

Speeches
& Publications

Archive
Speeches &
Publications

FHC
Curriculum &
Research

Practice Models
Searchable
database

Meetings
Announcements
& Proceedings

Links
Health Resources

Requests
Information &
Subscriptions

About IHP
The challenge of
faith & health

**Institute for
Public Health
& Faith
Collaborations**

JOIN
colleagues



HOME

ihp
net

The forest, the spring, the leaven

Gary Gunderson, Director
Interfaith Health Program, The Carter Center
Given at Council on Health and Human Service Ministries of the
United Church of Christ, March 6, 1998, St. Louis

It is a curious and challenging task to speak to a group of Christians, almost all of whom are already embedded in organizations with many years of patient, yet bold faithfulness to the needs of lonely, sick, imprisoned, battered, injured and dying. It is not fashionable to have high expectations of denominational structures these days, so let me be clear at the outset that I do have such expectations. And we gather in the shadow of the arch, the launching point not just of the Lewis and Clark, but of thousands of other extraordinary and courageous ventures united solely by the belief that we humans could open up a new frontier for our children and those who might follow. Thus, everything I have to say is little more than a footnote on what is already underway, in some cases for many, many decades. I want to encourage you tonight. I want you to remember who you are and what you have remembered at your best moments in the past century.

Give your life away, and you will find it.
Be bold and you will be safe.

Something in us wants it all to be more complex and technical--professional, sophisticated. Dean Ornish leads his new (and amazing) book, *Love and Survival*, with a quote from Thomas Pynchon: "If they can get you to ask the wrong questions, then they don't have to worry about the answers." When you focus first on the technique, you're asking, not exactly the wrong, but surely, the second question.

Tomorrow you'll have a chance to learn from my teachers, Scott Morris of Memphis, Nancy Nielsen and Louis Peacock of the Bay Area, John Hatch of North Carolina and Ruth Martin of South Carolina. They are way smarter than me and can tell you deeply about how to do some astonishing things. But they'll be the first to tell you that their techniques are quite secondary. They have found a way to channel the enduring strengths found in their faith structures so that they flow like the cool water of an everlasting spring to those in need. How did they do that? I want to give you a lens in which to see, not only their way, but also your own.

I want to do this by lending you some different images in which I hope you'll catch your reflection and in doing so, an image of whom you might yet be. I want you to see yourself as part of the living forest, and our communities as a healthy forest. I want you to see yourself as what Isaiah calls, spring of water that never go dry. I want you to see yourself as the leaven in the rich bread that feeds our communities.

The forest. We all know what a forest looks like, but just try to find a picture of one and you'll see why I use my hand-drawn crude overhead instead. Anyone who has every walked in one knows that forests are a jumble, a tangle of life, whose deeper order look like a riot of disorder to us simple creatures. It's not neat. Some of the trees are fallen, obviously wounded ones live on unpredictably, even leaning on nearby ones for so long they actually grow together. And down in the dirt, where the real life is, the roots tell the story. Although we've been told for all our lives that we should put our roots down deep, actually, the healthy trees send them sideways. The interweave is not just structural, although that itself has profound lessons for us: the groves that survive the certain wind and ice, do so together. But even in gentle times, the forest would die, except for the interwoven roots, which have a nutritional and even informational, function. At the microbial level, the roots live together so intimately they literally function as one organism so that the light from one, the food from another is shared-- even among different species. At least in healthy forest, a healthy community it is.

Where are your roots tangled with others? How are reaching sideways?

Now, if you're missing my point, you probably have trouble with the parables, too. Go ask a Sunday School student for help.

Wendell Berry, writing in his 1996 novel, *A World Lost*, described a young boy drinking from an everlasting spring that must have been the kind that Isaiah had in mind. "I fastened the door and lay down outside at the place I liked best to drink, which was just below the threshold stone where the water was flowing and yet so smooth that it held a piece of sky in it as still and bright as a set in a ring. The water was so clear that you could look down through the reflection of the sky or your face and see maybe a crawdad. I took off my hat and drank in big swallows, relishing the coldness of the water and the taste it carried up from the deep rock and the darkness inside the hill. As I drank, the light lay warm on my back like a hand, and I could smell the mint that grew along the stream."

Wouldn't we all hope that our lives, our organizations would be thought of in that way, so that when our lives were handed on to the next generation, they might say of us, that we were like a spring in dry times. My Mom died five weeks ago, and her granddaughter read this scripture at her memorial service. I hope it could be read at mine someday. Hear it as a job description for one who might be a spring themselves. Let me paraphrase Isaiah 58.

Is this not the service I ask of you, to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens and to let the oppressed go free, to break every yoke? Is it not to share your sustenance with the hungry, to bring the poor and homeless into your home, to cloth the naked that you see, and never to hid yourself from those to whom you are connected like family (remember the roots, here). Some of us fear that our ministries are at their dusk, not dawn. Isaiah promises that "if you will only pour out your soul before the hungry your light will rise from confusion and your dimness will be like noonday. The lord will guide you, and satisfy you in dry times. You will be like a watered garden and like a spring that never fails."

