

Shifting Where We Rock — Porch as Missionary Posture

by Daniel Benedict

This address was given at the North American Association for the Catechumenate (NAAC) in Santa Fe, New Mexico at its annual convocation in July 2001. It has been abbreviated and edited for readers. Copyright © 2001 The General Board of Discipleship. Material by the author of this address, and quotes from Dan R. Dick's on line article, "The Way of the Pilgrim 2001," may be quoted for non-commercial, one-time educational use so long as the copyright notice appears with the quotation.

Most modern houses have front steps, but no porch. Instead of porches, newer houses have decks at the back. Porches are structures that welcome. A porch says, "Come, sit down. Rest awhile. We can talk." By contrast decks and patios are geared to privacy and exclusive gatherings. A porch offers a vantage point where people observe and meet the passing world. Assorted chairs, hammocks, tables, and plants create an invitational environment where people can wonder and muse, question, and tell stories. On the porch, neighbors and stranger can meet and be with each other, without going inside. Porches are *in-between structures*. Between the steps and the interior, the porch offers people a place to be. Porches allow for discovery and for testing relationships.

I want us to explore what is the evangelical context of the catechumenate using the image of a porch.

Obviously, we are not talking about a structure constructed of wood, cement, and shingles. We are speaking allegorically about the catechumenate as a structure — a basic process within the life of the baptized and baptizing community. It is a structure on the front side of congregational life — a structure open to and facing the world.

I am assuming *your knowledge of and commitment to the porch* as a process and a congregational structure, and I want to push the boundaries a bit by asking that we consider the porch as a *congregational posture* — an orientation to the world and daily life.

The NAAC leadership invited us¹ to focus on the front side of working with those we call inquirers; to push out a bit from the time when people are actually up on the porch and to consider the sidewalk and the street.

Here is the recipe or outline for what I have cooked up for this meal together: an image, a conversation in an airport, and a visit to an imaginary Greco-Roman town in the second century,

and then some words about recasting congregation life and baptismal living.

A colleague's recent experience caught my attention as a way for us to get into this. So I invite you, first, to do theology with me from the *underside* where life is raw and we put ourselves in relationship to some "twenty-something strangers" and let the Holy Spirit speak to us through their strangeness and their passion.

Listening to twenty-somethings in the airport

Dan Dick is a colleague, a voracious reader, and non-conformist forty-something Christian seeker. He has almost single handedly kept Amazon.com in business! By his own confession he is not a friendly traveler as it exhausts him. So he hides in a book in airports, on planes, shuttles, and taxis. As he puts it, "I am never the one to initiate conversation with other people" and he quickly excuses himself from conversation initiated by others. He is very protective of his emotional space. Interestingly, he observes that he, by living this way, may be robbing himself of valuable experiences and encounters. On a recent trip to San Francisco, he was sitting in an airport reading *The New American Spirituality* by Elizabeth Lesser and suddenly five college students, looking for a place to sit, plopped themselves on either side and across from him. He endeavored to ignore them but one young man (now in Dan's words)

“ — who had more things pierced on his body than Custer had bullet holes — leaned close and asked what my book was about. I prepared to deflect his invitation to chat politely, when I noticed that all five young people were looking at me, awaiting my response. I began to describe the book and was frequently interrupted by a torrent of questions from all five of the students. I felt like I was handing out food to starving children. The more I explained — not just of the book, but of the Bible and other sources — the more intensely their questions poured forth. Good questions, hard questions — better questions than I hear in most churches — about God, faith, relationships, meaning, purpose, practice, and worship. For more than two hours I played ‘air terminal guru’ to a small cadre of disciples. Two of the young people were “churched” and had some background in the Christian faith from which to draw. One girl was raised Buddhist, another nominally Jewish. The last guy said his family worshiped at the altar of “beer and wrestling.” His entire church life involved one wedding and one funeral.”²

That, friends, is porch! It is raw, wild, strange. Dan didn't want to be on the porch but he was. This is the kind of gutsy, uncomfortable experience the missionary God calls us to in the emerging postmodern context. It is the kind of get-out-on-the-sidewalk-and-front-porch experience that will make or break our churches out of the old mold of Christendom. It is a cameo of God's evangelizing the church. Yes, I said, “God evangelizing the church” — connecting us to the world of strangers around us who cause us to open our eyes to the good

news we have but don't see; strangers who break into our comfort zones with the gift of experiencing the gospel as if for the first time.

