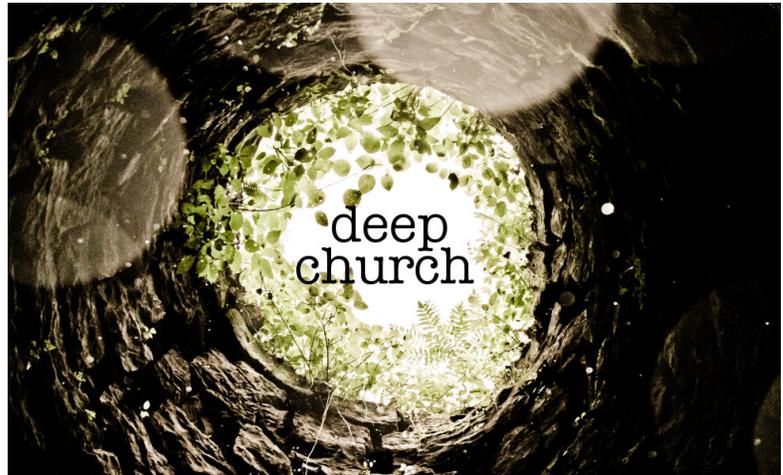


# Deep Church

“A group of people who gather with a willing expectation to share intimately the love of God.” This is the definition that has guided my understanding of Deep Church for many years. I wrote this article for the January 20, 2002 parish administration issue of *The Living Church*, followed by links to *a C.S. Lewis: At the Root of Deep Church*.



*DEEP CHURCH:  
An attitude that shares the Great Commandment,  
proclaims the Great Commission,  
and reminds all that the call to ministry begins with Holy Baptism*  
By The Reverend William Carl Thomas  
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For over three years [1998], I have been reflecting on a concept I call “Deep Church” that conveys my understanding of how positive, loving, and caring relationships can be lived, shared, and proclaimed. Deep Church is a way of expressing and living into the Greek word *koinonia* which has its roots in the Hebrew word *shalom*. James C. Fenhagen, in his book *Mutual Ministry: New Vitality for the Local Church* states that the Hebrew word *shalom* is foundational to the word *koinonia*. Fenhagen, using Colossians 1:15-17, 20 in which Christ is clearly the reconciler to God, writes that:

*the image (of such reconciliation) is one of profound harmony and systemic interconnectedness emerging out of a sense of meaning and obedience. When this interconnectedness is experienced in the human sphere, we have what we call “community.” The biblical word that best expresses this theological understanding of community is shalom, sometimes translated from the Hebrew as “peace.” Shalom is an all-encompassing word covering all the many relationships of life and expressing a vision of what the Israelites conceived of as the ideal of what life was intended by God to be. (page 62).*

Simply put, the group of people that make up a community of faith is, hopefully, living and sharing the fullness of all that God intends for them.

The term Deep Church becomes a unifying principle that expresses an essential attitude of the members to be *shalom* in these words: “a group of people who gather with a willing expectation to intimately share the love of God.” Such an attitude can help put in perspective all that is commonly held about church size and help church members recall that relationships among

people are more important than the dynamics of a parish organizational chart. Structure is necessary to experience healthy relationships but it should not so bind that the relationships suffocate. Deep Church encompasses polity models such as High, Low, Broad, Anglo-Catholic, Evangelical and puts the Arlin J. Rothauge sociological models of Family, Pastoral, Program, and Corporate in proper perspective. Deep Church evokes a missionary response within the community of faith that can get lost when hierarchy and institution overwhelm the spirit of the members.

In my practical experience over the past seven years as Rector of Saint Matthias Episcopal Church, Tuscaloosa, Alabama, a Deep Church attitude has allowed statements of vision and mission that evoke the Great Commandment and the Great Commission to evolve. A healthy parish spirit has arisen as we struggled to be released from the self-imposed limitations of sociological models of parish life and purpose. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, we discovered a parish vision (also the definition of the term Deep Church) that is a statement of the Great Commandment (Mark 12:29-31): “to be a group of people who gather with a willing expectation to intimately share the love of God.” By this same Spirit, we have come to recently understand that the four year old parish mission is a statement of the Great Commission that has its roots in Mark 16:15: “Supporting God’s work in the world as we proclaim a community of faith built on the sure foundation that is Jesus Christ.” I am indebted to Reclaiming the Great Commission: A practical model for transforming denominations and congregations by Bishop Claude E. Payne and Hamilton Beazley for helping make the connection of the Great Commandment and the Great Commission to the concept of Deep Church.

