

The Connections between Art, Faith, and Civic Engagement  
Elise M. Edwards  
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*These sessions will explore the way art and faith shape the visible and invisible communities we serve. Can art encourage active participation in development of church and local community programs and policies?*

## Introduction

### About this series:

- It will be interactive: there will be opportunities for you to share questions and comments and you will be asked to stand behind your opinions
- It will be about big ideas. I do believe in sharing some practical application. But what I learned from my own teaching experiences is that I like to introduce a way of thinking, a perspective to approach a topic or issue before getting into specific situations and contexts. If you'd like me to do more "connect the dots" discussion, I'd be happy to share some of that in the Q&A or conversations.
- We will discuss worship. This series is part of a grant project called **Fueling Creative Convergence**, in which this church is exploring with you the artist's role in the worshipping community, provides a collaborative leadership role to believing artists in worship planning, and seeks to gain a deeper understanding of both the contribution and worship needs of the artist. Worship means a great many things to many people, and I'm sure there are different perspectives in this room. In keeping with the "big ideas" theme, we will not get into issues particular styles of worship or formats of worship, except as illustrations. I think those types of issues are denominationally and locally specific to the context your church operates. The working definition we'll use is based off of one given by the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship: "The Bible talks about worship in three ways: as an act of **praise** and adoration, as a public **event**, and as **service** in all of life. ...All three meanings help inform what we do as worshipping communities." In the previous two lectures, we've focused on the second meaning, but this week, we'll look at the third: worship as service in all of life. We're going to connect that definition of worship with another description we've been using, given to us by Eugene Peterson. At a symposium I attended where he spoke, he described worship as "an artistic vehicle for inserting relationship with God into a community." Much of what we'll be speaking about is about worship in communities that occur beyond the church's walls.

There are a few things we've discussed in the previous sessions that inform tonight's message:

1. All people possess imagination and creative skills. However, an artist is someone who has exceptional skill or talent in some creative endeavor and has cultivated it through specialized training and practice.
2. Artists are whole people who should not be valued by Christian communities because of what they provide, but because of who they are.
3. Participation and reflection in worship is not a solo activity, therefore planning should not be a solo activity. In a collaborative process, artists and trained leaders in ministry contribute their skills to articulate a community's relationship to God.
4. Worship should reflect the values and experiences of the community who engages in it.

Opening Exercise (Group participation): Name some different forms that "community" takes.

Some expected responses: churches, neighborhoods, internet communities, online networks, gangs, families, friends, military, villages, cities, retirement homes, peer groups, schools, professional

organizations, civic groups, fraternities and sororities, sects, denominations, arts organizations, refugee camps, summer camps, activity clubs

### **Christian Engagement in Community**

Why should churches engage the communities that surround them? The Christian message and experience has to be redescribed, reinterpreted, and recast for new worlds, new times, and new places. The Christian faith is not meant to be private, even though it is very personal. It is intended to be communal, shared with those who have our faith, and extended to those who do not. Because we live not in our churches, but in other types of communities (see list above), we are called to find ways to live out our faith through action in those communities. Our activity does have to be “evangelical” for it to be representative of our faith. As we said earlier, worship is service in all of life, and such service need not explicitly state the name of Jesus to be his faithful witness.

I base my assertions on a praxis model of theology. The praxis model does not focus solely on reinterpreting a universal gospel message into local modes of language and practice or listening to the existing culture to see where the gospel already exists. Instead, the praxis model focuses on discerning the meaning of social change and contributing to its course of action.<sup>1</sup>

Theologian Stephen Bevans describes the central insight of the praxis model:

...Theology is done not simply by providing relevant expressions of Christian faith but also by commitment to Christian action. But even more than this, theology is understood as the product of these two aspects of Christian life [expression and action]. The praxis model employs a method that ‘in its most profound sense is understood as the unity of knowledge as activity and knowledge as content.’ It is reflected-upon action and acted-upon reflection—both rolled into one.<sup>2</sup>

This type of engagement is a way of knowing and living truth; it is a model of thinking. It is based on the idea that engagement is as a source of knowledge better than belief in someone else’s authority or personally appropriated knowledge. The idea is that we know best when reason is coupled with and challenged by our action, making us subjects, not just objects, in the historical process of our time and place.

