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Robert A. Chesnut. *Transforming the Mainline Church: Lessons in Change from Pittsburgh's Cathedral of Hope*. Louisville: Geneva, 2000. Pp. x + 180. \$19.95 (Paper). 549788

[1] How can mainline Protestant churches survive and thrive? That is the key question Robert Chesnut addresses in *Transforming the Mainline Church*. In 1988, Chesnut left a comfortable congregation in Evanston, Illinois to become the senior pastor at East Liberty Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh. The large urban church, located in a neighborhood facing significant economic problems, had lost many members over the prior decades. Chesnut describes his experience leading the congregation through a process of innovation and transformation.

[2] His key thesis is that the entire life of the church - everything a congregation does - should be seen not only a service to members, but as a way for the congregation to grow. The focus must shift from meeting the needs of those "inside" to "reaching those outside whom we seek to draw inside" (5). Chesnut is writing from within a tradition of "progressive, ecumenical, mainline Protestantism," and his book is oriented toward that audience, asking readers to follow his journey with the challenge: "Are we able to be pilgrims, to risk drinking from some strange wells rather than adopting a defensive, circle-the-wagons stance toward the changes that are transforming the religious world around us today?" (135).

[3] The engaging narrative weaves insights from a wide range of literature together with a description of the difficulties Chesnut and the congregation faced as they have struggled to survive. The focus on East Liberty provides an enriching depth of detail, but also limits the possibility of drawing directly from that experience to the experience of other struggling mainline congregations. Clearly, East Liberty - with its 18 million dollar endowment, 700 members, and established community ministries - is not a "typical" struggling congregation.

[4] At the same time, many of the obstacles to change that Chesnut describes are rooted in group dynamics that apply to many congregations. There was clear conflict at East Liberty between a group of long-time members who countered efforts for change and those members who were forwarding new ways of being church. Chesnut's description of the

conflicts and how they were addressed forms the core of his text and serves as one of most helpful parts of the book.

[5] The book draws from models of church growth, from popular management and leadership books, and from the sociology of religion to provide a helpful analysis of the challenges facing many of today's mainline congregations. This diversity of frameworks provides a helpful counterpoint to the experience of East Liberty. Among the important changes that Chesnut suggests are emphasizing diversity, adapting worship and music styles to reflect the tastes of the community, advertising and marketing, involving the congregation in the local community, and "offering the lost and lonely a community of caring and sharing, of solace and healing, of values and visions for a purposeful life" (112).

[6] Chesnut argues throughout the book that churches must move from an "either/or" way of thinking to "both/and." For instance, the congregation has emphasized both the mystical tradition and social justice efforts. To maintain this balance, Chesnut has drawn on the strength of "New Age" spirituality and Pentecostal/charismatic movements, with their emphasis on "the believer's direct, spiritually transforming experience of God..." (128). At the same time, he recognizes the potential for such personal religious experience to result in "navel gazing." This can be countered by highlighting the tradition of social justice within mainline Protestantism, even while recognizing that the church has often failed to incarnate what it preaches.

[7] Chesnut's emphasis on church marketing also follows a "both/and" approach. On the one hand, he acknowledges the danger that marketing may lead to "a temptation to 'sell out' for success." On the other, he argues that the danger can be countered by a willingness to "stand for certain principles that are not universally popular but that are, nevertheless right" (119). The difficulty is that the willingness to stand for certain principles may be in direct conflict with the effort to provide a "product" that reaches a "target audience." Chesnut recognizes this when he comments, "Openly welcoming everyone without regard to race, class, or sexual orientation, advocating for gun control, for example, will obviously not 'sell' very well to some people either inside or outside the church" (119). The problem is clear - but the solution is not.

[8] Chesnut is optimistic that there is a "market" for a diverse and inclusive church, particularly since it offers a spectrum of programs that appeal to a range of parishioners. But how can that diverse group be drawn together into a cohesive community? Chesnut's description of the conflict in the church makes the challenge evident. Inevitably, some are pushed to the margins, even if those pushed are those unwilling to participate in the change. While Chesnut clearly articulates the process of overcoming cliques within the congregation, he does not describe as fully how the congregation has struggled with, for instance, understandings of racial oppression or the relationship between the congregation and the community.

[9] Clearly, the book provides only one perspective - conflict and change are described through the voice of a pastor leading the effort for change. I would have liked to read more about the extent to which congregational transformation has led to a relatively homogeneous understanding of the purpose and mission of the church. Have opposing voices been silenced? Chesnut seems to argue that those opposing voices have self-selected themselves

from the community and joined other communities. Does this process replicate homogeneity of opinion and perspective rather than of race and class?

[10] The issues that the book raises are critical for congregations struggling to be faithful to their tradition and to meet the changing needs of the culture. *Transforming the Mainline Church* provides a rich and textured account of one congregation's struggle to meet both the material and spiritual needs of the local neighborhood as well as the wider community. Chesnut also effectively connects this account to broader theoretical models. The book would make useful and engaging reading for clergy, as well as for seminary courses addressing issues of church growth and congregational life.

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