Porch-side hospitality is *a posture of suspending our comfort and privilege as insiders* in order to be with others as strangers to the gospel. It is stepping outside having the answers so that we can live the questions. It is suspending certitude sufficiently to want to search again with those who are seeking and to journey with them.

So come back to the airport and listen to these strangers:

“For the past six years I have gone to one of the biggest United Methodist Churches in the entire Midwest. There are a half dozen different services and lots of events. People are in groups, and we do fun stuff all the time. The music is great, and I did a Bible study; but it feels like going to a fun house. You get hustled along, and then you end up outside wondering, ‘What was that all about?’ I’ve gone to church there for six years, and I don’t know God any better now than I did before.”

One young man said it this way, “It’s like going in expecting a full-course meal and getting cookies and milk.” Another asked, “Why is everything so watered down? Why are people [in church] avoiding the really big things?”

What does hospitality look like to these young people? Can our congregations hear their voices? “In the past, church leaders have been concerned that if we demand too much or expect too much, we might drive people away. Now, the converse is true: We may drive people away by demanding and expecting too little. The young man that initiated the conversation shook his head and lamented, “The church is the last place I would turn if I were looking to know God.”

Can we strive for evangelization and the catechumenal process to be more than “snacks” to spiritual seekers who are starved for “solid food”?

These young adults’ questions may not be definitive or exhaustive, but they are representative of many voices that are not being heard in our church today. Do our churches have a porch posture that can welcome such criticism and questioning? Can we bear to listen?

Listen a bit more, will you?

“My parents never went to church, so I have no idea what is supposed to happen. I need to ask questions — little questions about why we do the things we do the way we do them and big questions that don’t have simple answers. Most places I go, I feel like I’m stupid or that people disapprove of me when I ask questions.”

My colleague writes: “Gone are the days when the majority of visitors have some familiarity with our beliefs, our practices, and our procedures. A variety of polls and surveys indicate that the average church visitor today has as much background in other religions and new-age philosophy as he or she has in Christianity.” They are in a “sponge mode, absorbing new information and new ways of thinking. That scares us because we have made choices and commitments. But that fear may keep us on the patio instead of the porch. As a result we too often dismiss younger visitors as ignorant, disrespectful, and disruptive — like Jesus visiting with the religious authorities.

Listen to what another said:

“I don’t want to talk faith as a theory, but as a practice. I want the church to help me know how to live a good, kind life. I don’t need platitudes. I go to a church where all they talk about is love, but everyone there looks at me like they’re terrified of me.”

Dan reports that this young man — call him Scott — has bright blue spiked hair, a nose stud, a tongue stud, a cheek stud, a safety pin through his lower lip, at least eight earrings in each ear, and a tattoo of a blood droplet at the corner of his left eye. He reported that Scott is also one of the friendliest, most intelligent people I have met in a long time. He says that Scott scared him before he got to know him. There you see is the ever-recurring choice the Spirit puts before us: “Will you let fear keep you in the house? Or will you risk going out on the porch?”

What is Scott seeking? Would you and your congregation be able to overcome your fear and welcome him into your lives and walk with him in the search for meaning, purpose, and place? What could happen if we did? What if our baptismal living had such a consistency about it that what we profess and how we live would be seen by Scott as an invitation to share this way of life? What enormous potential there is in our churches if we could do so!

Listen again:

“My family moved from Japan when I was three. My parents are Zen Buddhists. As I grew up, in addition to the teachings of the Buddha, my parents had me read the Upanishad, the Koran, the Torah, the Gospels, and other Hindu, Christian, and Jewish writings. I now go to Christian churches and try to talk about my faith journey, which blends teachings from many traditions. Most Christians, I have found, are not conversant in other faiths; but they hold strong opinions that other beliefs are inferior. I go seeking to learn, but what I find most are closed minds.”