Even churches that are countercultural in the sense that they stand against prevailing attitudes and cultural shifts in society are called to engage the communities they live in. In a countercultural model of theology, the Christian community must first allow the message to transform their own lives, and then demonstrate their lifestyle and choices to the surrounding cultural atmosphere. The community functions as a “hermeneutic of the gospel,” for “the local church is not just *in* a place or *of* a place; it finds its identity in being *for* the particular place it finds itself in.<sup>3</sup> For the gospel to be a clear message of transformative power, the church is to be its incarnation which engages the human context. “Really *being* somewhere means to be committed to a place rather than simply an observer.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Stephan B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, ed. Robert J. Schreiter, Revised and Expanded Edition ed., Faith and Cultures Series (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2002; reprint, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 72. Descriptions of the theological models come from Bevans’ discussion of praxis and countercultural models of contextual theology.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

<sup>4</sup> Philip Sheldrake, *Spaces for the Sacred: Place, Memory, and Identity* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 12.

What is civic engagement? [Refer to Spectrum of Arts Based Civic Engagement 1 diagram] It is the many ways in which people participate in civic, community, and political life and, in so doing, express their engaged citizenship. From proactively becoming better informed to participating in public forums on issues, from volunteering to voting, from community organizing to political advocacy, the defining characteristic of active civic engagement is the commitment to participate and contribute to the improvement of one's neighborhood, community, and nation.<sup>5</sup>

Community building is the process of improving the quality of life in a neighborhood or community by strengthening the capacity of residents, associations, and organizations to identify priorities and opportunities and to work, individually and collectively, to foster and sustain positive neighborhood or community change. (The Aspen Institute)

Many churches already participate in civic engagement and community building activities.

Opening Exercise (Group participation): Name some civic engagement and community building programs that you know churches participate in.

Some expected responses: block parties, neighborhood clean-ups, prayer walks, soup kitchens, shelters, clothing drives, voter registration drives, political advocacy, parades, joining neighborhood committees

In the next part of the lecture, we'll discuss the benefits and possibilities of arts and cultural programs for civic engagement.

### **Churches and Arts-Based Civic Engagement**

When churches engage their communities, they should be wary of projects that offer one-way communication or benefits. These might be activities that reach out in mission projects that assume God is not already present in the community, or projects that only allow their community to speak and do not articulate a Christian message. We must try to teach and learn from each other. When churches engage in outreach or mission, they should do so with an attentive eyes and ears to see both the good and bad in their communities. For connections to be made, we have to encourage partnerships based on reciprocity.

Living out relationship with God in community is not based on one way communication. I argue that the most appropriate approach for the church to assume is from a "confessional" position. To be confessional means to assume humility before God and others that recognizes all our attempts to describe God as incomplete and approximated. It acknowledges that our attempts to live out our faith do not always meet the mark. Yet in spite of that fact, it seeks to "confess the gospel" as an alternative worldview that has relevance and meaning for our time and culture.

Dialogue occurs when two or more parties with differing viewpoints work toward common understanding in an open-ended, most often, face-to-face format.<sup>6</sup> In civic dialogue, people explore matters of civic importance and consider the dimensions of a civic or social issue, policy, or decision of consequence to their lives, communities, and society. Participants understand the civic purpose of the dialogue and are encouraged to contribute their own views and listen actively to others.

In dialogue:

- *Multiple and possibly conflicting perspectives* are included rather than promoting a single point of view.
- *Empathy and understanding* are promoted.

