



NEWS - at - FIRST

INCARNATIONAL SPIRITUALITY

June 2008
www.FirstOakland.org

“Real love and vulnerability are ultimately demonstrated in the incarnation of Christ”

*Join us for our first ALL-
Congregation LIFE Group event!*

SUMMER WITH THE SPIRIT Incarnational Spirituality

Tuesday, June 17, 2008
Dinner & Fellowship 6:15-7pm
Program 7-9pm
*(read more about theology of
Incarnational Spirituality on pages)*

Sunday June 1, 2008
SHOCK THERAPY
Pastor Lynice Pinkard

Sunday June 8, 2008
**LIVE DOG
RELIGION**
Pastor Lynice Pinkard

Sunday June 15, 2008
CONTENDING WITH THE CROSS
Ryan Dowell Baum

Sunday June 22, 2008
THE DILEMMA OF INTEGRITY
Pastor Lynice Pinkard

Sunday, June 29, 2008
PRIDE SUNDAY
VIRTUE IS ITS OWN REWARD
Dr. J. Webb Mealy

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NEWS - at - FIRST

Kirsten Swenson & Kai Lavatai, Editor
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We welcome your input & feedback!
Contact Kai Lavatai with your comments or for submission information:
kai@firstoakland.org or (510) 444.8511 x10

OUR MISSION STATEMENT

First Congregational Church of Oakland gives glory to God by reaching out to people of all racial, ethnic and economic backgrounds, ages, abilities and sexual orientations,
to welcome them into the beloved community, where together we discover our gifts;
develop authentic relationships with God and each other;
join in passionate, creative, Spirit-led worship;
grow in faith, understanding, power, love and service;
and respond to the word of life we encounter in Jesus Christ
by becoming part of what Spirit is doing to create justice and peace,
to heal the earth, and to restore kinship with all creation.



FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH *of* OAKLAND

Where Love is first!

PASTORAL REFLECTIONS

A REFLECTION ON INCARNATIONAL SPIRITUALITY

By Pastor Lynice Pinkard

One way of talking about incarnation is to say that God has taken the path that leads through history—the path that has to do with the body and society, the path that has physical and public relevance. God has entered precisely into sensate and social reality and that therefore God cannot be experienced apart from physical and material reality and society.

According to the classic view, Christ is God in the conditions of human existence. In Christ, God renounced the divine attributes that transcend human existence; God chose to strip God's self of them and to plunge fully into the conditions set by the world: to become a slave in a slaveholding society, to experience hunger and thirst, cold and pain, like all the others who did not have the wealth that would have protected them from such experiences.

One-sidedly and without guarantees God made God's self vulnerable in Christ. In other words, God didn't come in an armored car and wasn't born in a bank. God gave up all the old miracle weapons of thunder and lightning and heavenly hosts, one-sidedly and without guarantees. Palaces and kings and soldiers were not God's way when God decided unilaterally to become a human being. Christ embodies (incarnates), and thereby models for us, what it means to become human; we become human by getting up off our ASS-ets and by living without weapons. If you don't believe me, read the hymn in Phillippians 2, which tells us that Jesus made himself nothing.

Taking the very nature of a servant; he became human.

Having become human, he stayed human and died.

How did Jesus die? He died on a cross that expresses the bitter, realistic depth of faith and is a symbol of this-worldliness and history. It was not theologians who invented the cross—it was the Roman Empire that thought up this method of deterring people who heard the cry for liberation by slowly and publicly torturing to death those who cried out. Anyone who has ever read reports of torture—for example from Guatemala or Iraq, anyone who has seen a film like *Two Worlds* about South Africa—knows that it is not a matter of something exotic, but of the normality of imperial suppression which now presents a slow method of torture as “low intensity conflict” for whole regions.

