

WESLEY THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

OUR LIVES ON THE TABLE:
AN INVESTIGATION INTO
THE LITURGICAL PRACTICES OF SEEKERS CHURCH

A THESIS SUBMITTED
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF THEOLOGICAL STUDIES

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WASHINGTON, DC

FEBRUARY 15, 1998

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I. Introduction

The Seekers Church is an intentional Christian community of about eighty adults and twenty children. We who worship there have a strong commitment to the church as chosen family, sharing our lives deeply as we try to live out Christ's command to love one another. Although we meet often in smaller groupings, the center of our life together is Sunday worship, which begins with a gathering-time for welcoming guests and making announcements and ends with lively conversation over coffee for at least an hour after the benediction. In between, we sing and pray in silence and aloud, sharing laughter and tears, using a liturgy that grows out of our life in Christ and is grounded in the liturgical traditions of the Church Universal.

According to Orthodox liturgical theologian Alexander Schmemmann, "liturgy is always the *expression* of the faith, life and teachings of the Church, and therefore a sure path to learning these. '*Lex orandi est lex credendi.*' The rule of prayer is the rule of belief."¹ That is, not only does how we pray reveal what we believe, but also the way we pray, especially in communal prayer, forms us as Christians. If that is so, then what is done communally in church on Sunday may say more about the beliefs of that church than does any theological document set out in propositional terms. More than any apologia or argument, the specifics of how a church prays, its liturgy or order of worship, teaches the congregation what it means to be a Christian. Included in this is not simply what is said or sung, but what is done and seen — the actions and visual environment of worship.

¹ Alexander Schmemmann, *Liturgy and Life: Christian Development through Liturgical Experience* (New York: Department of Religious Education Orthodox Church in America, 1974), 22.

Those churches and denominations that understand themselves to be “liturgical” are those which, like the Roman Catholic, Episcopalian, Lutheran, and Eastern Orthodox, follow a fixed pattern, more or less in conformity with the patterns established fairly early in Christian history. While this pattern offers some flexibility, and allows for differences arising from festal days or special occasions or circumstances, it is usually marked by a certain level of formality, and a reliance on the repetition of certain prayers, formulae and actions in a more-or-less fixed order. These are set out in detail in the prayer-texts and rubrics of the appropriate denominational books of worship. Such churches often have a rich visual environment, replete with clerical vestments, eucharistic vessels, candles, stained glass, and in many cases paintings and statuary. Eucharist is celebrated frequently, and an altar is generally a prominent feature of such churches, often set against an elaborate reredos depicting scenes from the life of Jesus or images of the heavenly city.

The so-called “non-liturgical” churches are those which, like the Baptists, Quakers, and many charismatic groups, rely primarily on spontaneous prayer and a looser pattern to govern normal communal worship. While some groups may follow a fairly standard pattern of opening prayers, hymns, scripture readings, and sermon, followed monthly or quarterly by Eucharist, prayers are frequently made up on the spot, or at least are understood to be composed as needed for the life of the congregation. Some of these church bodies use music as the main component of worship, singing praise songs and other hymns, sometimes interspersed with personal testimony and a short sermon. Worship services in other churches may be largely unstructured, as the congregation waits in prayerful silence for God’s word to be spoken immediately through any one of its

members. In most of these churches, the visual environment is relatively plain, although special occasions may be marked by banners or other decorations. Here, the hearing of the Word of God is understood as the principal activity, and the table of the Lord's Supper — if there is one at all — is generally quite plain as well, perhaps bearing the words "In Remembrance of Me."

The Seekers Church has no denominational affiliation, but has ties with a number of other churches which have grown out of the Church of the Saviour in Washington, DC. Referring to itself as "ecumenical," it consciously draws its liturgical practice from the broad sweep of historical Christianity. Its immediate ancestry, through Gordon Cosby (founder of Church of the Saviour), and through its own founding members, Sonya Dyer and Fred Taylor, is in the Brethren and Baptist traditions. A strong current of silent communal prayer, and a non-hierarchical understanding of the priesthood of all believers, derives from a close association with Quakers and other peace churches. A commitment to the use of the Revised Standard Lectionary for weekly readings, and to observance of the liturgical seasons ties Seekers' practice to that of the more structured churches and is a constant reminder of its connection to the Church Universal. Other practices seem to be more idiosyncratic, but have roots in earlier customs of the historical Church.

Like the earliest Christian communities, Seekers has no credal statement or Book of Discipline. Rather, its theological understandings are experienced and transmitted through its liturgical and communal life. Communion is celebrated on the first Sunday of each month at a table which supports a visually rich composition relating to the seasonal liturgies and to events in the life of the community. By looking at the liturgy texts and the altar table as they change through the course of one year, it is possible to know a great

deal about what Seekers believes about God, the world, human beings, and about the relationships between and among them. As a member of Seekers Church, and of the small group which structures its worship, it is my hope that in Seekers' understandings about how community life, art, and collaborative creation may be a path toward authentic Christian discipleship, other church bodies may find hope and inspiration for a renewed approach to worship.

II. Background

A. Context

The central action of the Christian Church is the Eucharist. Called at various times and places the Lord's Supper, communion, or Mass, this symbolic meal is accompanied by the remembrance of sacred history, from the instant of creation through the moment of Christ's death and resurrection. In asserting that the bread is the broken body of Christ and the wine is the seal of the new covenant in Christ's blood, the Church reaffirms its connection with God's people throughout the ages and in all places. In eating and drinking the sacred meal together, Christians are transformed out of their insular individuality into members of the resurrected Body of the living Christ.

The Eucharist has from the earliest times been understood both as sacred meal and as sacrifice. Accordingly, the place of this rite has been understood as both table and as altar. The earliest records of eucharistic prayers and practices may be found in the book of Acts, some of the writings of Paul, and such texts as the *Apostolic Tradition* attributed to Hippolytus, c. 225,² the early third century *Teaching of the Apostles (Didache)*³, and the "Anaphora of Addai and Mari," or *Sharar*, which was preserved in an oral tradition and reconstructed from later Syriac manuscripts.⁴

More or less contemporary with these texts are the murals in the catacombs at Rome, as well as those in the Christian building at Dura-Europos. Although most of the

² Cabié, Robert, *The Church at Prayer, Volume II: The Eucharist*, edited by A. G. Martimort (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1986), 26ff.

³ J. Fitzgerald, trans. *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles: The Greek Text with Translation* (New York: John B. Alden: 1891), 19. Section IX "And concerning the Eucharist, thus give thanks. First as to the cup: We give thee thanks..." etc.

⁴ Cabié, 30ff.

catacomb frescos depict biblical stories of redemption, deliverance, or salvation, one image in the Callistus catacomb refers directly to the meal aspect of the Eucharist. In it, a large three-legged table bearing a loaf of bread and a fish is the visual and symbolic center of a composition in what is primarily a funerary setting.⁵ At Dura, there is no such direct representation, but in the room designated as the baptistery, there is a niche on the south wall which originally had a low bench or table beneath it. Clark Hopkins suggests that the niche was intended to hold the scroll of the Gospel, and the table the elements for the Eucharist that would have been celebrated at the conclusion of the ceremony of baptism.⁶

The meal symbolism is founded in what is known as “the institution narrative,” as recounted in the various Gospels (Matthew 26, Mark 14, and Luke 22), and associated not only with Jesus’ last meal with his disciples, but with the heavenly banquet in the realm of God. Joyce Ann Zimmerman points out that for devout first century Jews, even simple meals were a kind of liturgy, and festal meals had a recognizable ritual form. Such occasions were transformed into sacred meals by the blessings, *berakoth*, over the cups and the bread.⁷ Traces of the Jewish *berakoth* remain in the traditional language of many eucharistic liturgies, which retain the four-fold action of Jesus of taking, blessing, breaking, and giving the bread and the cup to those with him at table.

The sacrificial aspect of Eucharist is almost equally ancient. R. J. Halliburton says

⁵ Paul Corby Finney, *The Invisible God: The Earliest Christians on Art*. (Oxford University Press: New York, 1994), 216.

⁶ Clark Hopkins, *The Discovery of Dura-Europos*, edited by Bernard Goldman (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979), 116.

⁷ Joyce Ann Zimmerman, C. PP. S., *Liturgy as Living Faith: A Liturgical Spirituality* (Scranton: University of Scranton Press, 1993), 55.

that from the second century onwards the language of sacrifice was the most common in the writings of the early Fathers. He refers to John Chrysostom, Cyril of Jerusalem, Theodore of Mopsuesta, and Gregory of Nyssa as understanding Eucharist as primarily sacrificial. He cautions, however, that there is no implication that (at least at this stage) Christ's sacrifice is perpetually or repeatedly offered, but rather that Christ as high priest makes intercession at the heavenly altar. It is in this sense that Christ's sacrifice, which is not simply what happened at the cross but includes all of Christ's redeeming work, that is perpetually available to all; and it is in this sense that in the Eucharist the Church may be said to offer Christ's sacrifice, making it possible for Christians to perceive and receive redemption.⁸

In the Eastern tradition, the altar came to be understood as divine throne as well as banqueting table and altar of sacrifice. In his book *Liturgy and Life* Schmemmann says:

*The Altar is the mystical center of the church. It "represents" (makes present, actualizes, reveals to us -- for such is the realistic meaning of liturgical representation): (a) the Throne of God, to which Christ has raised us in His Glorious Ascension, before which we stand with Him in an eternal adoration; (b) the table of the Divine Banquet, to which Christ has called us and at which He eternally distributes the food of immortality and life eternal; (c) the altar of His Sacrifice for us, of his total oblation to God and to us.*⁹

Although the understanding of sacred meal never disappeared from either the liturgy or the theological thinking, by the fifth century the sacrificial aspects of Eucharist became more prominent. What had once been a simple table made of wood became a massive stone monument, shaped like a sarcophagus, and often containing the hallowed relics of a

⁸ R. J. Halliburton, "The Patristic Theology of the Eucharist", *The Study of Liturgy, Revised Edition*, Cheslyn Jones et al. Eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 249.

⁹ Schmemmann, 36.

local saint or even, if possible, those believed to be of Jesus himself. Although current thinking in the Roman Catholic Church has recovered much of the table symbolism, the sacrificial aspect of Eucharist is still very important. Current rubrics require that churches have a fixed, immovable altar made of natural stone, and strongly suggest that relics of martyrs or other saints be placed beneath it. However, in the more relaxed atmosphere following the Second Vatican Council, the rubrics do allow that portable altars no longer need be made of stone, and that any suitable table may be used for eucharistic celebrations outside of churches.¹⁰

The reformers of the 16th century (and in the case of the Hussites, the Moravians, and Lollards, even earlier) discarded much of the sacrificial, as well as sacramental, understanding of Eucharist. Preferring to call it the Lord's Supper, many of the churches which grew out of the Reformation stripped away what they understood as meaningless ritual. The sacrificial aspect of Eucharist was rejected, and the liturgy reduced to the simple recitation of the institution narrative.¹¹ The renewed emphasis on Eucharist as sacred meal, in which the saving acts of Jesus Christ are memorialized through symbolic eating and drinking, was accompanied by a renewed understanding of the importance of the community in Christian worship. No longer was there reference to an altar or to sacrifice, but to the table of the Lord's Supper.¹² In some church bodies, such as the Church of the Brethren, the Eucharist as such was virtually abandoned in favor of what was understood as the restoration of the *agape* meal of the primitive Church, the

¹⁰ A. G. Martimort, "Liturgical Signs," *The Church at Prayer, Volume I: Principles of the Liturgy* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1986), 208f.

¹¹ D. H. Tripp, "Protestantism and the Eucharist," *The Study of Liturgy*, 295f.

¹² Hughes Oliphant Old, *Guides to the Reformed Tradition: Worship that is Reformed According to Scripture* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1984), 127.

communal Love Feast.¹³

Along with a growing openness to ecumenical dialogue in wake of Vatican II, the liturgical renewal movement which began in the late 19th century in the Roman Catholic Church spread to many Protestant denominations and even influenced some Eastern Orthodox thinking. A study of some recently discovered ancient documents, especially the *Apostolic Tradition* of Hippolytus, has led several Protestant denominations to a recovery of the language of the *Sursum corda* (“Lift up your hearts”) and the *Sanctus* (Holy, holy, holy....”), as well as a fuller understanding of the anamnetic aspects of the Great Thanksgiving, so that today their communion liturgies are in many ways quite similar to the Episcopalian and Roman Catholic traditions.¹⁴ At the same time, the Roman Catholic Church has begun to re-emphasize the communal and table-fellowship aspects of communion, so that while there are still substantial differences in doctrine, both Roman Catholic and Protestant writers now understand the primary locus of Christ’s presence to be in the celebration of Eucharist — however it is named — in the gathered Body of Christ.¹⁵

¹³ Sonya Dyer, interview by author. Notes. Washington, DC, 1997.

¹⁴ See Allan Bouley, ed. *Catholic Rites Today: Abridged Texts for Students* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1992), 277ff., for Eucharistic Prayer II; Church of England, *The Alternative Service Book 1980*, (London: SPCK, 1980), 130ff., for The Order of Holy Communion, Rite A, First Eucharistic Prayer; United Methodist Church, *The United Methodist Book of Worship* (Nashville, Tennessee: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1992), 36ff., for A Service of Word and Table; United Church of Christ, *The New Century Hymnal*, (Cleveland, Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 1995) 1ff., for Service of Word and Sacrament.