The sixth year of The Living Our Baptismal Covenant (LOBC) eight month process of adult Christian formation at Saint Matthias Episcopal Church came to a close with Bishop Henry N. Parsley’s visit on May 9, 2001. I want to thank Bishop Parsley for uttering the phrase Deep Church in a 1998 sermon and his support in my development of the concept. Cecil P. Williamson (Spiritual Director-in-Residence, The Wellspring Center for Spiritual Formation of which Saint Matthias is the home parish) asked the LOBC participants during a breath prayer workshop, “What is God’s invitation to you?” This is a simple yet quite profound question.

Over Lent of this year, God surprised me with the invitation to memorize and thus integrate the following prayer for mission written by Charles Henry Brent, Bishop of the Philippines (1901-1918) and of Western New York (1918-1929):

*Lord Jesus Christ, you stretched out your arms of love on the hard wood of the cross that everyone might come within the reach of your saving embrace: So clothe us in your Spirit that we, reaching forth our hands in love, may bring those who do not know you to the knowledge and love of you; for the honor of your Name. Amen. (BCP page 101)*

God not only blessed me with this invitation but offered the grace that allowed these words to become my own. I am somewhat dyslexic and memorize set pieces with great difficulty. I find the Great Commandment in the words “reaching forth our hands in love” and the Great Commission in the desire to “bring those who do not know you to the knowledge and love of you.”

God's invitation comes in more forms, to paraphrase the Apostle Paul, than we can ask or imagine. Accepting God's invitation is a way, as Bishop Brent would pray, to be "clothed in the Spirit of Jesus Christ." To be so clothed is to intimately share the love of God which is what we hope to be as Deep Church.

Deep Church is also a way of expressing the possibilities of a church that experiences relationships on an "organic" model rather than a "hierarchical" model. James Monroe Barnett, in *The Diaconate: A Full and Equal Order*, argues at length that the nature of the Church is truly organic and from within that concept comes the understanding of how to renew the Church in what is now being called the post-Christian era. The organic model of the first three centuries saw the laos (the people of God) as "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people" (1 Peter 2:9). The clerical hierarchy that came after the formal recognition of the Church by the Emperor Constantine (marked as beginning with the Council that wrote the Nicene Creed in 325 A.D.), and which evolved in the Middle Ages, supported the notion that ordination rather than baptism was how one became a minister. Writing of the pre-Nicene church, Barnett states: "Baptism, replacing and standing in marked contrast to circumcision, created laos, the people of God, in a new and exciting way. In Baptism the Holy Spirit came anew to each, bestowing as he willed gifts for ministry, that together Christians might extend the presence of the living Lord and the fullness of his ministry throughout the world. From this empowerment and from these gifts to the laos all ministry flowed."

While I believe that I am an exponent of Holy Baptism as the entrance into the life of service that is Christian ministry, Barnett helped me see that I have not completely shed my hierarchical ways. Until May, 1999, my Certificate of Holy Baptism was kept in a drawer while my certificates of ordination as deacon and as priest have maintained prominent places on the wall in my church study. Now framed and hung in my study, this Certificate of Holy Baptism reminds me that, if I am to take Deep Church seriously as a pastor, I am to remember that I must live out my baptism in an attitude wherein I am a servant of the servants.

Proper attitude is foundational to being a healthy, vital group of people who gather with a willing expectation to intimately share the love of God. To be Deep Church achieves an attitude that transcends labels and institutional systems and reclaims that our response to Jesus Christ is to love one another as he loved us and to proclaim the good news to the whole creation. Indeed, Deep Church expresses the essential attitude to be shalom: the ideal of what life is intended by God to be.

## C.S. Lewis: At the Root of Deep Church

A few years ago I discovered a whole Deep Church movement base in the United Kingdom. Evidently, C.S. Lewis actually coined the term Deep Church in a letter written in 1952. At the very least, there is strong evidence that Lewis' *Mere Christianity* is an exposition of Deep Church. The late Ray Schneider, onetime Assistant Professor of Mathematics and Computer Science, Bridgewater College, Bridgewater, Virginia wrote a paper entitled *C.S. Lewis, Church Unity, and the Dynamics of the Hallway*, in which he explores the contention.