How open are we to the stranger from other faith traditions? Or from a mix of traditions? Does your congregation’s porch have room for such? Can we welcome them and their journey and not write them off? Dan reports that a prominent leader in evangelism ministries said to him not

long ago, “I don’t talk to Buddhists. They can’t tell me anything I need to know, and they won’t listen to the truth, so why bother? I’ve got better ways to spend my time.”

Can we really offer a porch to people if it forecloses on their questions, conflicting attractions, and their potential for rejecting our faith? Or, if we are really out on the porch, can we give in to feeling that to talk to him or her is a waste of time because we cannot convert him or her to our way of believing and practicing the faith? How strong are the vibrations such judgement sends out?

Listen one more time — living on the porch calls for perseverance:

“Why is it so hard to do things in the church? My uncle had a ton of blankets and stuff, so my girlfriend and I told my church that we had them and that we wanted to give them to homeless and poor people. They said we needed to tell the head of the mission committee, who would have to bring a proposal to, like, the governing body, and they would vote on it; and then we would have to meet with them to organize stuff. We said ‘forget it’ and took a pickup truck downtown and gave away all the stuff in about an hour.”

Dan observes: “When people are needy, twenty-somethings don’t want to bring helping them to a vote. They just want to help them. Interestingly, it is not just the “younger” generation that feels this way. A significant number of forty- and fifty-somethings are steering their efforts away from the church for the same reason — they don’t want to talk about helping; they want to help. In many cases, our organizational structure and processes take more time than the actual ministries they support.”

Wayne Schwab, former evangelism officer for the Episcopal Church, charges that the church we have known is too controlling, holding its members captive to the “body mission” rather than releasing and encouraging “member mission.”

What are some the words and impressions that have been forming as you have been listening to these young adults? How does this stretch our sense of what it means to be baptized and baptizing Christians? What does life on this porch of evangelization that extending out into the world look like, taste like, smell like?

Reynolds Price in an introduction to a book about the porch in American fiction writes that the front porch was a common feature of American architecture from the early eighteenth century through the first four decades of the twentieth century. In the young agrarian country the front porch was more than an escape from the hot interior of the house or cabin. The porch served as *a vital transition* between the uncontrollable out-of-doors and the cherished interior of the home. The family’s business, shopping, negotiations with farm hands, distressed or disgruntled neighbors, and encounters with unexpected visitors and strangers could be tended to under the shaded covering of the porch apart from the privacy of the interior *without risking harm to the*

*family's physical and psychic core.*³

Price's imagery related to the porch expand our imaginations around the porch and the way we use the "front porch" in our church life. First, the structure serves as *a transition between the uncontrollable out-there and the cherished interior of the home*. Second, the structure serves as a place where contacts with people outside the "family" can take without serious risk to its spiritual and psychic core. Of course we welcome the stranger to share in the worship, sharing, and life of the congregation when the time is right for *them*. But the porch I am inviting you to consider as a congregational posture extends out into the daily living and contact in the Monday to Monday world.

The front porch as an architectural structure and as a psychic posture serves as a transition between the swirling, uncontrollable world beyond and the safe and cherished interior space. It is also a place of contact with others of all sorts without serious communal and spiritual risk. It is a social structure and a way of being in the heart and mind of the baptized community. The baptismal covenant commits us all to this life: "Will you seek to serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?" (See the *Book of Common Prayer*. Church Hymnal Corporation, 1979, p. 305.) Each of our various denominational ritual texts have a similar question of those about to be baptized into Christ's royal priesthood.

However, Price's images have *the family's best interests* in mind — the household's privilege. I use porch with the mission of God in mind — God's free grace and mercy for all people. So the seeker, the stranger, the inquiring twenty-five year old with piercings and tattoos who is wondering about faith, looking for some "God stuff," can talk and be and encounter the mystery. *In this reversal*, the point is for Scott to have a place of transition between the experience of living in an uncontrollable pluralistic world and an unfamiliar interior of the people of God. *The porch is where he can conduct his search without serious risk to his spiked blue hair and his psychic core*. Of course, if he ends up following Christ, all he has known is at risk, but on the front porch we are called to rock on he is welcomed but not cannibalized by Christians! Hospitality — God's hospitality to the stranger — must reign on the front porch.