¹⁵ For examples of such thinking, see Zimmerman, 109 for a Roman Catholic perspective: “Communion is...our personal and public proclamation that we are the Body of Christ...Communion, then, makes sense only within the dynamic flow of the whole Liturgy of the Eucharist.”; Lutheran Philip Pfatteicher, *Liturgical Spirituality* (Valley Forge, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1997), 194: “In this meal we eat and drink with the Lord and his disciples. Just as the Lord’s Prayer prays with ad for the community, ‘Our Father,’ so the Lord’s Supper will not allow us to neglect the horizontal dimension of the community in heaven and earth with whom we share the meal”; and Methodist Don Saliers, *Worship as Theology: Foretaste of Glory Divine* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994) 48: “In the mystery of communion with God is where God seeks, not only to be glorious for us, but to allow us to be sons and daughters, bearing the hope that *all* shall share in the glory of a liberated creation.”

B. History and Sources of The Seekers Church

1. The Church of the Saviour

The Church of the Saviour was founded in 1946 by Gordon Cosby, a Baptist minister who had been profoundly affected by his experiences as a chaplain during WWII. Although Cosby himself had been to seminary and ordained as a Baptist minister, he held a deep commitment to the biblical concept of the priesthood of all believers and taught that a church “that takes that thought seriously must think of itself as a seminary to train laity for ministry in the world.”¹⁶ Instituted to transcend denominational differences, and calling for radical, sacrificial discipleship from its members, Church of the Saviour began with a constitution that declared its intention “to be in association and fellowship with, and to be subject to, the World Council of Churches as the representation and expression of Christianity throughout the world.”¹⁷ Membership was conditional on making a commitment statement, to be renewed annually, and only to be entered upon after a lengthy period of preparation and study, which included classes in scripture, doctrine, stewardship, and Christian growth.

Perhaps the most striking difference between Church of the Saviour and most other churches was its insistence on intimacy, both with God and with other members of the church body. Members understood themselves to be part of a covenant community, a family of faith, governed solely by God. Through an understanding of spiritual disciplines as “a response to the waiting grace of God,”¹⁸ they sought to avoid the traps of legalism

¹⁶ Elizabeth O'Connor, *Letters to Scattered Pilgrims* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1979), xiii.

¹⁷ Draft of constitution of Church of the Saviour, as quoted in Elizabeth O'Connor, *Call to Commitment* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 18.

¹⁸ O'Connor, *Call to Commitment*, 34.

and self-justification. Through meeting and working in small groups, they nurtured and held one another accountable to prayer, study and action.¹⁹

Within thirty years, the missions of the Church of the Saviour became well known in Washington, DC, for their charitable work with poor people. Meanwhile, Elizabeth O'Connor's books — *Call to Commitment*; *Servant Leaders, Servant Structures*; *Letters to Scattered Pilgrims*, and others — had spread to a world-wide readership the news of how a commitment to radical discipleship was transforming people's lives. The Church of the Saviour had become not a single entity, but twenty-five separate mission groups. Although many continued to attend Gordon Cosby's Sunday worship services and look to him for leadership, he understood that the church had grown too big for members to continue to be in close contact with one another. In 1975, he began to preach about what he called the New Lands, encouraging the formation of separate worshipping communities, each with lay leadership. In 1979, O'Connor wrote "By the spring of 1976, the Church of the Saviour had reformed itself into six new church communities" and listed Christ House, a hospice and place of healing for destitute men; Potter's House, a Christian coffee house, bookstore, and gathering place; Dayspring Farm and Retreat House; Jubilee Church, sponsoring low income housing; Dunamis Vocations Church; Eighth Day Church; and Seekers Church.²⁰ In 1996, the nine worshipping communities which then comprised Church of the Saviour chose to incorporate as independent church bodies; by 1997, at least thirteen churches had grown directly out of the Church of the Saviour, and an unknown number of others around the country patterned at least part of

¹⁹ O'Connor, *Call to Commitment*, 43.

²⁰ O'Connor, *Letters to Scattered Pilgrims*, xiv.

their lives on the model inspired by Gordon and Mary Cosby, Elizabeth O'Connor, and those that gathered around them.

2. *The Call of Seekers Church*

Unlike the new churches that formed around existing missions, the Seekers Church was called into being by Sonya Dyer and Fred Taylor in direct response to Gordon Cosby's preaching on the New Lands. Recognizing that many people, particularly parents engaged in raising families, needed more support than most Church of the Saviour members normally experienced in living out their commitment to Christian servanthood, Dyer and Taylor gathered a community of those who shared their ideals of shared leadership, inclusivity, and gender equality. Seekers' call reads in part:

By shared leadership we mean empowering the gifts of women and men to help our worship flow out of and feed into the life of the community. We are committed to evoking and giving space to new gifts of preaching, liturgical leadership, creative worship forms, giving, mission and other acts of faith.²¹

The name of the community was based on a passage by Robert Greenleaf, in which he wrote of his conviction that prophetic voices are equally prevalent in every age but that not every time or place is equally ready to listen. Greenleaf wrote:

The variable is not in the presence or absence or the relative quality and force of the prophetic voices. Prophets grow in stature as people respond to their message. If their early attempts are ignored or spurned, their talent may wither away. It is seekers, then, who make prophets, and the initiative of any one of us in searching for and responding to the voice of contemporary prophets may mark the turning point in their growth and service.²²

What the founders of Seekers seemed to have believed, and what the Seekers Church continues to act out in its ongoing life, is that a responsive, listening, nurturing

²¹ Seekers Church, *A Guide to Seekers Church* (Washington, DC: by Seekers Church, October 1996), 5.

²² Robert Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership*, (New York: Paulist Press, 1977), 8.

community helps each of its members to become servant leaders to the world, bringing Christ into the everyday structures of life, work, family, and citizenship.

3. *The Legacy of Baptists, Brethren, Mennonites, Quakers and Others*

Like Gordon Cosby, Fred Taylor came from a strong Baptist background, and while neither Cosby nor Taylor has any current formal involvement with the Seekers Church, the Baptist influence remains strong within Seekers. Many at Seekers grew up in Baptist churches, and although most reject the more fundamentalist and conservative notions of many Baptists, they retain a strong sense of biblical heritage and personal commitment to Christ. While Seekers leaves the decision about infant baptism to the parents, when an adult believer is baptized in Seekers, it is often done by full immersion in the lake at Dayspring Farm.

Sonya Dyer, who co-founded Seekers with Taylor, continues to be active in Seekers leadership. Her background in the Church of the Brethren, and her strong interest in ecumenism in general and liturgy in particular, have given Seekers some distinctive liturgical customs and theological insights. The most obvious link to the Brethren is the annual Maundy Thursday footwashing, in which the community gathers in the dimly lit chapel and retells the story of Jesus washing the feet of the disciples. In silence and with great solemnity, one person kneels at another's feet with basin and towel, washing and drying each foot with care and love. Then, the one who has been washed carries the basin to another, until the entire assembly has been both washed and washer. Afterwards, all share in a simple meal of bread and figs and olives, and tell stories about their faith journeys.

From Church of the Saviour, and from its ongoing links with the Religious Society of

Friends (Quakers) and with Mennonites, Seekers has received the legacies of silence and a commitment to peacemaking. Worship at Seekers has noticeably more silent prayer than is usual at most churches, although not as much as at a meeting of Friends. From the Friends, too, comes reinforcement for Seekers' practice of having no professional clergy and a relatively informal style of worship.

4. *Seekers at Worship*

In its worship life, Seekers enacts its core belief in the priesthood of all believers. Although several members have been ordained as clergy in various denominations, Seekers makes no distinction between clergy and laity. Rather, on making a commitment to core membership, each person is ordained to ministry in the world as well as in the church. Any core member may preside at eucharistic celebrations, and whoever feels so called in the performance of ministry may be provided with appropriate credentials to satisfy the requirements of the state or of other churches in which they might be asked to perform the functions normally reserved to clergy. An "open pulpit" policy provides that anyone in the community who feels so called may sign up to preach at any regular Sunday worship that has not already been filled. While there are no official qualifications for preaching, there are some general guidelines, and first-time (and other) preachers are encouraged to consult with Celebration Circle (the mission group charged with supporting the community's worship life) as they prepare. As a sign of the community's commitment to inclusion and gender equality, the liturgist is (almost) always male when there is a woman preacher, and vice versa. Likewise, the monthly Eucharist always has two leaders, one male and one female.

Seekers recognizes that the Word of God does not always come in the form of spoken

words. Members of the Seekers community come from a wide variety of religious backgrounds and bring not only their memories but also their involvements in such areas as liturgical dance, sacred music, clowning, drama, and visual art into the worship life of the church. As different people with different backgrounds come into and out of Seekers in general, and Celebration Circle in particular, the worship life of the community is in constant flux. For instance, although some were initially wary (associating processions with clericalism and hierarchical, high-church notions expressly rejected by Seekers) recently a processional cross and banner were made by members of the congregation, and now are a regular presence, leading the entire church into and out of worship. Frequently, the time set apart for the sermon may be used for dance, for music, for a dramatic presentation, or even for an extended period of communal silence.

III. Collaborative Creation

Worship in Seekers is guided by a small group called Celebration Circle. Numbering at any given time from three to seven members, Celebration Circle is part accountability group and part committee. It is one of several mission groups which serve as “focal points for living out our commitments to mission (the journey outward), community (the life of Seekers), and spiritual growth (the journey inward).”²³ Celebration Circle is committed to deep personal sharing, mutual trust, and collaboration as the method by which it approaches its work. Its call reads in part:

Celebration Circle is called to energize and structure the worship life of the Seekers Church. They write Seekers' worship liturgies, plan and coordinate worship and other celebrations, and coordinate preaching.

In Celebration Circle our work is some combination of what is traditionally done by ministers, worship committees and altar guilds....During our weekly mission group meetings, we select themes for worship based on the lectionary and concerns in the life of the community, compose the liturgies and special rituals, schedule the preachers and work with them to select the hymns and music, and plan the altar table....On Sundays, we arrange the worship space and coordinate the different parts of the morning....²⁴

In general, the year is shaped by the festal cycles of Advent-Christmas-Epiphany and Lent-Easter- Pentecost. The weeks between Epiphany and Ash Wednesday are considered the Season of Epiphany, and the long “ordinary time” season from Pentecost to Advent is broken into four thematic sections suggested by the life of the community. In order to maintain some consistency in the preaching — a difficult task with an “open pulpit” policy — as well as to maintain connection with other churches worldwide, Seekers follows the Revised Common Lectionary for its weekly readings from scripture. The

²³ Seekers Church, *Mission Groups in Seekers Church* (Washington, DC: by Seekers Church, 1996), 4.

²⁴ *Mission Groups in Seekers Church*, 16.

entire congregation is encouraged to study the lectionary scriptures each week in order to be fully prepared for Sunday worship. Preachers are asked to work with at least one of the lectionary scriptures, as well as the theme for the season, as they prepare to share the Word as they understand it.

A. Writing Liturgy

In order to maintain a flexible but familiar framework for the worship of the community, Celebration Circle is committed to collaboration as a guiding principle. In practice, this collaboration may take many forms, and occurs on many different levels. A typical sequence is as follows:

Two or three times a year, we think together about themes for the coming several seasons. Two or more people volunteer to read the lections for each of the seasons to be considered, in order both to familiarize themselves with the texts, and to find some common image or idea to give focus to the season. At the next meeting, the images and ideas are shared and discussed, and new ideas grow out of a brainstorming process in which no thought is rejected as being too silly or disrespectful. These sessions often are marked by playful high spirits and laughter, alternating with somber moments when we are touched at a deep level. Eventually, there is a moment when we hear as one, when it is apparent that not only the theme but the words have been found to express the way that this year's Advent, for instance, differs from any other. Often, the themes for an entire cycle may emerge in one session. At other times, the process gets stuck, and we agree to go on to something else, and come back to working on themes at a later time.

Once the theme for a season has been found, we look for a short reading as a

meditative focus. Referred to as a “reflection paragraph,” this short piece of poetry or other excerpt from theological, spiritual, or devotional writings appears at the beginning of the seasonal worship bulletin. As group members read their suggestions aloud, ideas are generated for other parts of the liturgy. Sometimes, the right reflection paragraph seems obvious to everyone. More often, however, there is disagreement, or suggestions for editorial changes.

At this point, a number of different things may happen. Sometimes, one person may be inspired to write the entire liturgy, based on all the ideas and images that have emerged in the conversations on theme, and will bring it to the group for comments and suggestions. At other times, various individuals may volunteer to write one or more sections each, or to work on sections in groups of two or three. Liturgies written for the current season in other years will be consulted, and sometimes a section or two, or even the entire liturgy, will be reused as is, or with some minor modification. As is true for the reflection paragraph, ideas for liturgy may come from a variety of sources, including hymn texts, denominational books of worship and time-honored prayers of the Church Universal, and the original writings of members of the community.

When most of the prayers are written, they are printed out in the proper order, and read aloud, one person taking the part of the leader and the others, that of the congregation. This allows us to hear any clumsiness of language, find any tongue-twisters, and discuss the finer theological points of one or another phrasing. If there is enough time, there may be two or more read-throughs in successive weeks, allowing for further refinements of both language and typography.