It was not God who erected the cross but the Lords of this world, whether they are named Pharaoh or Somoza, Nebuchadnezzar or Columbus, Pilate or Botha. God in Christ “emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness, being found in human form, humbled himself and became obedient to love to the point of death—even death on a cross”. Jesus got up off his assets and laid down his weapons, immersing himself in a culture of otherness and being willing to be transformed by it. He was not trying to get away and hide, be safe, just chill. So if we want to respond to his call, “Follow me”, we



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PASTORAL REFLECTIONS

A REFLECTION ON INCARNATIONAL SPIRITUALITY (*Continued*)

By Pastor Lynice Pinkard

cannot get away from it all, hide, bury our heads in the sand, emigrate to a distant South Sea island as if there were no nuclear weapons tests there and no grooming of women for the prostitution trade. Incarnation reminds us that there is no “away”.

It is not God who makes us suffer, but love has its price. God wants to make us alive, and the wider we open our hearts to others or the more audibly we cry out against the injustice that rules over us, the more difficult our lives in the rich society of injustice becomes. Even a love of trees, or of seals or school children who cry out at night from the constant sounds of sirens and gunshots in their communities is costly. But there are among us people who step in for the victims of violence, who create unrest while the authorities are trying to keep everything nicely under control. There is great freedom in choosing life even when this choice plunges us into difficulties, unpleasantness, indeed suffering.

The more we grow into love, into conformity with the message and life of Jesus—the more vulnerable we make ourselves. We are more open to attack when we become conspicuous or when the life of God lights up in us. When we spread our life around rather than hoarding it, to be sure we enter into loneliness, often we lose friends, a standard of living, a job, a secure future. But at the same time we are changed. The cross, the sign of isolation, of shame, of abandonment becomes the tree of life. The dead wood begins to turn green, and we know for once where we belong.

To choose life means that we choose to embrace the messiness, to put up with the difficulties, the lack of success, the fear of standing alone. To embrace the incarnation of Christ and our own incarnational Christic life means that our participation is imperative for the redeeming activity of God to take place. Incarnation is not about personal salvation and an immortal future in heaven—it’s about liberation from injustice, violence, and suffering for ALL. Liberation for ALL is not just magically produced by God, but requires our historically concrete participation here and now. And, incarnation is a continuing phenomenon—it’s not restricted to Jesus of Nazareth. Christ stands for Jesus of Nazareth plus all those that belong to him, who corporately manifest his tangible body on earth in the present. To believe in Christ, to follow him, is to participate in the incarnation by laying down our prerogatives in order to carry God’s power. If Jesus of Nazareth was the poor man from Galilee who was tortured to death, then Christ is that Word of Life which cannot be destroyed, which came into the world in him and lives through us. The incarnation continues and the christic power is still alive.



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THOUGHTS ON INCARNATIONAL SPIRITUALITY

By Webb Mealy

It's about forming our spirituality and our lifestyle on the basis that the whole living physical world, and ourselves in it, are made by God to be "very good". It's a deeply ingrained habit in Western culture to oppose the physical to the mental or spiritual, and to assume that the non-physical is more valid or more important. The Hebrew tradition, which is the foundation for Christianity, does not think that way. It sees this physical creation as God's chosen realm of self-expression. When God makes a physical world and gives us physical bodies, that isn't a mistake, and it isn't the work of an inferior assistant deity. Glory is the manifestation in creation of the nature and character of God, and God has created the physical world with the capacity to receive and to express God's full presence and glory. It's said in the prophet Habakkuk that "As the waters fill the sea, the earth is going to be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Living One." The incarnation of the Word of God in Jesus Christ is the most radical proof of God's intention to make the world a place of total glory. And if the Son of God can fully take part in and give himself for the wellbeing of this physical world without being diminished, then so can we. Paul's advice to us is to "Present your bodies as a living, holy and pleasing sacrifice to God, which is your appropriate priestly service" (Rom. 12:1). Incarnational spirituality is the discipline of investing unreservedly in the wellbeing of this beautiful creation, in the healing and reconciliation of humanity, and in the health and wholeness of ourselves as bodily persons. Led by the Spirit, we do these things in many ways, including worship, work, play, relationship-making, activism, service, self-care and recovery. We try hard to live so that everything we do with our bodies remains consistent with our full aliveness and full welcoming of God's Spirit.