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<sup>5</sup> From the Americans for the Arts Animating Democracy Toolkit

<sup>6</sup> This description and the bulleted list below are from the Animating Democracy toolkit, which cites Everyday Democracy formerly known as *Study Circles Resource Center* and *The Magic of Dialogue* by Daniel Yankelovich

- *Assumptions* are brought out into the open.
- *Suspension of judgment* is encouraged in order to foster understanding and break down obstacles.
- *Equality among participants* is established to honor all voices and help build trust and safety for deep dialogue.

A confessional approach encourages dialogue and exchange. This is why arts-based civic engagement is especially appropriate. Robin Jensen reflects:

“Art might reflect an artist’s values or commitments, and it might be intended to change perspectives or deepen insight, but true art is open-ended. Different responses are expected, encouraged, and allowed. Each experience, encounter, or interpretation is valid and spontaneous. Art that leads the viewer to draw only one conclusion or that is designed to elicit a particular response from the viewer is not art, but actually a ‘sign,’ a simple message, advertising or propaganda. An image that prompts me to buy a particular product, or to vote for a certain candidate, or even to perform a public service might be a good or bad thing, but it is not art in the true sense.”<sup>7</sup>

Jensen goes on to explain that although artists don’t expect a single response, they do produce art to elicit responses, to change us and contribute to our continuing formation as people. This is common ground on which Christians and non-Christians can stand. There are many societal issues and cultural issues that the church has a stake in.

[Refer to Arts and Community Change diagram, and point to outer ring of issues. The following section articulates various ways the artforms and functions interact.]

In arts- or humanities-based civic dialogue/engagement, the artistic process and/or art/humanities presentation provides a key focus, catalyst, forum or form for public dialogue/engagement on the issue. The idea is to not simply present a work of art to the community, but to use it to spark interest and engagement and invite people to participate in dialogue.

Art allows us to share our experiences:

One role of artists is to be poets— those who “capture the rhythm and contour of the community’s experience.” Theologian Robert Schrieter says these poets can capture symbols and metaphors which best give expression to the experiences of a community. Artists also give sound and movement and images that capture and communicate the community experience.

Furthermore, artists of various media learn to feel *as* others as much as they learn to feel something *about* others. This is called empathy. The artistic ability to feel as others do is incredible powerful in worship, the “vehicle for inserting relationship with God into a community,” because the worship leaders guide our communication to and from God. Empathy becomes a way of relating to others and to God.

I received a post that articulates six roles of the arts from Brewing Culture, a faith-based non-profit organization dedicated to creating, commissioning, and celebrating transcendent art and media.<sup>8</sup> I’ll use these roles to articulate the purpose of arts-based civic engagement. The first three speak of sharing experiences:

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<sup>7</sup> Robin M. Jensen, *The Substance of Things Seen: Art, Faith, and Christian Community*, The Calvin Institute of Christian Worship Liturgical Studies Series (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2004), 21.

<sup>8</sup> These roles are listed in all caps throughout this paper. The quotes also come from this Brewing Culture email message dated 9/25/2005.

ART AS WINDOW: "We seek an enlargement of our being. We want to be more than ourselves. Each of us by nature sees the whole world from one point of view with a perspective and a selectiveness peculiar to himself ... We want to see with other eyes, to imagine with other imaginations, to feel with other hearts, as well as with our own ... We demand windows ... This, so far as I can see, is the specific value or good of literature [and art]; it admits us to experiences other than our own." (C.S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism*)

ART AS ECHO: "When we read the poem, or see the play or picture or hear the music, it is as though a light were turned on us. We say, 'Ah! I recognize that! That is something which I obscurely felt to be going on in and about me, but I didn't know what it was and couldn't express it. But now the artist has ... imaged it forth ... for me, I can possess and take hold of it and make it my own, and turn it into a source of knowledge and strength.'" (Dorothy Sayers, *Unpopular Opinions*)