B. The Visual Environment

Alongside the writing and editing process, the question of the visual environment is also addressed. Enough copies of the order of worship are printed for all the Sundays of a given season. The covers for these bulletins are imaginatively designed to complement the liturgical theme, and are made by Celebration Circle or other members of the congregation. Original artwork by adults or children is frequently used and kept for re-use in subsequent years. Sometimes this artwork is created by a single individual; other times it is the result of a communal exercise in collaborative art making. In either case the bulletin covers are a strong visual and tactile reminder of the values of creative energy and interdependence held by this community.

While it is sometimes altered for special events, the arrangement of the worship room remains substantially the same from week to week and season to season — the chairs form a rough semicircle, leaving a short aisle from the central entrance doors to the altar table. A rough-hewn wooden cross, made especially for the space by artist Jimilu Mason from a fallen tree at Dayspring retreat center, hangs above a narrow trestle-made from the same tree, and a small wooden lectern stands to one side. Other than two small stained-glass windows with geometric designs, the room is very plain.

The processional cross and congregational banner recently made by members of the community are usually present somewhere in the room as well, but the table is the primary visual focus during worship. As we do with the textual portion of the liturgy, the members of Celebration Circle brainstorm to arrive at images and symbols to be used on the table. We work with the theme for the season, the portions of the text already written, and go back to the lectionary readings for inspiration. Sometimes, one person will have a

flash of insight, and others will add details until everyone feels that it is “right.” Much of this conversation is theological, as we wrestle with the implications and nuances of textures, shapes, colors, and objects.

Once the basic elements of the visual arrangement are decided, one or two people are delegated (or volunteer) to obtain or make what is needed. Each Sunday during the season, all the parts are assembled before worship and put away for the next week afterward. Sometimes some detail is deliberately changed from week to week, but even when this is not so, each time the table looks a little different than it did the week before. While often one person takes on the main responsibility for these temporary art installations, others make suggestions or changes.

C. Collaboration and Theology

Collaboration is the practical working out of a theology in which the definition of the priesthood of all believers includes such concepts as shared leadership, Christian servanthood, and authority at the point of one’s gift. This is a very demanding way of working. For those who are used to writing or art making as a solitary endeavor, the outpouring of an individual intellect and soul, it is a discipline which takes some getting used to. Collaboration requires putting one’s best efforts at the service of the group, and a willingness to let go of those best efforts when it is clear that something else is needed.

The difference between collaboration and creation by committee is not unlike that between sense of the meeting and consensus. In his book *Beyond Consensus*, Barry Morley discusses how decisions are made among the Quakers. He says,

...consensus is achieved through a process of reasoning in which reasonable people search for a satisfactory decision. But in seeking the sense of the meeting we open ourselves to being guided to perfect resolution in

Light, to a place where we sit in unity in the collective inward Presence. Through consensus we decide it; through sense of the meeting we turn it over, allowing it to be decided. "Reaching consensus is a secular process," says a Friend. "In sense of the meeting God gets a voice."²⁵

Similarly, whether writing liturgy or designing the visual composition for the altar table or deciding on the image for the bulletin cover, the members of Celebration Circle do not seek to impose their wills upon one another or to convince one another of the rightness of their idea. We do not automatically assume that the person with specialized training or talent in poetry, music, or art will have the best solution. We do assume that those with specialized training or talent will put their gifts at the service of all, and often it is the case that a person with particular skills will offer to make something that has been envisioned by another. Our collaboration includes not only one another, but God.

It is deeply humbling to work in this way, to live out our collective call to empower "the gifts of women and men to help our worship flow out of and feed into the life of the community."²⁶ When collaboration works — as it does surprisingly often — we are aware of the presence of the Holy Spirit in our midst, of God's gift of grace in our common life. It is this gift that we offer back into the larger community as the weekly liturgy, the work of the people.

²⁵ Barry Morley. *Beyond Consensus: Salvaging Sense of the Meeting* (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Publications, 1993), 5.

²⁶ Seekers Church, *A Guide to Seekers Church*, 5.

IV. One Year of Seasonal Liturgies

A. *The Order of Worship*

A basic pattern of worship common to many churches includes entrance rites, proclamation and response, thanksgiving and communion, and sending forth. The entrance rites may include a gathering time, a greeting and call to worship, opening prayers and praise, and one or more hymns. Confession of sin and other penitential prayers may occur here, or later, during the response to the word. The proclamation and response generally include one or more readings from scripture, followed by a sermon, and prayers of penitence (if not part of the entrance rites) and intercession. The offertory (before communion, if there is to be one) in many churches is simply the collection of monetary gifts; in others, it is the bringing forth of the elements to be used in the communion from the congregation; still other churches conflate the two. The sending forth may include a closing hymn and a benediction pronounced by the presider of the assembly.²⁷

With some adjustments, this pattern is reflected in the order of worship at Seekers Church. Although Celebration Circle usually writes a new liturgy for each season (sometimes old ones are recycled), a more-or-less fixed pattern helps the congregation know what to expect. Following a communal gathering time in the entrance hall, at which news is shared, announcements made, hymns are practiced, and newcomers introduced, the congregation processes into the worship space and settles into silent reflection while

²⁷ United Methodist Book of Worship Committee, *United Methodist Book of Worship* (Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House), 6ff; Church of England, *The Alternative Service Book, 1980*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 119ff; Allan Bouley, O.S.B., ed., *Catholic Rites Today: Abridged Texts for Students* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1992), 201ff.

candles are lit and a musical prelude helps to set the tone for worship.

After a short greeting by the liturgist, a call to worship is read responsively, followed by a hymn. As the children leave for classes after the Word for the Children, the congregation again settles into a prolonged silence, punctuated by the responsively read litany. The solemnity is deepened by a recitation of common confession, followed by an opportunity for individuals to confess aloud or in silence. When the assurance has been given, congregants are invited once again to speak out of the silence, in thanksgiving and in intercession. When it seems that there are no more individual prayers to be said, the liturgist invites the congregation to rise for a hymn, in preparation for hearing the Word. Readings from the Hebrew scriptures and the Gospel are followed by short periods of silence, and then the preacher is introduced.

Silence once again follows the sermon, and the offering is taken while music is played. When the offertory prayer has been given, and the offering laid upon the altar, the energy in the room changes in anticipation of the most unusual feature of Seekers worship: the sharing of reflections on the week's lections, or on what has been said and done up until this point in the worship service. This is an opportunity to point out implications in the scripture readings which the preacher had not touched on, to share insights which have come up during the extended periods of silent prayer or during the week, and to respond to the preacher publicly regarding what he or she has brought to the community.

On the Sundays when there is communion, this time of shared reflections is omitted, in the understanding that the thoughts and ideas sparked by communal worship will take place over coffee after the service. After a brief period of announcements, a closing hymn

is sung, and the liturgist pronounces a benediction, ending the formal service. The following is the general format for worship at Seekers:

Entrance Rites:

Gathering

Reflection / Prelude

Call To Worship

Invocation

Hymn

Word For The Children

Silence

Litany

Silence

Prayers

Confession

Individual Prayers of Confession

Assurance

Prayers of the Community: Thanksgiving and Intercession

Proclamation and Response

Hymn

The Word

First Lesson

Silence

Gospel Lesson

Sermon

Silent Reflection

Thanksgiving and Communion

Offering

Shared Reflections

Communion (First Sunday only)

Sending Forth

Announcements

Hymn

Benediction

B. Communion at Seekers

1. The Altar Table

In *Environment and Art in Catholic Worship*, the altar is described as the holy table, "...upon which are placed the bread and wine and their vessels and the book...it is never used as a table of convenience or as a resting place for papers, notes, cruets, or anything

else.”²⁸ The way of thinking has become widespread in Protestant churches as well, and it is not uncommon to hear it expressed by clergy and interested laity alike. However, in many Protestant congregations, Eucharist is celebrated infrequently — monthly, or even quarterly. While there is a desire among some for more frequent celebrations of Eucharist, congregations are slow to change, and the communion table may be used for nothing more than two candlesticks and a cross, or even a floral arrangement, on most Sundays. Like many Protestant churches, Seekers Church celebrates Eucharist only on the first Sunday of each month. Unlike many other churches, however, Seekers liberally interprets the idea that the altar table should hold only that which is needed for the sacrament of communion. In the lived theology of its liturgical practice, Seekers Church understands the gathered community itself sacramentally. Thus, very early in the life of the community, it became the custom to use the table as a visual focus for worship, symbolically and visually laying the life of the community on the table, at the foot of the cross.

2. *The Eucharistic Celebration*

Communion at Seekers is open to all who wish to participate in this foretaste of the heavenly banquet. The text, which has been used in its current form for a number of years, suggests that it is the entire congregation, rather than those who preside, who are the celebrants, and who ask God to transform the congregation, both individually and collectively, through the eucharistic celebration. The theological understanding implicit in the epiclesis is that it is not so much the elements of bread and wine, but God’s people

²⁸ R. J. Halliburton, “The Patristic Theology of the Eucharist”, *The Study of Liturgy, Revised Edition*, Cheslyn Jones et. al. Eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), paragraph 71.

themselves, who in their mutual sharing become the Body of Christ. The Eucharist is expressly named as a sacrament, acknowledging that God is active and present in the ritual, the visible sign of an invisible reality.

The elements are set out on the altar table before worship begins, a visual focus throughout the service. The earthenware vessels were made by a member of the congregation, and consist of a small pitcher, a chalice, two patens, and a large number of small cups. The cups are all slightly different, in size, shape, and decoration, but this is not an accident. When asked about them, the potter said, "I know perfectly well how to make identical cups. When I made these, I centered a large lump of clay on the wheel, and threw them 'off the hump.' I made each of them a little different because we are all a little different, but all made from the same clay."²⁹ The wooden trays that hold the cups were made by another member of the congregation.

The Seekers communion liturgy is very brief, compared to many modern and ancient texts. Most of what is contained in the Great Thanksgiving is collapsed into a brief statement about our connection to the history of chosen-ness, and a confession both of our own sin and our desire to overcome it. This is followed immediately by what may be termed an *epiclesis*, an invocation of the Holy Spirit which historically — at least in some traditions — was understood as a petition to change the bread and wine into the actual Body and Blood of Christ. In Seekers' communion text, the emphasis is on the transformation of the community into the Body of Christ through the sharing of the elements. Because of this understanding that Christ's presence is in the gathered

²⁹ Marjory Bankson, interview by author. Notes. Washington, DC, 1994.

community of believers, rather than in the elements themselves, the *epiclesis* is spoken not by the leaders, but by the entire congregation, invoking God's transformative, life-giving power.

The next section of Seekers' communion text is an invitation to participation, to belief in Christ as the never-failing source of spiritual nourishment. On the surface, it seems that this should come first, but placed here it testifies to the reality that only an already-gathered community can extend an invitation to those who are not already part of it. It also is a reminder for all that Eucharist is a regular opportunity to repent, to turn away from sinful, destructive behaviors which inhibit full participation in God's blessings, and instead to receive God's grace in faith and gratitude.

Although much has been written in recent years about the absurdity of thinking that the so-called "words of institution" are some kind of magical formula, nonetheless no communion liturgy would be complete without them. As in the preparatory statements and prayer, here again there is a collapsing of some of the actions of more expansive communion liturgies, in this case the reciting of the words of institution and the fraction. The words are spoken by the leaders, and are accompanied by the actions of breaking bread and pouring wine.

At this point, the congregation is invited to stand in a large circle, all around the room. Those who are unable to stand are welcome to remain in their places, and are reminded that they will be served if they wish. Those who do not wish to participate in communion are invited to stand in the circle nevertheless, and allow the elements to be served past them. In this way, all are included in the unbroken and egalitarian community

of God's people.

Each of the leaders takes half of the broken loaf, and presents it on a paten to the person standing next to him or her, saying "The Body of Christ, broken for you." The person responds "Amen," breaks off a small piece, and serves his or her neighbor in turn, until all who wish are served around the circle. One of the leaders crosses the circle to retrieve the two patens with the bread, and then the leaders serve one another. As the elements are passed around the circle, the congregation sings a simple chant, *a capella*. When all have been served, one of the leaders says "Feed on Christ in your heart with thanksgiving," and all eat.

Similarly, the trays holding the filled cups are passed around the circle, with the words "The cup of the new covenant, poured out for you," or "the blood of Christ," and the response, "Amen." Once again, the leaders serve one another last, as a sign of servant leadership. When all who wish are holding cups, one of the leaders says "The blood of Christ, poured out for you and for all. Drink all of it," and all drink.

The final prayer of thanksgiving and dedication is recited by all present, and one of the leaders dismisses the congregation back to their seats with "go in peace." Communion is followed by announcements, a final hymn, and a benediction.

3. *Text of the Communion Liturgy*

Preparation for Communion

Leader 1: Friends, this is the joyful feast of the people of God.

Leader 2: We come to the Lord's table as chosen people. We come in our brokenness and in our desire for life lived out of love.

People: O God, in our inmost spirits, transform our sharing of bread and wine into an opening of us into you, into one another, into creation. Increase your life within us so that we may more totally be the body of Christ.

Words of Invitation

Leader 1: Friends, all persons who sincerely turn away from sin, and desire to live a new life of loving and doing God's will, are welcome to receive this sacrament in faith.