But now, let's step away from the rawness and strangeness of the Other who comes to meet us in people like those we have listened to so far and go back to ancient time — some 1800 years ago through the sociological mind of Rodney Stark.⁴

The porch as public life and open social network

Stark is a sociologist who uses social theory and tools to narrate *The Rise of Christianity* from a small Jewish sect to the dominant social movement in the ancient Greco-Roman world. Stark asserts that the basis for successful "conversionist movements" is adding new persons through social networks, through relationships of direct and intimate interpersonal attachments.⁵ This is a *sociological* description of what I am trying to say about the evangelical porch as posture

toward the world!

He further asserts that most new religious movements wane because they quickly become closed networks and fail to keep forming and sustaining attachments to outsiders. With this closure and inward turning they lose the capacity to grow. By contrast successful movements find ways to remain open to outsiders and continue to reach out and into new adjacent social networks. When such movements are able to sustain this active openness over a long period of time, they grow dramatically and exponentially.⁶ Stark's book is a fascinating attempt to explain how the early Christians maintained open networks, which it seems certain that they did and how they triumphed in Greco-Roman culture by 313 AD at the peace of Constantine.

Stark's work is too complex for me to detail here. Let me boil it down to a summary. He says that the rise and triumph of Christianity was due to love and service on the part of Christians. In contrast to pagan practice of sacrificing to their capricious and careless gods, the Christians *demonstrated God's love by sacrificing not to their God but on behalf of one another* (p. 86). They extended the bonds of family and tribe to include all who call upon the name of the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 1: 2) and even people who simply were in extreme need.

Stark attributes Christianity's phenomenal growth in the pagan world to sacrificial living on the part of the Christians. In times of plague that ravaged the population in waves, Stark posits that Christians had a lower mortality rate because they "nursed" the afflicted rather than letting them die for fear of catching their disease. And they nursed pagan neighbors that their own families had abandoned in fear, thus opening the Christian network to a wider circle in courageous and risky love. Here belief in eternal life as the gift of God empowered them to make sacrifice that the pagans were not willing to make.

Stark paints a picture of the growth of the Christians with calculations related to an imaginary town of 10,000 people with 40 Christians (.04 %) in the year 160 AD and a plague death rate of 30% over its course. The ratio at the start of this scenario is 1/249. He assumes that conscientious nursing and without benefit of medications could cut the rate of mortality by 2/3rds. So among Christians we assume that 10% of the 40 died. Now there are 36 Christians and 6,972 pagans or a ratio of 1/197. He posits that the conversion rate of pagans entering the Christian community at 40% over a decade. So add 16 more Christians and the ratio becomes 1/134. Stark, for simplicity, proposes that the population of the city is static for 90 years until the second epidemic begins in 250 AD and the 40% growth rate continues. The same mortality rates of 10% and 30% continue and by 260AD when the epidemic was over, there would be 997 Christians and 4,062 pagans or a ratio of 1 to 4! Had the plagues not come along the ratio would have been 1 to 8 based on a 40% per decade of growth. Soup and prayer made for a powerful ability to confront crises socially and spiritually that paganism could not demonstrate.⁷

The point here is that Christians grew in number not only by conversion but also by risky service to their brothers and sisters in the faith and to *everyone in need*, and many pagan survivors owed their lives to their Christian neighbors. The observation of the pagans would

have been twofold: one, Christians found the capacity to risk death (something their religion did not provide them), and two, Christians were much less likely to die! Note: religious authenticity was not the aim of the Christians; it was the outcome of mirroring the love and sacrifice of God in their daily lives. Christianity offered revitalization as a distinctive response to the misery, fear, chaos, and brutality of life in the urban Greco-Roman world. Christianity brought new life and new norms to the Greco-Roman cities filled with orphans and widows, incredible filth and congestion, homelessness and poverty, epidemics, and violent ethnic strife. The Christian community offered hope, faith, and love as active engagement and openness to new relationships with newcomers and strangers.