There is another aspect of incarnational spirituality that's worth meditating about. This aspect comes out of the knowledge that part of our physicality is the psychological and social dimension. Our way of interacting with other human beings and our style of being in the world is influenced, molded, by the environment in which we live our conscious lives. Another way of putting this is that our sense of identity is shaped by culture. We see that Jesus Christ gave himself without reservation not only into the world in general, but into the Jewish nation and culture. He lived in it and modeled what a person of that culture looks like totally full of God. Learning from his example, we know that we can lay down the primacy of our own cultural experience and let the Spirit draw us into situations where we have to re-learn the cultural rules of being human—we have to take on other ways of perceiving and sensing the world—in order to make common cause with those into whose cultural territory we have crossed. People who embrace incarnational spirituality understand about themselves that they are moldable, adaptable. They know that what they take to be their identity is not a fixed and absolute thing. It's something that has grown out of experiences, and that other experiences—if one is humble enough and trusting enough—can shape them in ways that will make them useful to other groups than the one that they have personally identified with in the past. So when they hear "We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand" (Isa. 64:8), they know that it is not simply transformation towards more wholeness and maturity that God wishes to accomplish in us by molding us—God also may wish to mold us into a form that will bring wholeness to groups of people whose way of being human is unfamiliar to us. This is the secret of incarnation—being willing to give up the definiteness and security of "being who you are", and letting the Spirit of God plug you into a new environment that will reshape you to God's purpose for the wellbeing of the people there.



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THE 7 HABITS OF HIGHLY **EFFECTIVE** CHURCHES

by Anthony B. Robinson

1. STRIVE FOR EXCELLENCE IN SERVICE TO CHRIST.

Effective churches are churches where people enjoy what they're doing and do it well. Give God your best whether in the care of church grounds, the soup you prepare for the homeless shelter dinner, or the hymns and anthems you sing in worship.

2. CULTIVATE A SPIRIT OF INNOVATION AND EXPERIMENTATION.

Make the "Seven Last Words of Church," i.e. "We've never done it that way before," a distant memory. Be open to new ideas that advance your mission. Free people to develop and try new ministries. Just remember, if you're not failing at something, you're probably not trying anything.

3. TAKE THE INITIATIVE TO BUILD RELATIONSHIPS WITH PEOPLE AND GROUPS IN THE WIDER COMMUNITY BEYOND YOUR CONGREGATION.

Refuse to be isolated. Take to the streets, the coffee shops, library and parks of your community. Be curious about what's going on. Get involved in the community events. Meet people. Introduce yourself as a member of the church. Invite people to "come and see."

4. ACCEPT RESPONSIBILITY FOR MISTAKES, LEARN FROM THEM, AND IN ALL THINGS, LET GRACE ABOUND.

Christians aren't perfect; they are forgiven. So making mistakes is not the worst thing that can happen. Besides we often learn the most from our families. In the end, and in the beginning, it is about God's grace, not our achievements. Cut others some slack. While you're at it, cut yourself some, too.

5. "ALWAYS BE PREPARED TO GIVE AN ACCOUNT OF THE HOPE THAT IS WITHIN YOU." (1 PETER 3:15)

Look for where the love, energy and life are following and focus on that. And recognize excuses for what they are: a sign of insufficient commitment. Be people of hope, trusting in God to find a way even when we can't.

6. BE WILLING TO LET PEOPLE GO IN ORDER TO STAY FOCUSED ON YOUR CORE MISSION.

It is more important for your church to be clear and steady about its core mission that it is to make everyone happy. Some people may be better off in another congregation. When folks are unhappy, connect, talk and pray. If things remain stuck, let them go with your blessing, giving priority to your mission.

7. SPLASH IT ON!

A hospice nurse told the story of bringing an elderly woman home for the final days of her life. Noticing a large bottle of perfume on the woman's dresser, the nurse asked, "Would you like me to dab a bit of that behind your ears?" "Honey," said the woman to the nurse, "Why don't you just splash it on!" God loves cheerful givers. So spend money wisely, well and freely in God's cause.