Leader 2: Jesus said, "I am the bread of life. She who come to me shall never hunger; he who believes in me shall never thirst." Come. Believe.

Words of Institution

Leader 1: On the night of his arrest Jesus took break, and after giving thanks to God, broke it and said, "This is my body which is for you; do this remembering me."

Breaking of the Bread

Leader 2: After supper Jesus took the cup and said, "This cup is the new covenant sealed in my blood; whenever you drink it, do this remembering me."

Pouring of the Fruit of the Vine

Sharing of the Elements

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Dedication

Unison: God of new life, with joy we have received this sacrament of bread and wine, giving you thanks for Jesus Christ, our peace and our hope. Unite your church throughout the world in continuing Christ's ministry of love and servanthood, that your name may be praised in all the earth. AMEN.

C. *The Seasons*

1. *Summer, 1996: Choosing Life — Wet and Green, Creative and Fruitful*

In the liturgical seasons of Ordinary Time, we pay attention to the natural world and to the rhythms of the society of which we are part as well as to the biblical witness of God's life in our midst. The theme for late summer was chosen because summer in the middle-Atlantic states is not only hot, but also wet and green. The texts for this liturgy were reworked from those of an earlier summer, which seemed to fit both the current lectionary readings and the community's ongoing commitment to peace and social justice. While the reflection paragraph is a quotation from Teilhard de Chardin, those who worked on the liturgy also had in mind passages from the writings of Hildegard of Bingen which juxtapose God's creative power with human goodness. In her commentary on her tenth vision, she wrote:

In these arrangements the eternity of God's perfect power indicates what should occur in the total fullness of creation. It is, so to speak, the greening power of generation in a shoot as it sprouts forth. For heaven and Earth were not yet in existence when the gifts of the Holy Spirit poured out this green freshness of life into the hearts of men and women so that they might bear good fruit.³⁰

The fruit of this season is both literal — the fruits and vegetables of summer — and metaphorical — the fruits of the Spirit. These fruits, which include love, peace, and self-control, lead to an awareness of the injustices in our society and our own complicity in the sins of society.

The altar table for this season was covered with a burlap cloth, on which were placed flats filled with sod, and a planter box holding assorted late-summer flowering plants.

³⁰ Hildegard of Bingen, "Vision Ten: 2", *Hildegard of Bingen's Book of Divine Works, with Letters and Songs*, Matthew Fox, ed. (Santa Fe, New Mexico: Bear & Company, 1987), 225.

The offering plate and Gospel book rested on the grass, and two slim candles were placed nearby. Between Sundays, the grass was kept in a sunny spot and watered regularly. It got longer and longer as the season progressed, until it was quite untidy. Likewise, the flowering plants grew leggy and bushy, changing over time from a neat, orderly arrangement into an overabundance of leaves spilling over the sides of the container.

The connection between the greening theme of the liturgy and the greens on the altar table at first seems obvious. At its most basic reading, the visual composition on the altar table reiterates what the text of the Call to Worship plainly states: The gardens of summer are blooming; God's abundance is manifest.

What is not obvious in simply reading the text or contemplating the image of growing grass is the discomfort felt by many in the congregation as the grass grew longer and longer, like an untended lawn. This discomfort was intended. It was seen as the visual counterpart to the tension evoked in the liturgy between those who have too much, and those who have not enough; between our desire to be in control and our awareness that we are not. What, in this case, does it mean to "choose life"? Is it to clip the grass, prune back the extravagant offerings of God's abundance? Or, is it rather to live with the untidiness, the luxuriant overgrowth?

On the final Sunday of the season, the flowering plants were replaced by tall bundles of dried grasses. The core members of Seekers are committed to annual silent retreat, and these dry weeds had been collected at Dayspring retreat center the previous September. They are thus a reminder of the community's life together over time, the deep spiritual connections among individuals and with God that are found especially in silence. The dry

weeds reflect a deep awareness that no matter how abundant and extravagant the summer harvest, in the end everything passes.

Often it is easy to get so carried away with the poetry of an image, in this case the “greening power of generation” spoken about by Hildegard, that one loses sight of the physical reality to which it refers. Both the Litany of Choosing Life and the lengthening greenery on the altar table give more questions than answers. One set of answers, incomplete though it is, may be found in Genesis 2:15, in which human beings are commanded to till and keep the orderly and enclosed garden, rather than simply to accept the given condition of wilderness. That is, humans are to cooperate with God in creating order out of chaos, in making a place of peaceful beauty for the habitation of all.

In the midst of all this lush greenery, the table was very different one week. As would be true on virtually any communion Sunday, most of the surface of the table was taken up with the communion elements, Gospel book, and offering plate. However, whereas on most communion Sundays as much as possible of the seasonal display would be preserved, on this day, even the burlap was replaced. Instead, a white cloth was used that had been decorated by many people in the community about two years earlier at a weekend multi-generational event; this cloth seems to symbolize both creativity and joy. Below the table rested bulging sacks and odd-shaped packages. These offerings had been brought as gifts to be taken along with a group of adults and children who were leaving that week for El Salvador to visit a clinic that is partially funded by the community. Embodied in this somewhat chaotic tableau was a reflection of the theme of justice and material sufficiency for all that was proclaimed in the liturgy of the season.

SEEKERS CHURCH
A Christian Community
In the Tradition of the Church of the Saviour
SUMMER 1996
CHOOSING LIFE — WET AND GREEN,
CREATIVE AND PAINFUL

REFLECTION

The sense of the Earth,
opening and exploding upwards into God;
and the sense of God,
taking root and finding nourishment downward into Earth.

Tielhard de Chardin

PRELUDE

CALL TO WORSHIP

Leader: The gardens of summer are blooming.
Their fruits and vegetables cover our tables
and delight our senses.

People: God's abundance is manifest.

Leader: All of creation, and humanity in particular,
is showered with greening refreshment,
the vitality to bear fruit.

Unison: Come, worship God.

INVOCATION

HYMN

SILENCE

WORD FOR THE CHILDREN

LITANY OF CHOOSING LIFE

Leader: Life is wet.

What does that mean for us as Church?

Voice 1: Wet life is children running fresh from the ocean,
flowers filled with nectar,
watermelon on the chin,
a cool pool after a hot day at the office...

Voice 2: Wet life is giving voice to the mute and the weak
who can not get what should be theirs.
Sharing power is muddy business, but it is life.

Leader: Life is painful.

Voice 1: It would be easier to look the other way,
avoid the stress,
run away somehow.

Voice 2: But we are called to ask "Who is my neighbor?"
We are committed to the search for answers.
Life IS painful.

Leader: Life is green.

Voice 1: Summer can seem too green,
like too much of a good thing:
too much rain, too much lawn,
too much time with children out of school...
too much.

Voice 2: But there are many who don't have enough:
not enough money,
not enough food,
not enough clothing,
no shelter...not enough.
"Material Sufficiency for All" is a good, green banner.

Leader: How can we choose life?

Voice 1: We can go for it all,
claiming our right to control everything we can,
using our strength and wisdom
to make sure the needy get taken care of.
Sometimes that doesn't seem right.

Voice 2: Or we can allow ourselves to trust the gospel vision
that when everyone chooses to have enough
there will be enough for all.
Sometimes, that doesn't seem right either.

Unison: Enough is best. Choose life.

SILENCE

PRAYERS

CONFESSION (Unison)

Holy God, we confess how hard it is to live in a world
of abundance and pain. When there doesn't seem
to be enough to go around, it's hard to rejoice in
Your bountiful gifts. We don't know what to do
with the tension this creates in us.

Have mercy on us, O God.

INDIVIDUAL PRAYERS OF CONFESSION

ASSURANCE (Leader)

Hear the Good News!

God is merciful and forgiving. God accepts us, and
uses our very human lives in the creation of
Shalom.

PRAYERS OF THE COMMUNITY

HYMN

THE WORD

SCRIPTURE

SERMON

SILENT REFLECTION

OFFERING

SHARED REFLECTIONS

ANNOUNCEMENTS

HYMN

BENEDICTION (Leader)

The fruits of the Spirit are love, joy, peace, patience,
kindness, goodness,
faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such
there is no law. As we live by the Spirit, let us also
walk by the Spirit.

SUMMER 1996
CHOOSING LIFE — WET AND GREEN, CREATIVE AND PAINFUL



July 28, 1996



August 4, 1996



August 11, 1996



August 18, 1996



August 25, 1996

2. *Recommitment, 1996: Freed by Commitment*

Commitment to Christian discipleship in general, and to a specific Christian community in particular, is one of the traditions which Seekers has maintained out of its heritage from Church of the Saviour. Like the other churches which share this heritage, Seekers observes the third Sunday in October as the Recommitment Sunday. On this day, all of the Core Members of Seekers who choose to recommit at this level repeat the following statement which they first said when they initially entered Core Membership:

I come today to make my commitment to the Seekers Church, a Christian Community in the tradition of the Church of the Saviour. Seekers Church is an ecumenical body of Christians who are linked with the people of God throughout the ages. We worship God as triune being. We believe:

- *That the Creator — father and mother to us all, ground of being — loves, sustains and calls us;*
- *That Jesus is the Christ, who for our sake lived, was crucified, died, rose from the dead, and now bids us to a ministry of love and justice;*
- *That the Holy Spirit, as the empowering presence and breath of God, confronts and inspires us to do God's work in the world.*
- *We believe that we are all ministers of the Church, which is both universal, grace-filled body of Christ, and fragile earthen vessel.*

I commit:

- *To be a faithful witness to God's presence among us;*
- *To nurture my relationship with God and Seekers through specific disciplines;*
- *To foster justice and be in solidarity with the poor;*
- *To work for the ending of all war, personal and public;*
- *To share responsibility for the spiritual growth of persons of all ages in my community;*
- *To respond joyfully with my life, as the grace of God gives me freedom.*

When I move from this place I will join another expression of Christ's Church.

Other members of the community recite, if they wish, promises of a lesser level of commitment, affirming their intention to be a part of this expression of the Body of Christ

and to engage seriously the issues of Christian discipleship. All, children and adults alike, are invited to sign the Book of Belonging each year at this time, as a further symbol of their intention to be a part of the community.

In the weeks leading up to this ritual of belonging, each person is invited to consider what these statements and commitments mean to them personally as well as to the community as a whole. The liturgy for this season took as its theme the idea that commitment is not a prison, keeping one from doing as one pleases, but the key to real freedom and joy. The reflection paragraph is taken from Walter Harrelson's book *The Ten Commandments and Human Rights*, in which he suggests that true freedom is exemplified in the basic rules of a civil society which expects its citizens to respect one another and to honor God, that all may learn to live in love and joy.

The prayers of the liturgy repeat this theme in various ways, speaking of our promises to God as well as God's promises to us. The text of Thomas Troeger's hymn, "God Marked a Line" was used some weeks as a responsive reading and other weeks was sung by individuals or the entire congregation. It, too, is about limits which do not confine but rather free all persons and things to be most truly what they are.

The altar table in this season changed from week to week, bearing an increasingly complex grouping of objects related to the community's understanding of commitment. Since the first week of the season was communion Sunday, the table held mainly the vessels and elements for the sacrament, as described elsewhere in this paper. The second week, the table held symbols of commitment as well as of communion : a loaf of bread, the collection plate, the Gospel book, and a suitcase. On that day, instead of a regular

sermon, the community was invited to travel in groups through a series of experiences taken from biblical texts, as presented by children and adults in various rooms throughout the building. The objects on the altar table represented, then, bread for the journey in both literal and metaphorical ways.

In the third week of the season, the congregation was asked to consider its commitment to children. A stool such as is found in shoe stores was set upon the altar table with a foot-measuring device resting near it. On the floor in front of the table was a basket filled with old shoes. At the beginning of the sermon, the basket was passed, and each person was invited to take one of the shoes, and imagine which of the children in the congregation it belonged to. This tactile and visual connection with a particular child was reinforced when, later, each person went to find the child whose shoe he or she was holding, creating for many an opening for connection and commitment with that child.

For the remaining weeks of the season, various objects which help this community to know itself were added to the visual environment. In addition to the collection plate and Gospel book which are almost always on the table, these included the Book of Belonging and the hand-made box in which it is kept; the sign which normally hangs on the front door during worship services; and the celebratory altar cloth and hangings which had been made for the community by Adelaide Winstead in the late 1970's.

Other objects in this season included a reminder of a member of the community who had recently died, in the form of some ceramic cups and bowls that she had made; and a paper chain, made during the Word for the Children, on the links of which were inscribed the names of persons mentioned in the Bible, Christians of note through the ages, absent

or deceased family members, and members of other churches in the tradition of Church of the Saviour. During the Recommitment Ritual, this chain was stretched as far as it could reach, so that as many people as possible were touching it.

By this final, celebratory Sunday of the season, the visual environment of the altar table had grown from a strictly-defined “only that which is needed for the sacrament” of communion to a progressively richer and more complex representation of the connections and commitments that Seekers has with one another and with the world outside its doors. Using the ordinary stuff of everyday life, this small congregation was able to see and touch a variety of symbols of its connection to the Church Universal, to all those who ever were or ever will be part of the people of God, and to all that is part of the created universe.