ART AS MIRROR: "... in art, whether it's poetry, fiction, or painting, you are telling the reader or the listener something he already knows but which he doesn't quite know that he knows ... What the artists does ... is simply validate the human experience and to tell people the deep human truths which they already unconsciously know." (Walker Percy, "Walker Percy, the Man and the Novelist: An Interview")

Artists can:

- document projects
- communicate the outcomes of a project to the public in creative ways
- generate creative icebreakers; summarize key themes or ideas in “standard” meetings and processes
- lead a story circle
- voice or visually map or communicate diverse perspectives on an issue
- allow us to see marginalized groups in our communities

Art educates us:

Even Christian groups that are suspicious of engaging art because of its ambiguity or associations to “sinful lifestyles” can use the Bible as a generator of dialogue. Scripture is filled with metaphor, parable and poetry, which lends itself to artistic expression – *because it already is an artistic expression.*

ART AS TRANSLATOR: "The method of art is to incarnate meaning in concrete form. The artist *shows*, and is never content only to *tell* in the form of propositions." (*The Liberated Imagination*, Leland Ryken)

ART AS LANTERN: "We don't want to feel less when we have finished a book; we want to feel that new possibilities have been opened to us. We don't want to close a book with a sense that life is totally unfair and that there is no light in the darkness; we want to feel that we have been given illumination." (Madeleine L'Engle, *Walking on Water*)

Artists can:

- develop concepts for a project
- frame a project's civic focus, core question or intent in creative terms or artistic form
- collaborate on designing the elements, structure and flow of a dialogue or engagement
- educate dialogue facilitators about an artistic work in order to taps its true potential
- generate fresh questions that draw upon art and are fun to think about, elicit empathetic, candid responses
- employ creative processes such as role play toward conflict resolution
- create or present art that motivates people to vote, volunteer, join, or otherwise get involved in a local issue.

Art allows us to be who we are:

ART AS LEISURE: "Leisure is a form of silence, of that silence which is the pre-requisite of the apprehension of reality ... Because Wholeness is what man strives for, the power to achieve leisure is one of the fundamental powers of the human soul ... In leisure ... the truly human values are saved and preserved." (Josef Pieper, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*)

Artists can:

- offer art as a setting, backdrop or focus
- encourage creativity by teaching skills and exercises
- provide examples of creativity by facilitating dialogue about their creative work

**Dialogue Exercise**

We will break into three groups that will look at the types of art, roles artists play, and issues communities confront to develop an idea for an arts-based civic engagement project that a church could facilitate. We'll then discuss some challenges and opportunities to each one.

Final thoughts:

Presenting art well so that it engages the community requires skill and collaboration. This is a chance to engage artists in your congregation and to also form partnerships with local artists and arts organizations (museums, art councils, theater groups, dance troupes, choral groups, etc.). To do so requires an ethic of partnership and institutional commitment. I have handouts that can help you determine your church's commitment, capacity, and resources.

**Question and Answer**

**Resources and References:**

books:

Bevans, Stephan B. *Models of Contextual Theology*. Revised and Expanded Edition ed. Faith and Cultures Series, ed. Robert J. Schreiter. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2002. Reprint, 2002.

Jensen, Robin M. *The Substance of Things Seen: Art, Faith, and Christian Community* The Calvin Institute of Christian Worship Liturgical Studies Series. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2004.

Sheldrake, Philip. *Spaces for the Sacred: Place, Memory, and Identity*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001.

websites:

Americans for the Arts Animating Democracy

See <http://www.artsusa.org/animatingdemocracy> for project profiles and publications

Convergence: A Creative Community of Faith

[www.convergenceccf.net](http://www.convergenceccf.net) and blog <http://lisa-convergence.blogspot.com>

my contact info:

Elise Edwards

[elise.edwards@gmail.com](mailto:elise.edwards@gmail.com)

[musecreative@speakeasy.net](mailto:musecreative@speakeasy.net)