Also note that Christianity in the Greco-Roman world was a *deviant group*! Not sociopathic deviancy but radical countercultural living. They were a minority with high levels of commitment. Stark points out that high levels of commitment and energy go with deviant groups — the *stigma and sacrifice* required by the group mean that free-riders or free-loaders stay on the outside of the group. The stigma and the sacrifice involved in being Christian created a barrier to group entry. Only those willing to pay the price qualified. Beyond that, the high cost of belonging increased participation among those who joined, and that led, in our parlance, to value added. More participation, full worship spaces, vital song and prayer, and positive feelings meant that the whole community reaps higher “production” and benefits. This, Stark observes makes membership in an expensive religion a bargain, even in a “this worldly” sense!⁸ What does that say to our acculturated churches that have such low expectations of one another within the baptismal covenant?

One can hardly conceive of our bureaucratically organized 20th century North American style churches pulling off such a feat! Instead of caring for the most vulnerable in direct and daily contact, our churches form committees to talk about the plague and send money to our “mission” agencies to respond to the crises. Rather than being engaged in hands-on discipleship, we have insulated and isolated ourselves in the suburbs and in gentrified neighborhoods where the needy are across town or on another continent.

Could it be that faith communities gathered around Word and table weekly in praise and prayer, parted from one another to live out the good news on the porch of their neighborhoods? Maybe they were formed in weekly feasting around word and table — the sharing of a little bread and a cup — in ways that were paradigmatic for life all through the coming week?

What vision does such a reconstruction evoke for us? What would such a vision call for in the way of simplification and reorientation of our social networks and our sense of mission in daily life? What would living out this vision mean for our motivations in relationships to others? Would we see others as potential converts to our faith and churches? Or would we see them as Jesus — hungry, strange, misfit, diseased, elderly, young and inquisitive, wounded, abandoned?

Maybe the porch is God’s place. Maybe the porch extends out much further than next September’s letter to those who recently visited our churches inviting them to “Journey to

Christ” or whatever we call the process of working with catechumens. How many people does it take to “rock“ on the porch?

Recasting congregational life toward baptismal living

So, what does this say to us as we consider our congregations and the heart, mind, and work of Christ in the postmodern world? Sociological reconstruction and history are not prescriptions for success or a “monkey see, monkey do” approach. They do, however, call us to attention and invite us to look at our own context and ask what is different in the first decade of the third millennium in North America from that of the 2nd to the 4th centuries in the Greco-Roman world.

Let me float several:

1. Christians and their churches today are *not so much deviant as they are accommodated to the values and practices of the culture*. The martyrdom of sacrificial service is not even on the radar screen.
2. Christians and their churches today are *generally enclaves of doctrinal, social, and institutional homogeneity and comfort*. There is little accountability for baptismal living in daily life. The structures of North American economic and social segregation separate the rich from the poor, educational elites from under educated, and generation from generation, and few congregations are oriented or postured to break the patterns with strategies and instincts of engagement.
3. Christians and their churches today — speaking of the mainline/old-line ones — are *formed and sustained in an institutional rather than a communal mindset*. This focuses church life on acquisition and corporate production of goods and services with power in the hands of professionals (pastors and staff). The ministry and sacrificial service of the baptized in their daily life relationships is relegated to the closet. Professionals and institutions have missions but the members are not seen as the missionaries.
4. Christians and their churches today have bought the package that they must *compete for the attention of the at-large population on the terms of the dominant culture*. We use entertainment worship, relevant services (faithfulness forgotten or secondary), accessible and low commitment programs, and prophylactic experiences that ensure we don’t scare anyone with the classic understandings of liturgy, encounter with the Word, prayer, discipline, accountability, and service.
5. Christians and their churches today have *substituted their own mission and semi-Pelagian⁹ theology for the mission of God (missio dei)* and radical theology of the coming reign of God.

This may seem like a blast of wrath from a sour soul. I hope it is not that. Rather, I hope it is a seeing that is more and more prevalent among those of us who recognize that the way Christians and the church have been living in the last two centuries — the legacy of Christendom

— is in need of a serious overhaul. That is an agenda that has to belong to God while the saints cry out from under the altar “How long, O Lord, how long?” In the meantime, this assembly of leaders is among a growing number of folk who realize we can and must think and live differently as disciples of Christ. We are among a growing community of people who know that baptismal living has to look radically different if we are to be faithful to the mission of God in the early years of the third millennium.