SEEKERS CHURCH
A Christian Community
In the Tradition of the Church of the Saviour
RECOMMITMENT 1996
FREED BY COMMITMENT

REFLECTION

The first thing people need to know is that they can have no real life, no real freedom, no real joy in life save as they lay aside the kinds of actions that destroy the very things they are seeking... The second is...that we are being drawn forward toward the day appointed by God when people will indeed avoid these prohibitions, and will love God and neighbor.

Walter Harrelson, *The Ten Commandments and Human Rights*, pg 188.

PRELUDE

CALL TO WORSHIP

Leader: In the freedom of commitment,
we come from the daily obligations of our lives.

People: For this time,
we set aside the tasks of our everyday lives,
both the chores and the rewards,
to celebrate our service to the Living God.

Leader: As we are free in Christ,
we offer this time to the God who calls us.

Unison: In the freedom of commitment,
let us worship God together.

INVOCATION

HYMN

WORD FOR THE CHILDREN

SILENCE

LITANY

Leader: God marked a line and told the sea
its surging tides and waves were free
to travel up the sloping strand
but not to overtake the land.

Voice 1: God set one limit in the glade
where tempting fruited branches swayed,
and that first limit stands behind
the limits that the law defined.

Leader: The line, the limit and the law
are patterns meant to help us draw
a bound between what life requires
and all the things our heart desires.

Voice 2: But, discontent with finite powers,
we reach to take what is not ours
and then defend our claim by force
and swerve from life's intended course.

Unison: We are not free when we're confined
to every wish that sweeps the mind,
but free when freely we accept
the sacred bounds that must be kept.

(from New Century Hymnal, #568, by Thomas H. Troeger, 1986)

SILENCE

PRAYERS

CONFESSION (Unison)

Holy One, although you free us for your service:

We confess that we do not always accept
the freedom that you offer;

We confess that we often want our own way
even when your way would bring us joy;

We confess that sometimes our service to you
feels like work instead of celebration;

We confess that we do not understand
that promises are not prisons,
but pathways to freedom.

Forgive us, Great Lover of Freedom,
and help us to know your ways.

INDIVIDUAL PRAYERS OF CONFESSION

ASSURANCE (Leader)

As God walks among us,

God promises to know and understand our failures,
our forgetfulness
our foolishness.

In God's amazing radical freedom,
we are loved and forgiven.

We are free to love and forgive others.

PRAYERS OF THE COMMUNITY

HYMN

THE WORD

SCRIPTURE

SERMON

SILENT REFLECTION

OFFERING

SHARED REFLECTIONS

ANNOUNCEMENTS

HYMN

BENEDICTION (Leader)

Live your life in a manner worthy of the Gospel of Christ.
Stand firm in one spirit.

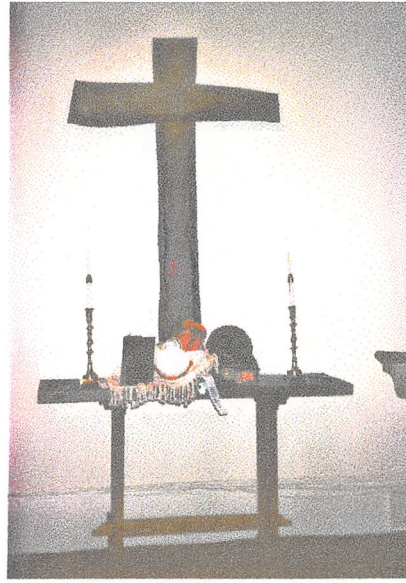
Strive side by side with one mind
for the faith of the Gospel,
for God has graciously granted you
the privilege of believing in Christ. Amen.

from Philippians 1:27-29

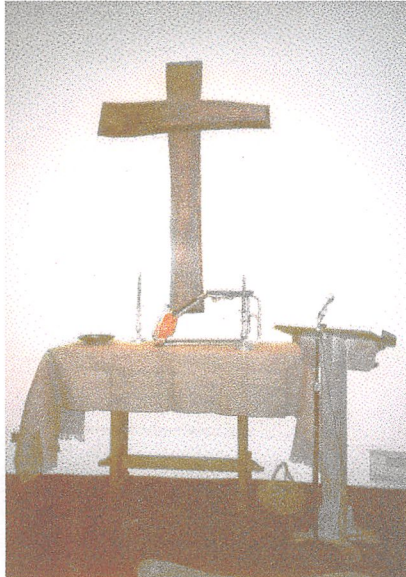
RECOMMITMENT 1996
FREED BY COMMITMENT



September 1, 1996



September 8, 1996



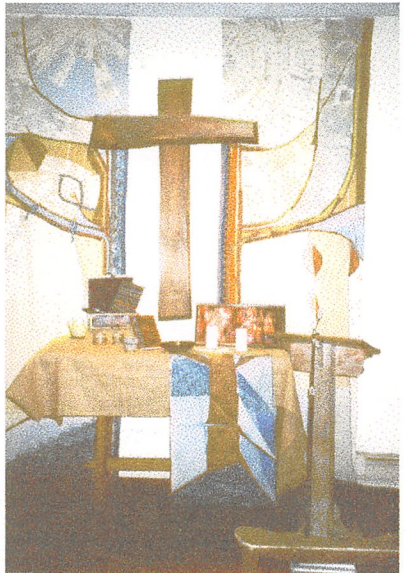
September 15, 1996



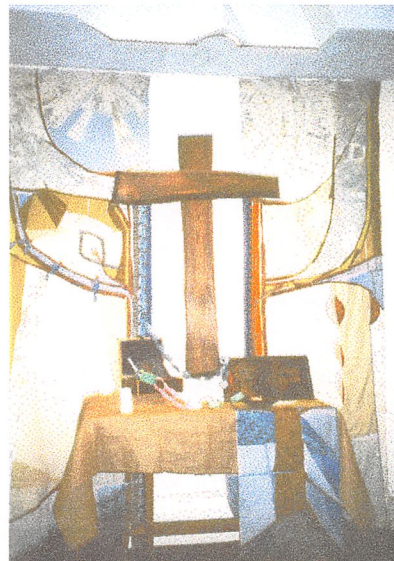
September 22, 1996



September 29, 1996



October 13, 1996



October 20, 1996

3. *Fall, 1996: Keeping the Vigil — Pursuing the Promise*

Early in 1996, Seekers Church, along with the other churches that had once been the Church of the Saviour, became a separately incorporated entity. The other churches had indicated a wish to sell the old mansion which had served as the headquarters of Church of the Saviour since 1950,³¹ and in which Seekers had continued to meet for worship since its own beginning in 1976. Seekers, then, was beginning to consider whether and when to buy or lease space of its own, and there was much uncertainty regarding the future of the community.

For this reason, Celebration Circle chose “Keeping the Vigil — Pursuing the Promise” as the theme the few remaining weeks of Ordinary Time before the beginning of Advent. Referring to the wise virgins who kept their lamps filled and ready in one of the Gospel readings for the season, the liturgy spoke of carrying small lamps of hope and retelling the story of promise during a time of waiting and searching.

The arrangement on the altar table reflected this imagery. A dark, richly ornamented oriental rug served as an altar cloth, as a foundation of beauty and comfort for a wooden structure that looked like the unfinished framing members for a simple house. Within the house, and beneath the bread on communion Sunday, was a colorful woven strip that had been made as a community project the year before. On it rested a small oil lamp, its small flame courageously burning against the winds that might blow through the open sides of the small house.

Since Seekers shares its worship space with another community, everything that it

³¹ O'Connor, *Call to Commitment*, 22.

brings in on Sunday morning must be removed in time for the other community to prepare for its quite different worship style. In dismantling the altar arrangement one week, the glass oil lamp was dropped and broke. Recognizing that breakage is part of our being fragile earthen vessels of the Spirit, the following week the place where the lamp had been was filled with a fat candle in a sturdy pewter stand, and the roof of the little house was covered with black plastic — small but (perhaps) adequate shelter for the coming storms of winter.

SEEKERS CHURCH
A Christian Community
In the Tradition of the Church of the Saviour
FALL 1996

KEEPING THE VIGIL — PURSUING THE PROMISE

REFLECTION

Neither virgin nor wise
I fill foolishly
my lamp, lest surprise
take me unprepared. Mulishly
at mid-morning sun-time
I pour in the oil.
(I'm anticipating as usual.)
Toil is my lot,
my daily drink and meat.
The Bridegroom will find me workworn and rough.
But my lamp is ready, and even as I am,
I'll gladly greet Him who comes.
And that is joy enough.

*"The preparation of Mary, mother of Jesus."
Madeline L'Engle, A Cry Like a Bell, p 7.*

PRELUDE

CALL TO WORSHIP (Unison)

We come here looking,
all of us carrying
our small lamps of hope.
We come here calling out,
hearing each other,
retelling the story of promise.
Here, we reach out to God,
and become the one Body of Christ,
breathing together with the Holy Spirit.

INVOCATION

HYMN

WORD FOR THE CHILDREN

SILENCE

LITANY

Leader: Leaves turn yellow and crimson
and drop from the trees.
Voice 1: Soon wind and rain and snow
will assault our bodies and invade our spirits.
Voice 2: It feels like time to close the windows,
build a fire and hibernate,
comforting ourselves with dreams of Spring,
Leader: But sometimes we are called outside into the cold
to hunt for what we have not clearly seen,
and then we feel alive.
Unison: We live in the tension
of this waiting, searching time.

SILENCE

PRAYERS

CONFESSION (Unison)

Giver of New Life,
although you call us from our comfort into newness,
too often we want to stay within our habits,
and we refuse the adventure that you offer.
Forgive us, Holy Source of Hope,
for our unwillingness to watch and wait;
for our reluctance to look for you.

INDIVIDUAL PRAYERS OF CONFESSION

ASSURANCE (Leader)

The Good News of salvation in Christ is this:
Our human failings are forgiven
so that we might truly be
the eyes and ears and hands and feet of God.
Amen.

PRAYERS OF THE COMMUNITY

HYMN

THE WORD

SCRIPTURE
SERMON
SILENT REFLECTION

OFFERING

SHARED REFLECTIONS

ANNOUNCEMENTS

HYMN

BENEDICTION (Leader)

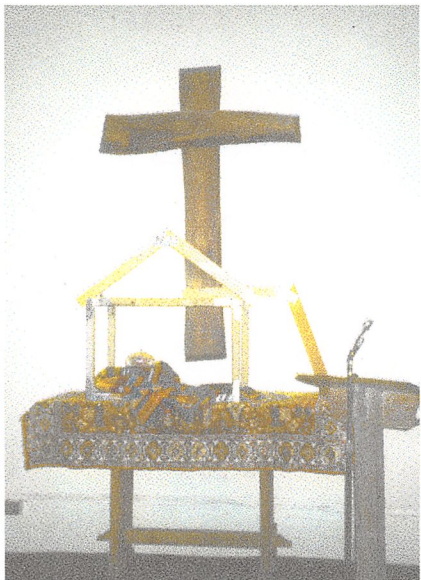
God wants us to allow ourselves
to see the Holy Face continuously.
For God wants to be seen,
and wants to be sought.
God wants to be wanted,
and wants to be trusted.
Amen.

Julian of Norwich, Meditations with Julian of Norwich, p 35.

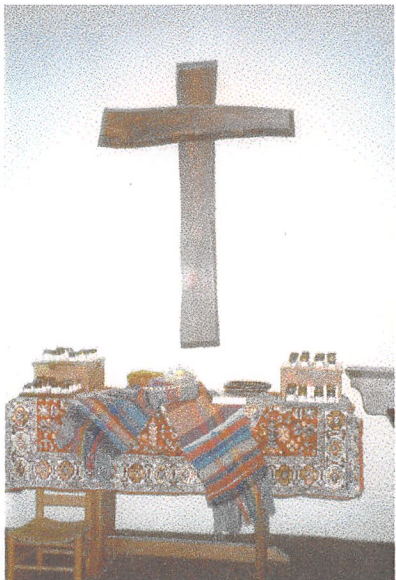
*"We expect a theophany of which we know nothing but the
place, and that place is called community."*

Martin Buber

FALL 1996
KEEPING THE VIGIL — PURSUING THE PROMISE



October 27, 1996



November 3, 1996



November 17, 1996



November 24, 1996

4. *Advent, 1996*

In Advent, the reflection paragraph asked the congregation to consider how Christ might come through us to our time and culture. The prayers in the liturgy echoed the Psalms for the season, remembering that God's promises have been fulfilled in times past, and assuring that the Holy Child is always being born anew. In the few weeks between the first Sunday's communion and the final Sunday's expectant scene in the manger, the altar table carried the drama of the season.

On the first Sunday of Advent, the communion elements were accompanied only by two amaryllis plants in full flower — brave beacons of God's abundance amid the chilly bleakness of late fall. On the second Sunday, there was a third amaryllis, and, strangely, a red ball covered with white stars. Jean Adams, who contributed the ball, explained:

A dream brought an image of a red ball with a scattering of stars on it. It felt right. Why? Musing on this image I saw that it contained the image from Psalm 148: "Praise the Lord from the heavens. Praise him, O ye stars." It contained the image of a ball, a universal toy, suggesting the physical nature of God-with-us, which Jesus is. And the red represents joy!³²

The next Sunday, the red ball was still there, but only one amaryllis. Instead, two wooden figures appeared, dressed as Mary and the angel. The children of the congregation were making a nativity crèche, with the help of two or three adults, and on this day the conversation now known as the Annunciation was the lectionary Gospel text, so it was fitting for the angel and Mary to be seen by all.