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FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH *of* OAKLAND

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THE 7 HABITS OF HIGHLY **INEFFECTIVE** CHURCHES

1. ELEVATE MEDIOCRITY TO A SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE.

Figure out where average falls and aim below there. Doing things with excellence, joy and flair may make someone uncomfortable. God doesn't really expect much, anyhow.

2. TAKE NO RISK.

A successful practice of risk avoidance is often best achieved by sending any and all new ideas to a minimum of four Boards or Committees who understand that it is their role to say "No" to new ideas. This process may need to be reinforced by remarks noting how a particular idea might make the church liable, cost money or ruffle feathers.

3. PRACTICE THE FOLLOWING EVANGELISM STRATEGY: "IF THEY WANT US, THEY KNOW WHERE TO FIND US."

Assume that everyone does know where you are and what you are. It can also be helpful if your building looks like a medieval fortress. If you don't have that going for you, encourage your ushers and greeters to look like palace guards as they perform their role.

4. BLAME EARLY AND OFTEN.

Maintaining dysfunction in a congregation is made easier if scapegoats are regularly identified. In some congregations, ministers make wonderful scapegoats. You may also blame "newcomers," or "people who don't understand how we do things in this church." If all else fails, blame the conference, the denomination, or Satan.

5. ALWAYS BE PREPARED TO MAKE AN ACCOUNT OF THE EXCUSES THAT ARE WITHIN YOU.

Have an all-purpose excuse like, "I've just been busy" (elaborate at great length just how busy you are, implying that no one else is busy). Occasionally try out a creative new excuse, like, "Our dog ate the printer-ink cartridge and required an emergency appendectomy. He is not very busy, too."

6. MAKE IT CLEAR TO ALL THAT THE JOB OF THE PASTOR(S) AND STAFF IS TO KEEP EVERY ONE, MEANING CHURCH MEMBERS, HAPPY.

Think of your church as "The Love Boat," and the Pastor as the cruise director and activity planner. The job of clergy and staff members is to keep everyone on board happy. If someone is unhappy, it's a sure sign your Pastor is not doing the job.

7. SPEND AS LITTLE MONEY AS POSSIBLE

Even though you may enjoy spending money on personal things like a car or a cruise, you can demonstrate your commitment to modesty and a simple life-style at church. The very best programs cost nothing. And why would your church building need any renovations? If it was good enough for your grandparents then it'll be good enough for your grandchildren.



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WHAT'S HAPPENING AT FIRST!

PRISON MINISTRY -or- PRISON ABOLITION?

- Do you believe that humans don't belong in cages?
- Are you concerned that the U.S. incarcerates almost 2.5 million people, more than any other country in the world?
- Do you want to find out who profits from the mass incarceration of people of color, queer and trans people, low income and immigrant communities?
- Do you want to redirect the \$7.7 billion dollars currently designated for prison expansion in California toward schools, hospitals and community resources?

Critical Resistance is hosting CR10, a national movement conference and strategy session to be held in Oakland, CA, September 26-28, 2008. We hope to bring together people from all over the country and world – former prisoners and family members, political organizers, policymakers, journalists, attorneys, and others – to assess the state of the movement to end the prison industrial complex (PIC) during the last 10 years and where we must head next. CR10's goals are to: assess the movement against the PIC over the past 10 years (what have we won? what have we lost? why?); to engage the movement in a practical discussion about PIC abolition; and to think collectively about where we need to head during the next 10 years and beyond.

First Congregational Church of Oakland has been invited to co-host an Interfaith Breakfast at CR10 entitled "Prison Ministry or Prison Abolition?: An Interfaith Conversation on the Prison-Industrial Complex". The goals of the Interfaith Breakfast are **to create a network of progressive, anti-prison, spiritual and religious leaders** and to **generate an action plan for faith-based PIC abolition work** in the coming years. The Breakfast will take place on **Saturday September 27** and will include speakers and conversation from a range of faith backgrounds, including our own Senior Pastor Lynice Pinkard.

If you are interested in helping with planning this event, please contact Julia Sudbury at jsudbury@mills.edu. We particularly need volunteers to cater the breakfast.