The hydrologists among you might say, appropriately, that a spring is actually a highly complex phenomenon reflecting millennia of climate and geology, the underlying aquifer. To which I say, yes! We humans can only stop the spring, not start it. Isaiah makes a nice point that fundraisers should hear: if we will simply do those things that channel the cold waters into our dry communities, we get credit for them. We may even find the springs will be named after us! Imagine that! But follow the job description.

Now it's not quite that simple, because you'll have noticed that the whole job description involves relating to other humans. A retired executive at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention once summed his wisdom by saying that the perfect project has plenty of money, clear objectives, a good plan and no people. The challenge is rarely technical, almost always relational."

Dr. Dean Ornish has been a thorn in the flesh of medical establishment for many years now in his research and evangelism for the priority on diet and exercise. His new book is even more troublesome in that it argues that the real predictor of disease and injury is lovelessness, isolation, and loneliness. Isaiah beat him to the point by nearly three millennia, of course, but it always helps to have controlled study documentation, whenever it comes along. He says, "Love an intimacy are at the root of what makes us sick and what makes us well, what causes sadness and what brings happiness, what makes us suffer and what leads to healing. If a new drug had the same impact, virtually every doctor in the country would be recommending it for his or her patients. It would be malpractice not to prescribe it-- yet, with few exceptions, we doctors do not learn much about the healing power of love, intimacy and transformation in our medical training." (p.3) Ornish claims that his medline search of the National Library of Medicine found only two articles out of nine million that explored the relationship of love to heart disease.

Isaiah, Ornish, my mom, our kids all know that the cutting edge of health and wholeness does not lie up some unexplored river, over some academic horizon, in come clever new management paradigm, out amid some cosmic mystery. The cutting edge is in between us, among those who literally share our breath and water, our food and shelter. The cutting edge of health ministries is not technical, but relational, how we care for each other.

Now we must not leave that to chance, so let me move to the next image, the leaven.

The leaven. I've done some writing and a lot of thinking about how communities and organizations can evaluate their activities, to hold themselves accountable for testing the results of their efforts against their best intentions. You know that "accountability" is all the rage, these days among insurance companies, foundations, government agencies and even the United Way, all of which are coming at this task from anything but high moral ground. Even we Baptists know that there is nothing so annoying as a new convert, even, maybe especially, to something like righteousness. However, hypocrisy is often the first step toward civilization, so we should not despise it, but look for the next step. The fact is that we social justice folks have rarely taken even the first hypocritical step toward laying out accountability tools that would permit us to gauge whether our intermediate actions were actually leading toward or away from fairness and equity. Our usual feedback is purely emotional, derived from the devastatingly prophetic press conference, the razor-sharp memo, and the incendiary email. It feels good. Isaiah would be dubious.

A number of communities, chambers of commerce, health departments and coalitions of all sorts have adopted and tried to implement assessment tools that attempt to measure progress toward healthier communities. The Coalition for Healthier Communities of which some of you are members has recently published a wonderful inventory of such tools that help bring onto the screen the measurable indicators from teen pregnancy, to recidivism, kids finishing school on time, underweight births, acres of parkland, ER admissions, crime, joblessness and so on.

I like to bake bread with a bread machine, which was churning away one morning this week as I read through the thick inventory of assessment tools. Not surprisingly the compendium looked to me like a recipe book of sorts. It suggested that if you get all these ingredients together and stir them up with some minor level of skill, a healthy loaf, or community should emerge. No Christian could read the list of desired ingredients and object to any one of them in any one of the recipes. But you'd have to have the spirituality of a brick not to notice what's missing from almost every one, faith, hope, love, spirituality. Dare I call it, the leaven? Need I point out the obvious about the healthy city movements driven by the chamber of commerce? They don't rise up. And they sure as hell don't raise up the poor and the hungry.

It is a new—or renewed-- thought that congregations-- the faith-forming things-- have any serious role in doing heavy lifting for communities. I admit it takes some imagination sometimes to see this. We see them as supporting structures at best who should be enlisted to support better qualified specialists and professionals. Let me just note that the spring of faith is not formed in our specialized agencies and service organizations. It is only expressed there. It is formed back where people are born, taught, formed, cared for, get sick, die, have babies, wed, divorce, weep for their children, sing,

pray and wonder. There is no greater challenge for Christian mission than to re-image the relationship between the faith-forming things and the specialized service things.

Some of the wisest people working on healthy communities speak of this dawning understanding as having backed onto what they now see to be sacred ground. The common ground.... is sacred. Almost every secular and governmental institution now has some program reaching out to religious or spiritual structures-- to us. They frequently do this from shallow or naive intentions, often seeking muscle, not brains. Our inconvenient pace, odd habits and curious strengths often frustrate them. Their bread isn't rising and they are in a hurry.