By the last Sunday in Advent, the fragile house-frame that in the previous season had symbolized the congregational dilemma of impending homelessness was now fittingly

³² Jean Adams, "A Ball on the Altar?" *Soundings: The Newsletter of Seekers Church*, vol. 4 #2, February, 1997.

converted into the stable in Bethlehem where the holy family took shelter. Since it was not yet Christmas, there was no baby Jesus in the manger, but an expectant Mary and Joseph stood in the stable with the local folks and a few sheep, who had also come in out of the cold, while the angel waited outside. On Christmas Eve the baby Jesus appeared, and on the Sunday that falls during Christmastide the Nativity scene was complete.

SEEKERS CHURCH
A Christian Community
In the Tradition of the Church of the Saviour
ADVENT

REFLECTION

What good is it to me if Mary gave birth to the Son of God fourteen hundred years ago and I do not also give birth to the Son of God in my time and culture?

Meister Eckhart, quoted in *Original Blessing*, p 24.

PRELUDE

ADVENT RITUAL

CALL TO WORSHIP

Leader: The days grow short,
and all creation groans with expectation.

People: We hear the cry of the prophets,
the greeting of the angel,
and wonder.

The spirit of God is upon us
and we proclaim the good news:

Unison: The One who calls us is faithful.
Nothing is impossible with God!

INVOCATION

HYMN

WORD FOR THE CHILDREN

SILENCE

ADVENT LITANY Leader: When the Holy One restored
the fortunes of Zion
we were like those who dream;
Then our mouth was filled with laughter
and our tongue with shouts of joy.

Voice 1: Then it was said among the nations
"The Holy One has done great things for
them."
The Holy One has done great things for us,
and we rejoiced.

Voice 2: Restore our fortunes, O God,
like the watercourses in the Negev.
May those who sow in tears
reap with shouts of joy.

Unison: Those who go out weeping,
bearing the seeds for sowing,
shall come home with shouts of joy,
carrying their sheaves.

Psalm 126

SILENCE

PRAYERS

CONFESSION (Unison)

Leader: God of hope and wonder,
sometimes we forget
that you have walked among us,
that you are always creating us,
and that the Holy Child is always being
born.

People: It is then that we refuse to hear your prophets,
reject your messengers of peace,
and believe that there is no hope.

Unison: Help us to remember that you are with us,
and forgive us when we forget.

INDIVIDUAL PRAYERS OF CONFESSION

ASSURANCE (Leader)

The Eternally Incarnate One
knows our fears and failures
And tells us that in Christ
we are forgiven.

PRAYERS OF THE COMMUNITY

HYMN

THE WORD

FIRST LESSON

SILENCE

GOSPEL LESSON

SERMON

SILENT REFLECTION

OFFERING

SHARED REFLECTIONS

ANNOUNCEMENTS

HYMN

BENEDICTION (Leader)

Let our mouths be filled with laughter,
and our tongues with shouts of joy.
Let us go into the world saying,
"The Holy One has done great things!"

ADVENT



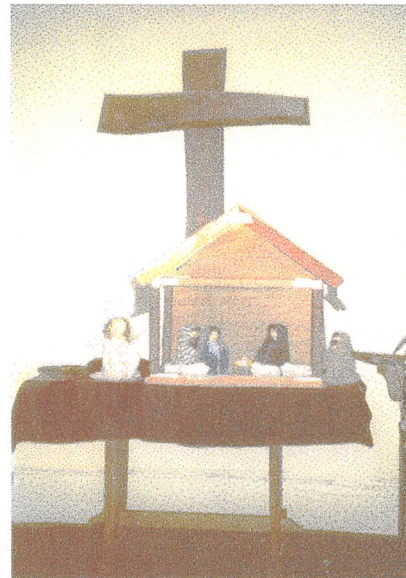
December 1, 1996



December 8, 1996



December 15, 1996



December 22, 1996

5. *Epiphany, 1997: The Appearance of God*

On Epiphany Sunday, the altar table still displayed the stable with Mary and Joseph and the infant Jesus. Now, however, the shepherds and angels were gone, and in their place were the Magi, bearing their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Instead of sheep, a heavily-laden camel waited outside as the three wise ones surrounded the holy family, bringing with them symbolically the entire world. In earlier versions of the calendar, Epiphany, or the Manifestation of God, celebrated the baptism of Jesus and Jesus' first miracle, turning water into wine at the wedding at Cana as well as the coming of the Magi. While these moments are now commemorated in church calendars on separate Sundays, the sequence still makes sense. At first, the angel came privately to Mary, to Joseph, to Elizabeth and to Zachariah. Then, the neighbors — the shepherds nearby — heard the good news. At last, strangers from a distant land arrived, and then returned to their homes, spreading the good news to all the world. Epiphany is the end of the Christmas celebration, and at the same time the beginning of Christ's — and our — work in the world

So the “not-yet” of waiting turns for a time into the “already” of the heavenly feast, and the communion elements were placed in front of the crèche on the same richly-patterned carpet that a few weeks earlier had served as the foundation for the temporary structure symbolizing our communal homelessness. In communion, as we eat the bread and wine, we become the eternal, resurrected Body of Christ. Time becomes the eternal now as we know ourselves in the presence of God and of one another other.

But we are still human, still subject to the demands of earthly existence, and the ecstatic eternity begins to fade as we return to our ordinary life. In many churches, the

weeks after Epiphany and after Pentecost are called just that: ordinary time. "Ordinary" originally meant "counting," as in ordinal numbers, but mostly we use it to mean something that is just plain, nothing special, the same old thing. But Ordinary Time is not just the same old thing, because if we have lived into the realities of preparation and celebration, we have been transformed by the experience. We are renewed by that fleeting moment in the presence of God, by our awareness that God's truth is not always the same thing as verifiable, historical facts.

In order to sustain this awareness, the theme for the season after Epiphany was "The Appearance of God." The ambiguity of this phrase was intended, as it is not always obvious when we have seen God, nor what God might look like. The reflection paragraph was a poem written by one of the oldest members of the congregation some years previously, which speaks of the Word as indescribable, un-nameable vision.

In this season of God's appearance, the visual environment was at its most formal. The celebratory hangings and altar cloth were used each week, with a simple symmetrical arrangement in which the collection plate was centered between two, tall candlesticks. Suspended at about the mid-point of the cross was an antique enameled Eastern Orthodox icon of Christ Pantocrater, which belonged to a member of the congregation, and was a potent symbol not only of the appearance of God, but of Seekers' connections with the Church Universal.

Throughout the season, there were some small, but significant additions and changes to the altar table each week. Preachers had been asked to focus on something which to them was an appearance of God, and to bring to the altar an object as a visual counterpart

to their words. One week, there was a woolen porkpie hat in one corner. This had belonged to a somewhat cantankerous, but beloved, member of the congregation who had died earlier in the year. It had been given to the congregation by her niece and nephews as a symbol of their gratitude for the care which the congregation had given to their aunt during her final illness, and to them after her death. Another week, one of the mission groups had been on retreat and returned with a small sculpture consisting of a wax apple with silver leaves on long, springy stems, symbolizing something of their life together. The next week, the sermon was about the contributions to community life made by the same senior member who had written the poem used as the reflection paragraph. On the altar was a set of finely-made, small wooden chairs, tables and other furniture which he had made as a young man, dreaming of becoming an architect. On the final Sunday of the season, the sermon considered the many beautiful objects that had been made for Seekers worship by members of the community, and all were displayed, including the vessels used in the communion that morning. In these many objects and images, the congregation saw the ever-changing, ever-renewing, eternal appearance of God.

SEEKERS CHURCH
A Christian Community
In the Tradition of the Church of the Saviour
EPIPHANY 1997
THE APPEARANCE OF GOD

REFLECTION

the .
the .

square, indigo, iridescent
precisely sized so
edges meld
unbetrayed.
yet its essence
fully felt

square, indigo, iridescent
hidden mist
square, blue, sparkling
edged
yet there

square, indigo, iridescent
the word.

Hollis Vail, January 1981.

PRELUDE

CALL TO WORSHIP

Leader: Arise, shine, for our light has come,
and the glory of God has risen upon us.
People: Lift up your eyes round about, and see;
the people of God all gather together,
they come to rejoice;
our sons shall come from far away,
and our daughters shall be carried in our arms.
Unison: Then God shall see and be radiant,
and our hearts shall thrill and rejoice!

After Isaiah 60:1-6

INVOCATION

HYMN

WORD FOR THE CHILDREN

SILENCE

LITANY OF EPIPHANY

Leader: The word becomes flesh, and dwells among us.
Voice 1: Look! God is in our midst —
in the truth shared by little children.
See, God is alive in the challenge of the oppressed.
Voice 2: Before our eyes,
God transforms the bored and satisfied.
Look for God in the swirling tension
between valued traditions and emerging visions.
Unison: Come! See God incarnate.
Share the Good News with boldness and delight.

SILENCE

PRAYERS

CONFESSION (Unison)

Leader: The Light comes into the world:

People: Our eyes, long used to darkness,
Close tight against the bright light.
We turn away and will not see.

Leader: The Light comes to reveal the truth.

People: But we are lost in logic,
and miss the reflections of God's appearance.
We turn away, and will not see.

Unison: Forgive us, Light of Life,
when we turn away,
and will not see you in the world around us.

INDIVIDUAL PRAYERS OF CONFESSION

ASSURANCE (Leader)

You are forgiven,
for the Light has come,
and the Glory of God surrounds us. Amen.

PRAYERS OF THE COMMUNITY

HYMN

THE WORD

FIRST LESSON

SILENCE

GOSPEL LESSON

SERMON

SILENT REFLECTION

OFFERING

SHARED REFLECTIONS

ANNOUNCEMENTS

HYMN

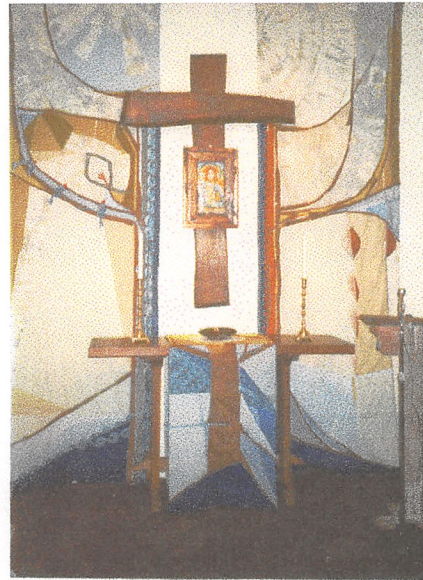
BENEDICTION (Leader)

The Light has splintered our darkness.
God appears, asking us to dance.
Let us go forth to answer with our whole lives.
Amen.

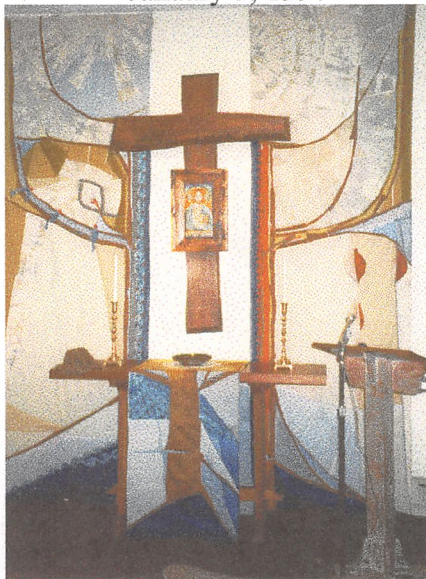
EPIPHANY 1997
THE APPEARANCE OF GOD



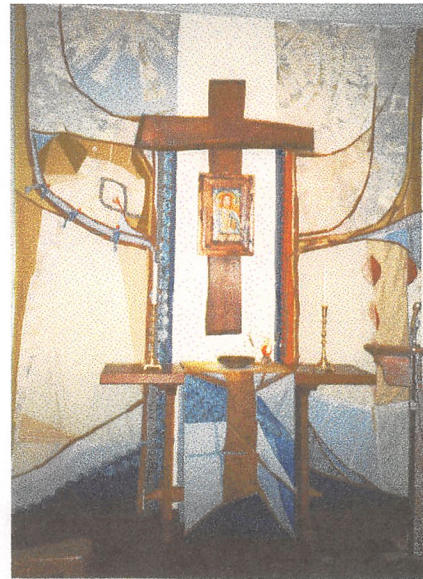
January 5, 1997



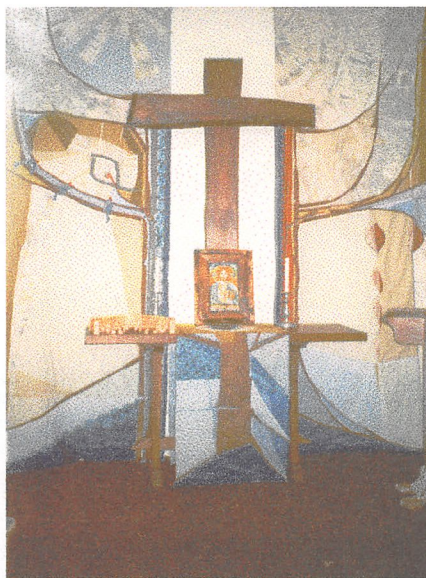
January 12, 1997



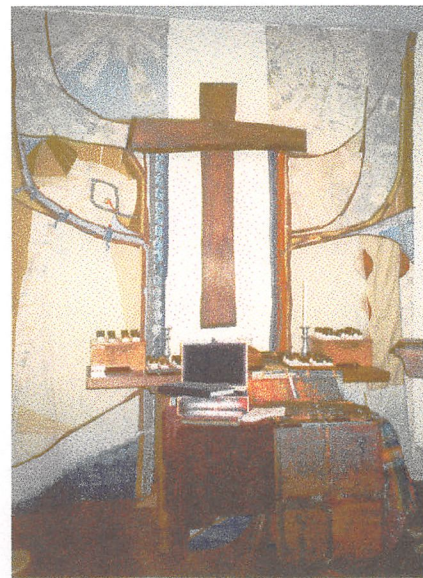
January 19, 1997



January 26, 1997



February 2, 1997



February 9, 1997

6. *Lent, 1997: Preparing for the Not Yet*

As a time of preparation and waiting, historically a time of introspection, fasting and penitence, Lent often suggests themes of mystery and darkness. One year, someone in the congregation objected to what seemed to her an excessive concentration on the crucifixion, when we know that Christ is always risen. This tension between what has already occurred and that which is to come was the basis for the theme in this Lenten season: Preparing for the Not Yet. The reflection paragraph reminded the congregation that discipleship is the conviction that God can and does redeem exile, chaos and crucifixion.

