.

So I walked into my parish, settling into my first house with a wife who was expecting our third child to go with our now two boys. With academic honors and a seminary degree, I was just a small-town boy in a totally alien environment, knowing absolutely nothing about life as a parish pastor. I was broke, so I had to start work even before I could get ordained. I *knew* a lot of theology (Tillich, two Niebuhrs, a literary critical knowledge of the Scriptures, and all that). But I didn’t know what I was supposed to do, or when or how to do it.

This was about eight months after the Supreme Court ruled for the desegregation of the schools, and we at seminary had spent energy and time—lots of both—worrying about how this might impact our work, we who were going to parishes in the “rural deep South.” Panic was close to the surface for most of us as we read daily newspaper accounts that talked of “massive resistance” and “nullification,” and

our kinfolk told us how angry everyone was. We heard about how upset people were at “outside agitators.” We wondered if we were going to be perceived as such agitators. When one of my best friends at seminary joined the NAACP, I thought he was crazy, but I envied his craziness. No other white person I’d ever known would have done that.

I walked into the beautiful white building that was to be my church, my primary center of ministry. It was absolutely beautiful, with clear glass windows and a magnificent clear fan window above the altar, looking out on massive long-leaf pines in what I would soon find out was Doc Fishburne’s yard. I loved its brightness, its white paint, the colonial box pews. Outside was an enormous magnolia tree, and crepe myrtles lined the one dirt road through town. There was a one-room post office across that road where I soon learned everybody gathered to talk when the mail came. The setting was straight from an eighteenth-century novel, only American. I looked around the church where I was to learn to preach. There was a processional cross and a flag. I felt immediately at home.

Oh my God!

It was not the flag I expected—the forty-eight-star, thirteen-stripe Old Glory I’d found in many churches during World War II. It was a Confederate Stars and Bars flag!

It knocked me for a loop. What should I do? I didn’t know much, but with all the baggage I’d brought with me from seminary—long conversations about the growing tensions over race, the arguments in local papers and on the radio, I knew two contradictory things. I *knew* the flag had to go. I couldn’t stand what it stood for. I knew just taking it out all by myself would violate all sorts of relationships as well as any sense of commonality with the parish leadership. A clear no-win situation. Who should I ask? The bishop had assigned a clergy mentor for me, but I already knew he was an alcoholic and undependable. I was alone, I felt. So I did what I felt I *had* to do, knowing it was strategically a very bad step. I moved the flag out by myself, without asking anybody, and I never told anyone what I’d done. (I’ve wondered since if I really thought nobody would notice! I just did it. I felt I had to!)

Nobody said anything to me about it. Silence. We went three years, doing all sorts of things together—many of them first-rate things. But nobody spoke about what I had done with the flag. Until three years later.

I had already made my decision to leave Pinopolis for a call to Chapel Hill, North Carolina, and I went to see Miss Carrie Cain, the person whose depth of faith and love had sustained me for three years. She had taught me more than I can say—all the things I had not learned at seminary. She not only had become my seminary, she was one of the most extraordinary persons of faith I've ever known. (Years later I dedicated a book, *Transforming Congregations for the Future*, to her.) I told her I was going to leave. She gave me wonderful feedback about my work and the state of the parish, and then she asked me one question. "I need to know," she said, "why you moved our flag." I don't know to this day what I said in reply. I may well have lied to her. At that moment I knew I had missed something important. As I have come to understand it, I had judged their symbol through my prejudice, not theirs. I have tried to hold that learning close to my heart ever since. When I went back to the parish office that day, I looked in the parish register and found dozens of names recorded, including several of her father's generation, with the notation that they were "KIA" in the war that they still called *the* war.

But I've never forgotten it. All of it. It was a turning point inside me.

It was while in Pinopolis that I had a major learning experience in what was called a Group Life Laboratory—basically an introduction to group dynamics and the pedagogy of experiential education. This ten-day conference simply reoriented us to how groups work. It substantially influenced all the teaching I've done since then, as well as my understanding of the way to lead groups and plan change.

Through this period of my work, I think my primary model of what I was doing was based in a therapeutic approach. If something was wrong, that approach assumes it could be fixed, but first you had to understand it. If you understood it, you could figure out how to change it so it would work. Maybe you'd have to tinker with it, but eventually it could be fixed. Then you could tell or teach other people how to diagnose similar problems and fix them. It was a model adapted from the world of medicine (my father was a doctor, so the approach was familiar to me), the presuppositions of the academic world that had trained me for two decades, and the reinforcement of doing clinical pastoral education in the therapeutic setting of a psychiatric hospital. But those presuppositions were beginning to be

challenged—by learning about the ambiguities of human life through the world of psychiatry, through intense personal engagements in group therapy, and through what some of us had begun to sense in what we later learned to call family systems thinking—as I struggled with the pastoral care of a flood of alcoholism in my parish. The best “therapy” I could find didn’t seem to “fix” very much, or for very long.

With lots of learning under my belt—several disasters, a number of new boundaries crossed, with a pretty chastened picture of what I was able to do as a pastor, but with no little growing commitment to the life of the local congregation—I collected myself for the challenge of a mission church in North Carolina, with perhaps the loudest advice being to “Watch out for all those Communists in Chapel Hill.”