THE WILDERNESS WITHIN

An exhibition of fine art photography by Grant Kinney

Photographer and FCCO member, Grant Kinney, presents *The Wilderness Within*, an exhibition from his fine art photography portfolio spanning from 2006-2008. The show will consist of both traditional landscape photography as well as more experimental work. The title, "Wilderness Within" honors both the subject matter of wilderness, as well as the internal contemplative journey behind the art. Please come and join us for the reception on June 22nd.

Light refreshments and drinks will be provided. Exhibition will run June-September 2008.

For more information, contact Grant at:

(510) 292-6758 or grant@grantkinney.com



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JOIN US FOR PRIDE!

On Sunday, June 29th put on your marching shoes, or sparkly pumps...and join the Open & Affirming Team Ministry as we march in the San Francisco LGBTQQIA

parade. We will be singing, walking, doing blessings, and handing out beads & fliers in an effort to let the world know that First Congo is truly a faith community where Love Is First. You can sign up and pick up a packet every Sunday beginning June 8th. Please note: there will be a mandatory parade safety and preparation meeting on Friday, June 27th at 7p. Hope to see you there. Contact Erica B. for more info or questions: (510)-331-4849

BOOK DISCUSSION

-on- BECOMING GOD'S PEOPLE

I'm really excited about our joint Life Group meeting on Tuesday, June 17, to talk about incarnational spirituality. If you are interested in even more discussion of how we can live into God's Kingdom vision, I just read a pretty interesting new book called *The New Monasticism: What It Has to Say to Today's Church*, and I'd love to find some folks who are interested in talking about it. The book is not just for those who are interested in creating intentional residential spiritual communities—though some of us at First Congo are talking about that, too. It's about how to become a real community, how to enact the generosity and compassion to which we're called, etc. I want to find a time and format that works for as many people as possible, so if you are interested, please give me a call at (510)-225-8561, or email me at ntorbett@hotmail.com, and we'll figure something out. I hope to hear from you!

BELOVED COMMUNITY CIRCLE

Save the Date - Sunday, July 27, 2008—Lunch

The United Church of Christ has called for Sacred Conversations on Race throughout our denomination. The FCCO discernment process made clear that our congregation both needs and is ready for such conversations. The Beloved Community Circle, committed to confronting issues of race, class, gender, sexual identity, and other forms of oppression within our own community, invites you to join us in conversation about Barack Obama's speech on race over lunch on Sunday, July 27. Our own, Victor Lewis, internationally recognized anti-oppression and diversity trainer, will facilitate our conversation.

Please join us and bring your appetite—both for good food and for soul-nourishing conversation. Bring your curiosity, willingness to risk “telling the truth in love”, compassion and generosity of spirit. And, bring your friends!

SEPARATION & DIVORCE

A new spiritual offering at First Congo Church

A new 12-week small group workshop will be offered starting July 7th through the next 11 Mondays excluding Labor Day. The workshop will be based on Bruce Fisher's highly regarded "Rebuilding After Divorce" healing model (see www.rebuilding.org). It will be held in the 1st Congo library from 7-8:30pm and will be limited to 12 participants. The workshop cost is \$150 if registered by June 16th. The workshop leader is Dr. Bonnie Pollack who has a PhD in Psychology. For more information, email Dr. Bonnie at bnpollack@hotmail.com or leave a message at (510) 336-0765.

REMINDERS

PASTORAL CARE HOURS

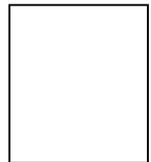
*Wed & Thurs
3:30—7:30*

*Please contact Kai, Church administrative assistant, to
schedule Pastoral Care appointments.
(510) 444-8511 x10*

NEW CHURCH OFFICE HOURS

*Tue-Fri, 11-5pm
Sat-Mon, Closed*

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF OAKLAND
2501 HARRISON ST. @ 27TH
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BLESSINGS TO ALL OF OUR GRADUATES

If you do not wish to receive this Newsletter please let us know at (510) 444.8511 x10