The liturgy was largely based on the psalms in the lectionary for the season. Those parts that are not directly from scripture reflect the scriptural concern for justice and truth as the measure of a community's connection with God. In awareness of the tradition of using unbleached cloth for the Lenten array, the altar table was swathed in layers of raw canvas, with the Gospel book, collection plate, candles, and — when appropriate — the communion vessels nestled in and partly hidden by the folds of the cloth.

On the wall, surrounding the cross behind and above the table, was an artwork of copper and brass, entitled "Clouds of Witnesses," which I made for Lent in 1991, as a gift to the congregation on the first anniversary of my baptism. It contains likenesses of Seekers children and adults, as well as members of an Asian-American congregation in Los Angeles that nurtured me into Christian faith. It also contains scriptural texts, an image of the tree of life according to the Kaballah, a mystical Jewish tradition, and a figure representing the primordial human, the pre-existent Christ.

On the first Sunday of Lent, somewhat raised above the other objects and at the center

of the altar table, there was a fairly large lump of wet clay, just slightly formed to suggest a vessel. After worship, the clay was kept damp, and on subsequent Sundays, the vessel began to take on a clearer and clearer form. By Palm/Passion Sunday, the clay had become an irregularly-shaped pot, its lip curving slightly inward and one side bulging like a pregnant belly. Like the liturgy text and the cloth which both hid and revealed what was on the table, the pot suggested that much was possible. Although the clay was still wet and malleable, it was strong enough to support the palm branches which seemed to grow out of its earthen body and lean on the cross for support.

SEEKERS CHURCH
A Christian Community
In the Tradition of the Church of the Saviour
LENT 1997
PREPARING FOR THE NOT YET

REFLECTION

The community of disciples around Jesus had the irreducible conviction that:

- God makes homecoming in the midst of exile;
- God makes creation in the midst of chaos;
- God makes resurrection in the face of crucifixion..

Interpretation and Obedience.,
Walter Brueggemann, p 318.

PRELUDE

CALL TO WORSHIP

Leader: How clearly the sky reveals God's glory!
How plainly it shows what God has done!
Day carries the news to day;
night brings the message to night.

People: Without a word, without a sound,
without a voice being heard,
their message fills the world,
their news reaches its rim.

Unison: May the words of our mouths
and the meditations of our hearts
be acceptable to you,
O God, our rock and our redeemer.

INVOCATION

HYMN

WORD FOR THE CHILDREN

SILENCE

LENTEN LITANY

Leader: We are a community that believes
our faith has a future.

Voice 1: The future of our faith
Is new when we fully grieve
Because the old is lost and gone.

Voice 2: A future grounded in God's hope
cannot be filled with deception or cover-up,
pretense or denial, numbness or old habits.

Unison: The future is given to us by God,
known in Jesus Christ, crucified and risen.

SILENCE

PRAYERS

COMMON CONFESSION

Leader: Ours is a society in which hopelessness
is prevalent and powerful;
muteness and complacency are enemies of hope.

Voice 1: Too often we are part of the mute majority,
who choose to conform rather than to risk.

Leader: We Americans are among the affluent of the world
too easily satisfied with what is,
unwilling to look for the not yet.

Voice 2: We assume we have the answers
and no longer hunger for God's true gifts.

Unison: God of hope, our trust in you is weak.

INDIVIDUAL PRAYERS OF CONFESSION

ASSURANCE (Leader)

Power for life is given in seasons of vulnerability.
The good news in Christ is this:
we are forgiven and freed for a hopeful future. Amen.

PRAYERS OF THE COMMUNITY

HYMN

THE WORD

FIRST LESSON

SILENCE

GOSPEL LESSON

SERMON

SILENT REFLECTION

OFFERING

SHARED REFLECTIONS

ANNOUNCEMENTS

HYMN

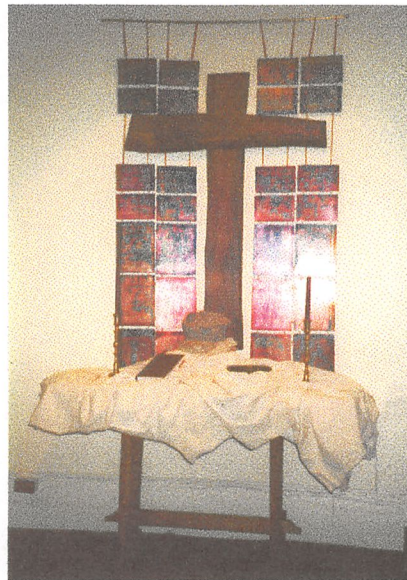
BENEDICTION (Leader)

Go forth into the danger of the Not Yet,
knowing that we are part of the faithful people of God.
Amen.

LENT 1997
PREPARING FOR THE NOT YET



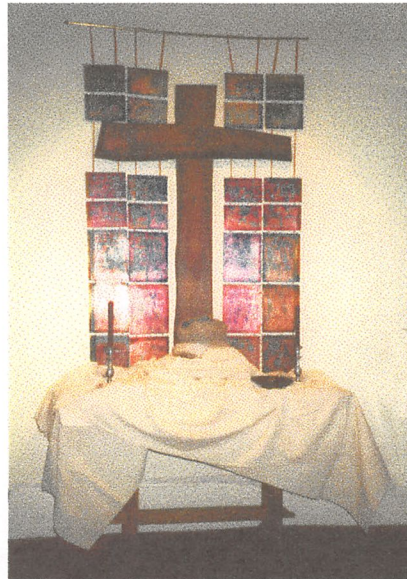
February 16, 1997



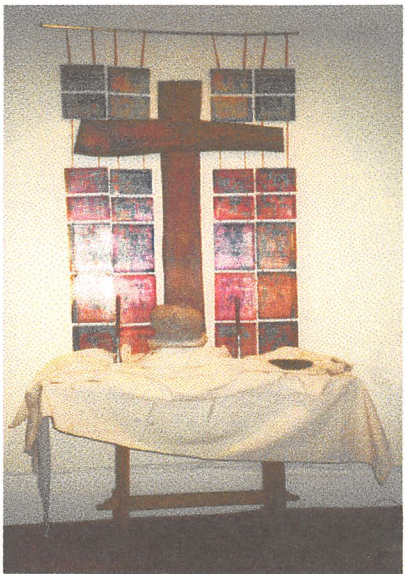
February 23, 1997



March 2, 1997



March 9, 1997



March 16, 1997



March 23, 1997

7. *Easter, 1997: Wondering if it's True....*

Because Lent, Easter and Pentecost are not separate events, but together comprise a festal cycle, we wanted to carry over some of the elements of both the liturgy texts and the visual environment from one season to the next. The Lenten theme of "Preparing for the Not Yet" yielded to "Wondering if it's True..." at Easter, reflecting both the unsettledness of the first disciples in those weeks immediately following the crucifixion and resurrection, and our own modern difficulty with believing in miracles. The prayers recounted some of the terror and doubt of the women at the empty tomb, as well as the ecstatic cry "Hallelujah! Christ is Risen!"

During Holy Week, the clay vessel that had been shaped during the weeks of Lent was pit-fired, a reminder that at one time in the history of the Church Universal the Christian formation of candidates for baptism was during a Lenten period of catechesis, a preparation for the descent into and rising from the pit of baptism. On Easter Sunday, the vessel reappeared on the altar table a deep, sooty black, with areas of iridescent blues and purples, a new creation. It was placed on a piece of red silk which partially obscured a larger piece of cloth-of-gold. Under that was the unbleached canvas of Lent, allowed to peek out in a few places. Rising from the vessel were sprigs of redbud, and two fat, white candles illuminated an icon of Mary Magdalene which rested on the cross. The icon was a reminder that it was she who, according to John's testimony, first saw the risen Christ.

Throughout the season of Easter, the arrangement on the altar table was substantially the same, with one exception. The fragile, earthen vessel, now hardened by fire, held on various weeks dogwood, azaleas, and other flowing branches. One Sunday, there were coiling vines of wild grape, making vivid the text "I am the vine and you are the

branches.” On the Sunday when the lectionary texts relating to the Good Shepherd were read, a shepherd’s staff rested on the cross. On the last communion Sunday of the season, only the gold cloth remained as a visual connection to the rest of the season.

On the second Sunday of Easter, however, the altar table made a different set of connections. On this day, the Sunday School coordinator was retiring from that post, and was to be honored for her faithful work. Therefore, on that communion Sunday, the altar table was covered with a white cloth last seen in worship the previous summer. It was decorated by children and adults with images of community, and on it rested, in addition to the communion elements, two of the magi from the Christmas crèche, also made by the children under the guidance of this gifted and committed teacher. While such symbols may have been “out of place” in terms of the liturgical year, they were a necessary and fitting tribute to one who had served the ongoing life of the entire community, and a reminder that not only is Christ always being crucified and always risen, but Christ is always being born in our midst.

SEEKERS CHURCH
A Christian Community
In the Tradition of the Church of the Saviour
EASTER 1997
WONDERING IF IT'S TRUE....

REFLECTION

... the resurrection remains a historical enigma and an object of theological speculation until - at the breaking of bread, or while at prayer, or in the giving or receiving of unearned love - everything is suffused with the light of the resurrection.

*Violence Unveiled,
Gil Bailic, p 233.*

PRELUDE

CALL TO WORSHIP

Unison: On this day we celebrate resurrection.

Leader: Friendships once killed by frosty misunderstanding bloom again in warm reconciliation

People: — Halleluyah!

Leader: Hopes glimmering and gone are rekindled by expressions of caring

People: — Halleluyah!

Leader: Faith, dulled by lack of exercise, dances again to God's everyday rhythms -

People: — Halleluyah!

Unison: We come to worship the God whose resurrection power lives on in the Christ we serve. Halleluyah!

INVOCATION

HYMN

WORD FOR THE CHILDREN

SILENCE

EASTER LITANY

Leader: On Easter morning,
they saw the stone rolled back,
the empty tomb.
Trembling, they doubted, feared, and wondered.

People: We doubt. We fear. We wonder.

Leader: Trembling, they approached the tomb,
place of death meeting life,
of endings and new beginnings.

People: We approach the tomb.
We doubt. We fear. We wonder.

Leader: Passing through betrayal and sorrow,
through death and defeat,
Trembling, they came to Easter morning.

Unison: This Easter morning,
we see life bursting through death.
Trembling, we meet the risen Christ.

SILENCE

PRAYERS

Leader: The risen Christ is among us,
therefore we can celebrate the festival of life.
Through the love of Christ we are made whole.

COMMON CONFESSION

Leader: Christ is among us,
but too often we are not aware of the resurrection.

People: Resurrection can be so quiet, so unobtrusive
that we are not aware
of the powerful presence of Christ in our lives.

Unison: Forgive us, Holy One,
for missing resurrection.

INDIVIDUAL PRAYERS OF CONFESSION

ASSURANCE (Leader)

The risen Christ is among us,
therefore we can celebrate the festival of life.
Through the love of Christ we are made whole. Amen.

PRAYERS OF THE COMMUNITY

HYMN

THE WORD

FIRST LESSON

SILENCE

GOSPEL LESSON

SERMON

SILENT REFLECTION

OFFERING

SHARED REFLECTIONS

ANNOUNCEMENTS

HYMN

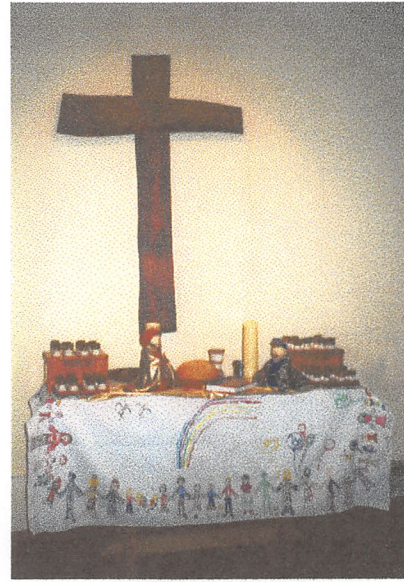
BENEDICTION (Leader)

Halleluyah!
The church is Easter!
Resurrection resounds through our community
Go forth in power. Amen.