Let me say quickly, before we become too proud, that our leaven is often too old and moldy to rise, now that people are willing to stir us into the mix. But we are being asked something like the right question: can you help this community rise? We should be able to engage that and say, yes, we will pour our lives out as leaven.

That's why I wrote this little book, *Deeply Woven Roots*. It started out as a paper to describe to government folks what they could reasonably ask religious folks to do. This required describing for them the underlying strengths of congregational networks. Many agencies wish that we had other strengths than we do, and wish we didn't have some of the strengths that we do. Many people in government see the task as handing off inconvenient or expensive problems. I have no interest in that task. But I am interested in aligning the strengths of our democratic government institutions with the enduring strengths of our religious networks.

We have small task, really, sort of like the leaven and I want us to play to our strengths. We, the Christians, (I won't speak for the Muslims and Jews here) have come to like small tasks too well. We like the notion that our role as leaven lies in telling the rest of the loaf what to do, especially for those inconveniently poor people who we no longer like to be around ourselves, who our churches have gone off and left downtown. This is not what I mean. Perhaps rather than saying small role, let me use the word humble.

I think our role is to be who we are, to live out our strengths for the benefit of the whole community, which God loves in its entirety. These strengths can only be witnessed, not heard, for everyone talks incessantly about caring and service and compassion. Hell, even the HMO's are smart enough to describe themselves as servants. What are our strengths? Well, you should buy the book, of course, but they aren't skills, techniques or projects. They are underlying characteristics of a social structure, similar to genes, which depend on nurture and ecology for their specific expression. You can't see them in just any 'ol church, of course, because most of these everlasting springs are blocked and neglected by the same selfish culture that has dried up our communities. But in a minority-- I'd say about 10%-- of congregations, you can see these strengths growing ragged and wild and unmistakable, right in the midst of the greatest challenges of our time.

These congregations have the strength to:

- Accompany (they show up and are physically present)
- Convene (they gather people in big and small groups across interest lines)
- Connect (they form complex webs of exchange across which resources can be accessed, help offered, knowledge flow)
- Frame, give context, tell stories (they not only "educate," but learn and discuss)
- To give sanctuary (they are physical places where things happen)
- Bless (they evaluate, judge, encourage)
- Pray (they mark the intersection between human and holy)
- Persist (they have a long time span, memory and hope)

In his remarkable book, *Ecotherapy*, Howard Clinebell calls for "reality based hope" capable of lending energy to heal communities and all that lives in them. These are not easy times, for as he points out, there is much to fear. "Reality-based hope is not the opposite or the absence of appropriate fear. It is hope that integrates the energy of this fear in a fresh synthesis that brings new strength to the person. Like tough love, this is tough hope. It is hope with muscles. It is hope grounded in a transcending spiritual reality that is its ultimate wellspring."

I end my book with the following thought, that I lay before you as a reminder to be who you are. "There is a certain craziness at the heart of the universe that is captured in the symbols of reversal, the upside-down-ness of faith. All faith traditions look upon the urgent anxiety of our time with a slightly ironic smile knowing that all that counts is not counted in the modern calculus of probabilities. So we find time to accompany the lonely, to convene a meeting of neighbors, to connect someone in need with an organization that can help them. We expect God's work to go on, so we go on, too, patiently telling our stories as best as we can and welcoming the hopeful and hurting into our safe space. We think we are witnessing the work of a loving God who has not given up, so we continue to offer up a touch, a word of blessing and hope. Because we are broken ourselves, we pray and sometimes seeing our faith, weak as it is, others find their way toward God, too. This all sounds to somber, dutiful, and full of heavy purpose. That is not at all what it feels like. It feels like life, surprising life.

I have heard it said more than once that you can tell if anything lively and new is happening in a research laboratory by the laughter. Humor and discovery are closely linked because both thrive on surprise. So does a living congregation. It turns out that God has hardwired a joke into the universe that you only get once you have been to the breaking ground and been flipped upside down. Like all humor, this cosmic joke rests on unexpected reversal, and it is a good one: Humility endures while pride dies in the dirt; sacrifice endures while acquisitiveness ends with death; knowledge remains incomplete while love fulfills and is never wasted. A laughing God nudges us in the ribs: "Do you get it?"

Congregations who get it accompany, convene, and connect. They give context and sanctuary. They bless and pray. They endure and build healthy communities that endure too.

We are gathered in the shadow of tall arch built to honor the memory of bold and courageous people who carved a wilderness into a new country. We're here to help each other find ways to navigate our new frontier, the cutting edge that lies between us. This is not simple work, so we need to talk about techniques and tools and strategies. But listen to each other, to the deeper question that brought us together. Is there a spring among us that wants to flow through us onto our dry communities? Oh, yes, there is. Every generation has found it, tended it, and passed it on. And now it for us to do so. Do not doubt the spring. And do not doubt that you are adequate for the times.

[Back to IHP-NET Documents Index](#)

[Back to IHP-NET home page](#)