

# THE UNDERGROUND CHURCH

Reclaiming the Subversive Way of  
Jesus

# Four characteristics of a vital and progressive faith community:

- 1) biblically responsible
- 2) intellectually honest
- 3) emotionally satisfying
- 4) socially significant

If you wanted to design the progressive church of the future from scratch, how would you answer these four questions?

1. What makes a church “biblically responsible”?
2. What makes a church “intellectually honest”?
3. What makes a church “emotionally satisfying”?
4. What makes a church “socially significant”?

# Complaints, Compliments, Dreams

- What most frustrates you about the church in our time? If you could change just one thing, would it be?
- What gives you the most hope about the church in our time? Despite our failures, what do we do well?
- What could the church as an Underground Movement (a counter-cultural, subversive force) do to undermine or transform the dominant culture?

# The seven characteristics of The Underground Church

- 1) As often as possible, the Underground Church will celebrate communion by serving an *actual meal*, before or after the service. It will be provided and served by members of the community, who bring food and share with all those who come, especially the poor.

- 2) Membership in the Underground Church is not by “profession of faith” but by the *profession of trust* in the redemptive power of unconditional love, revealed to the community through the mystery of the incarnation and sustained by that love, not by creeds and doctrines demanding total agreement.

- 3) Worship styles and music in the Underground Church are to be *intentionally diverse*, joyful, and meant to bring worshipers into an experience of the divine. Individual communities will decide what music and liturgical forms are most meaningful to them, and the creation of services that reflect both more traditional and less traditional approaches to worship is encouraged. No musical snobs, please.

- 4) Members of the Underground Church will be committed to mission projects that mark the community off as *countercultural and anti-imperial*. We will be committed to nonviolence, radical hospitality, collective generosity, and the ministry of encouragement.

- 5) The Underground Church will give special attention to the *stranger*, the forgotten, the weak, and the dispossessed. When the Empire marks off certain groups of people as scapegoats or as “enemies,” we will make certain that there is room for them at the table and, if necessary, protect them from persecution.”

- 6) the Underground Church will *create its own economic system* in the community by requiring a pledge of financial support from all members to support the operation of the church, while encouraging individuals to contribute additional funds to mission projects that they are particularly passionate about. We will not rob Peter to pay Paul; we will pay Peter first so that in the work that truly matters, we can fully fund Paul. We will loan money at no interest and bear one another's burdens.

- 7) the Underground Church will seek to work together with all others who share the conviction that *it is more important to be loving than to be right*. We will not insist that others agree with us on all matters theological—only that we offer each other the benefit of the doubt, mutual respect, and the chance to become the rarest and most precious of all things: a community that declares its loyalty only to love incarnate, not to Caesar.

# Low Risk?

- 1) Form a committee to find out what other churches are doing and join them in mission.
- 2) Adopt a local public school and learn what it needs, and how you can make it better.
- 3) Actively participate in interfaith services and move the host site around to different houses of worship. Make sure that includes a mosque if possible.
- 4) Join other faith communities in responding to hate crimes with public declarations.
- 5) Become a “green” church and an active recycling center.

# Moderate Risk?

- 1) Form a Sunday school class that is dedicated to reading and discussing the latest in biblical scholarship, with or without clergy approval.
- 2) Form a committee whose responsibility it is to bring biblical scholars to your community for continuing education, with or without clergy approval.
- 3) Add services to the normal venue that might attract people who do not like traditional worship, or who find it inauthentic. Healing service? Foot washing? Quaker circle? Anything other than Sunday morning!
- 4) Bring local political candidates to your church for a Town Hall event, representing all parties and points of view.
- 5) Give laypeople the power to create mission ideas and pursue them without undue interference from church staff. Allow direct giving to missions in addition to regular church pledge.

# High Risk?

- 1) Make changes to to way communion is served and invite the poor.
- 2) Change the language of worship, so that “trust” is used in place of “faith” and “these are our sacred stories” is used in place of “this is the word of God.” Incorporate more silence, more poetry, less “insider” theological language.
- 3) Create alternative worship experiences with alternative worship elements, music, and liturgy.

# High Risk?

- 5) Establish your church as the center for the study of non-violent social change. Protect and encourage conscientious objectors, protest war, and if individuals are willing, take non-violent direct action against war.
- 6) Practice radical hospitality by welcoming people that test your comfort level. Fundamentalists? Ex-convicts? Sex offenders?
- 7) Give money away in the church to those in need, and consider returning to the ancient practice of loaning money at no interest to members of the community.

# High Risk?

- 8) Consider what it means to welcome the stranger in your community. This may be your next-door neighbor, a runaway teen, a homeless person who shows up at church, or even an illegal immigrant. Consider becoming a sanctuary movement church.
- 9) Form or join a community organizing organization and study the needs of your community. Then show up in force at local city council meetings and be the voice of those without a voice. (VOICE—Voices Involved in Civic Engagement).
- 10) Get involved with the OCCUPY movement in your area, and see what the church can do to support it. Preach against financial injustice and predatory lending practices and boycott the worse offenders as a collective action. Restore the church as the center of resistance to the Empire.