EASTER 1997
WONDERING IF IT'S TRUE....



March 30, 1997



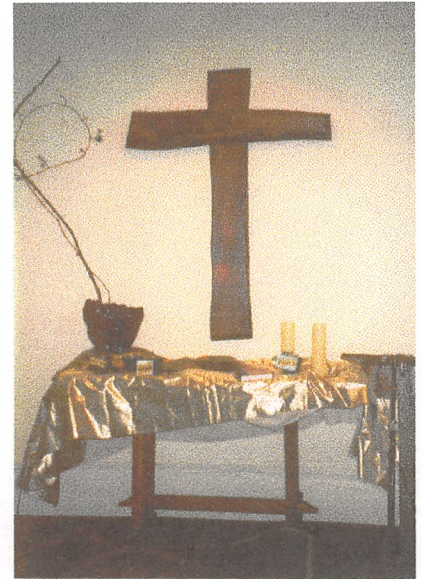
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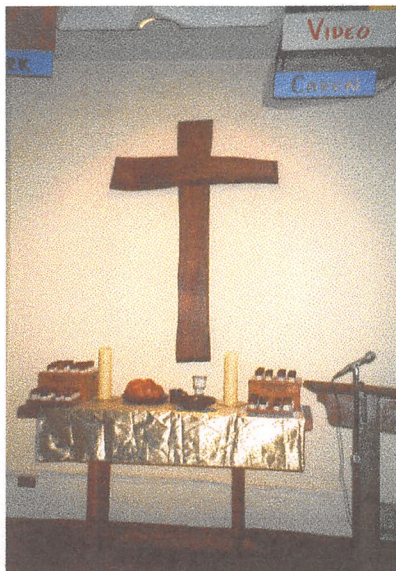
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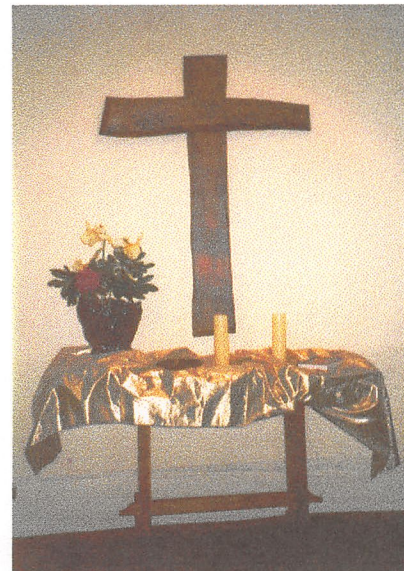
April 20, 1997



April 27, 1997



May 4, 1997



May 11, 1997

8. *Pentecost, 1997: Of Course!*

Pentecost concludes the festal cycle begun with Lent, and the theme for the day of Pentecost and the six Sundays immediately following was the triumphant answer “Of Course!” to the Easter question, “Wondering if it’s true...”. The relatively spare text of the liturgy left a lot of time for silence, for listening for the roar of the Holy Spirit moving in the worshipping community. On the altar table, the clay vessel of Lent and Easter appeared once more, this time lying on its side like a cornucopia, spilling out its multi-colored gifts of tangled ribbon. The altar cloth was painted in the reds, yellows and oranges of tongues of fire, and three red-orange candles provided both real and metaphorical flames. On two Sundays of this season on which there was communion, the vessel was removed, replaced by the elements for the sacrament.

On the first Sunday of Pentecost, a new processional cross and banner were dedicated. It was clear many in the congregation were uncomfortable with the kind of symbols that have been used in many churches to mark the separation between “important” clergy and “unimportant” laity. However, there is evidence that as early as the 4th century portable crosses that could be easily carried from place to place were used to identify groups of Christians as they went from one church to another, much as a signboard or a pennant is used by a tour-group leader in the airport. Since Seekers foresaw the imminent possibility of some extended time in temporary quarters, there was a need for something like that, that would say “here, in this place, wherever we gather, we are the people of God, the Body of Christ.” A processional cross and a banner are such signs, and were to become part of the community’s common life together even before moving to a new place. In the dedication message that day, I said:

But the cross and the banner are not really finished. Today, some of us will tie ribbons to the wooden supports, dedicating these symbols to the life of the community. From time to time, perhaps you will want to add a ribbon, in memory of some event in the life of Seekers. Over time, some of the ribbons will become shabby and ragged, but, I hope, there will always be new ones, binding us to one another, speaking in tongues of color and form, waving in the breathing wind of the Spirit of God.³³

And, that day, and on subsequent Sundays, members of the congregation took ribbons from the altar and tied them to the base of the processional cross. Later in the year, the symbolism changed, as some people took or were given a ribbon to carry with them as a token of their belonging to the Body of Christ, as they followed God's call to new jobs, new challenges, and new places.

As in previous seasons, there was one Sunday when the altar table looked quite different, once again due to a special event within the congregation. On this Sunday, the children were to present the results of their recent study-topic centered on the Temple at Jerusalem in the time of Jesus. Visible in the photograph is an elaborate, three-dimensional game board representing the physical layout of the Temple, which some of the children had made, and which they explained during the time set aside for the Word for the Children. At the time which would ordinarily be that of the sermon, other children and some adults presented a drama, complete with sets, props, costumes and sound effects, depicting the story of Jesus overturning the tables of the moneychangers in the Court of the Gentiles. While this text was not tied to the lections for the season, it did reflect the atmosphere in Jerusalem during the pilgrimage festival of Shavu'ot, which is still celebrated by Jews today, and which Christians celebrate as Pentecost.

³³ Deborah Sokolove, "A Cross and a Banner", May 18, 1997 Online. Internet. Accessed February 2, 1998. Available www.his.com/~mks/seekers/sermons/19970518.htm.

SEEKERS CHURCH
A Christian Community
In the Tradition of the Church of the Saviour
PENTECOST 1997
OF COURSE!

REFLECTION

The Pentecost story reverses the going logic, and puts hearing before speaking as the work of the Spirit.

Nell Morton, The Journey is Home

PRELUDE

CALL TO WORSHIP

Leader: Let what was still and dark wake up...

Voice 1: Become intelligent, move,
name itself by hunger and by kind,
walk, swim, fly, cry, call, squeak, sing.

Voice 2: Let us all praise
and pray to the light we are
but can not know.

Unison: Let the Spirit of Pentecost roar through us! Amen.

INVOCATION

HYMN

WORD FOR THE CHILDREN

SILENCE

LITANY OF COMMUNITY

Leader: In true community
there will be enough diversity and conflict
to shake loose our need
to make the world in our own image.

Reader: Of course!

Voice 1: Community will teach us
that our grip on truth is fragile and
incomplete,
that we need many ears
to hear the fullness of God's word for our lives.

Reader: Of course!

Voice 2: Community can break our egos open
to the experience of a God
who cannot be contained by our conceptions.

Unison: When the Spirit of Pentecost roars through,
community breathes.

SILENCE

PRAYERS

CONFESSION

Leader: God of all creation,
we yearn for the assurance
that our understanding of you is complete.

People: We yearn to know
that our choices are expressions of your will.

Unison: We yearn for the freedom to risk believing
that you are present in our life together.

INDIVIDUAL PRAYERS OF CONFESSION

ASSURANCE (Leader)
God stands beyond all human systems;
God transforms the difficult lessons of community
Into a larger and truer life.
Amen.

PRAYERS OF THE COMMUNITY

HYMN

THE WORD

FIRST LESSON
SILENCE
GOSPEL LESSON
SERMON
SILENT REFLECTION

OFFERING

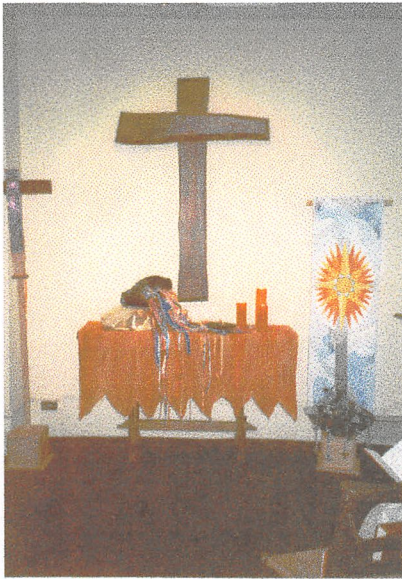
SHARED REFLECTIONS

ANNOUNCEMENTS

HYMN

BENEDICTION (Leader)
People of the Spirit, take heart!
In the thousand tongues of fire
there is one Spirit
calling us to unexpected new life.
Go forth to live the call of God.
Amen.

PENTECOST 1997
OF COURSE!



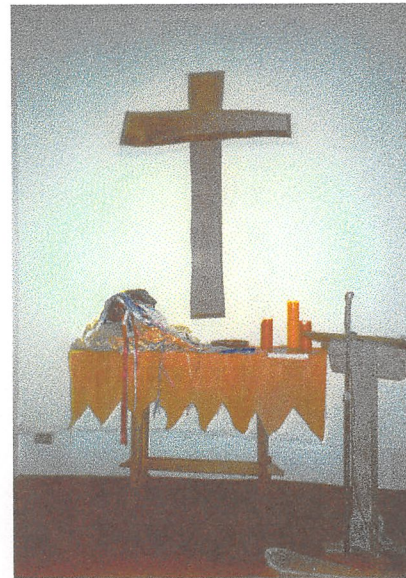
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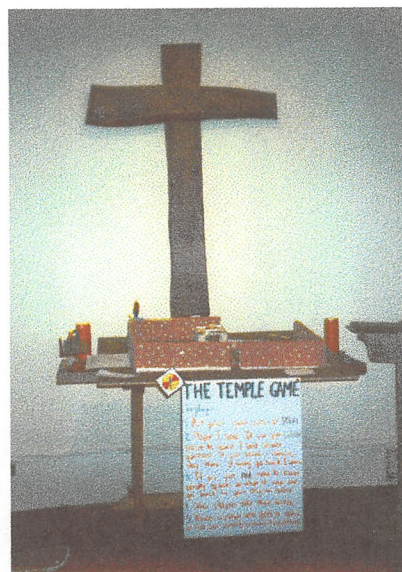
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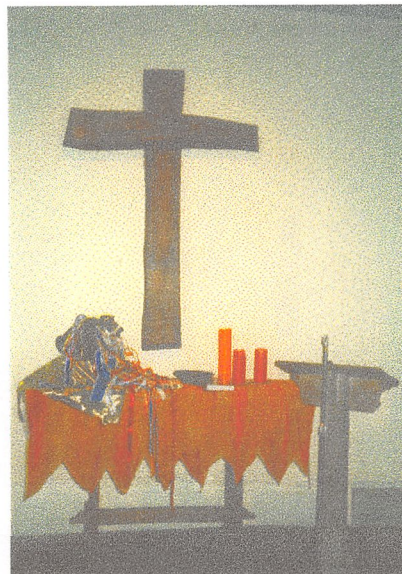
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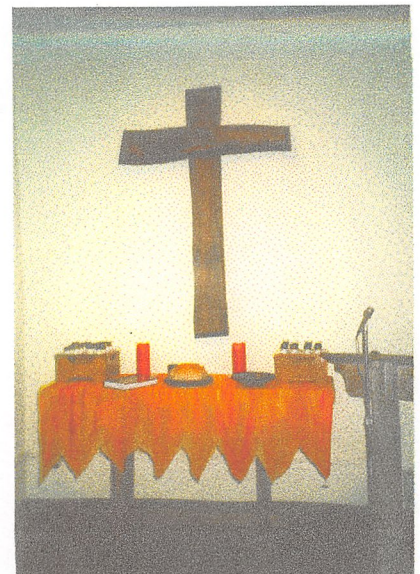
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June 22, 1997



June 29, 1997



July 6, 1997

V. Conclusion

Although the Seekers Church has an unusual approach to both its ecclesiology and its liturgical practice, we see these approaches as authentic expressions of the Christian faith. Combining our heritage in the Free Church tradition with participation in the wider ecumenical dialogues regarding doctrine and practice, Seekers' self-understanding is that of a pioneer in liturgical renewal as well as in intentional community. In designing and leading worship, Celebration Circle models a radical interpretation of Christian servanthood and of the priesthood of all believers, in which collaboration with the Holy Spirit and with one another on behalf of the community is both the method and the goal.

A defining document of the Seekers Church says:

Our call is to be a "Seekers community" which comes together in weekly worship rooted in the Biblical faith, with shared leadership; and disperses with a common commitment to understand and implement Christian servanthood in the structures in which we live our lives.³⁴

Within the context of communal worship, the liturgical texts and visual compositions on the altar table which are their non-verbal counterparts become not merely symbols, but vehicles for the congregation's communion with God and with one another. Combined with the spoken and silent and sung prayers of the people, they become sacramental realities, the visible and audible signs of God's grace. Objects taken from everyday life are transformed as they appear on the altar, at the foot of the cross. They become tangible reminders that, as Christians, our lives are always on the table, in service to Christ.

³⁴ Seekers Church, *A Guide to Seekers Church*, 5.

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