The mission of God is not church oriented — it is creation oriented. Genesis to Revelation is painted in strokes much larger than the growth and vitality of the church. *Baptism joins us to the mission of God, calling us to move from the privacy and isolation of the interior of the house to the gracious and vulnerable space of the front porch.* Living faithfully on the front porch is the vocation of all of the baptized as we anticipate the new heaven and the new earth. This vocation — this calling — oriented toward God’s compassion and justice means that our churches will:

1. listen and attend to others — particularly the stranger — as God’s beloved
2. resist fear when encountering the “stranger” and the needy
3. support every baptized person to be a missionary in daily life ministry and witness
4. initiate people into the reign of God and the new creation rather than making members of our denominations and their “local franchises”
5. consistently and publicly gaze upon the splendor and mercy of God in liturgy, Scripture, and contemplative service — welcoming others to do so with us
6. be alert and open to the potency of the Spirit in ritual action that exorcises the “demons” haunting and crippling the affections, tempers, attitudes, and powers of those on the journey to Christ¹⁰
7. ensure that seekers and inquirers know from the beginning of the process that grace is free and baptismal living is risky service and costly love because they see both dimensions lived out in us.

Ambrose of Milan (4th century) in an Ascension Day sermon said that what was conspicuous in Jesus Christ passed over into the sacraments — a wonderful word. I think what I have been trying to say is that our joy and delight is to so experience the splendor and grace of Christ given to us in baptism that he is embodied in the way we live with people on the porch.

Or to put it more colorfully and tersely, as a now retired Episcopal Bishop, put it in dismissing the people from worship: “Get up! Get out! Get lost!”

End Notes

¹ The presenters, The Rev. Karen Ward of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and The Rev. Daniel Benedict of The United Methodist Church, gave four talks addressing the theme, “Getting Out on the Sidewalk and the Front Porch: Assessing the Climate of Evangelization in the Postmodern World.”

² Dan R. Dick, “The Way of the Pilgrims 2001,” General Board of Discipleship web site article posted 6-14-01.

(www.gbod.org/congregational/articles.asp?act=reader&item_id=2914) All of the quotes that follow on pages 2-4 are from this web site article. Used with permission.

³ See Reynolds Price's "The Lost Room" in *Out on the Porch*. (Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 1992), p. 1.

⁴ Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997).

⁵ See Stark, p. 20.

⁶ See Stark, p. 20.

⁷ See Stark, p. 89.

⁸ See Stark, p. 178.

⁹ Pelagius was a 4th century North African church leader whom Augustine of Carthage argued with because he charged that Pelagius overemphasized human initiative and supplanted God's initiating grace in matters of salvation. For more about this controversy go to http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/NPNF1-05/npnf1-05-04.htm#P106_10241 (for an extensive and classically Protestant article) and a shorter article at <http://www.graceonlinelibrary.org/full.asp?ID=514>. It is difficult to find a good, concise, and mainline web article to deal with the Pelagian controversy.

¹⁰ The "scrutinies" or examination of conscience (consciousness) in the weeks immediately before baptism may scare us, but fear of God's working at deep levels in the lives of those on the conversion journey ("conversion therapy" as Aidan Kavanagh calls it) should not cripple us from such rich and receptive prayer. For more on the "scrutinies" or examination of conscience see Daniel T. Benedict's *Come to the Waters* (Discipleship Resources 1996), pp. 77-79, 106-107, 117-119 for a United Methodist interpretation and ritual prayer; *Welcome to Christ: Lutheran Rites for the Catechumenate* (Augsburg Fortress, 1997), pp. 28-30 for an Evangelical Lutheran Church in America ritual prayer; *The Book of Occasional Services* (Church Hymnal Corporation, 1997) pp. 124-125, for an Episcopal Church interpretation and ritual prayer; John W. B. Hill's *Making Disciples: Serving Those Who Are Entering the Christian Life* (Toronto: The Hoskins Book Group, 1991), pp. 8-9, 29, 36-37, 69-72) for Anglican Church in Canada, *Ritual of Christian Initiation of Adults* (Washington, DC: ICEL, 1983), pp. 69-116 for instruction and ritual prayer for the Roman Catholic Church.