COLLOQUY GROUPS AS "BASE COMMUNITIES" ---------- ELLIOTT #2100

This is one of several Thinksheets prepared for the Conveners' Orientation at the Craigville Theological Colloquy III, Craigville (MA) Conference Center, Sept.30 - Oct.2, 1986--on *THE MINISTRY OF THE WHOLE PEOPLE OF GOD*. My double purpose in this Thinksheet is (1) to illumine our Colloquy's work (which is to be carried out almost entirely in small workgroups) by use of the current Third World "base communities," and (2) to suggest, more by way of passing references than by exposition, aspects of bass-community theology ("liberation theology") that can help us address (a) our Colloquy theme and (b) our theological situation today in the United Church of Christ.

1. The Craigville Colloquies, of which this is the third, are quietly radical in their style of doing theology in a national communion (denomination). The few speeches in the plenaries are not by experts added to the planning process but rather by participants, representatives of groups as well as individuals, who submitted papers from which four were selected for oral presentation. Except for the worships and the final plenary to shape, from the group papers, a Colloquy witness statement, all the Colloquy's work is to be done in groups whose members are chosen in the order of registration. As all Christians, we aim to discern the mind of Christ. According to our polity, this involves discerning the mind of the church, which requires that the churches of the UCC know their own minds, which requires that members--laity as well as clergy--know their own minds (versus the current joke that "Democracy means I'm free to do my own thinking even without thinking").... In this whole process, our Colloquy style (in all groups and in the overall) models being the church in the mind, toward arriving at the mind of the church, toward discipling ourselves to the mind of Christ. (NOTE: This is not a model for education; it is a model for the educated, for experienced clergy and laity working in colloquy as equals, in mutual continuing education, with no one in credit-giving authority.)

2. Like Third World "base communities," our Colloquy groups are not official, ie not within the UCC structure. They are, to use a colorful phrase from African (mainly Protestant) base communities, shade-tree (p.vi, Jean-Marc Ela, AFRICAN CRY, Orbis/86: "shade-tree theology" is without benefit of ecclesial structure, without buildings, without libraries or classrooms).

3. So far, the best single volume contexting current Third World base communities and their ("liberation") theologies in the history of Christianity is Guillermo Cook's THE EXPECTATION OF THE POOR: LATIN AMERICAN BASIC ECCLESIAL COMMUNITIES IN PROTESTANT PERSPECTIVE (Orbis/85). This Brazilian Baptist spent two years studying Roman Catholic "comunidades de bas" in Brazil with an eye to similar Protestant communities today and in the past--putting both in the context of the whole Christian history of small-group life of witness and action. With almost no exception, groups that begin on the underside of history seep upward, if successful, and enter what E.C.Colwell during WWII called "the struggle for respectability" (so p.203: "The Protestant Retreat: from Base Community to Prosperous Establishment"). It isn't just that what works gets coopted by power: too, what works corrupts itself by power-hunger and power-mongering--till once again Spirit breaks out against and from within institution, and the new base communities see themselves as firstfruits of the inbreaking Kingdom of God....Base communities feed hope into the poor because (p.7) base culture "is not totally determined by the dominant class. The poor are refusing to give up their own future. This is why I call the base communities 'the expectation of the poor'." (NB: "The poor" may be poor in power only, ie outsiders to major decision-making structures; or of course they may be also economically the poor. In Protestant history, the Metho-

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dist "classes" were originally poor in both senses, stepping "into the vacuum left by the upward mobility of the 17th-c. Congregationalists" (p.196)....Early Protestantism shows these types of base communities (pp.197ff): (1) Countercultural (socioreligious protest; Anabaptists, Familists, Levellers, Seekers, Ranters, Quakers); (2) Puritan (losing their distinctive lifestyle when persecution abated; Congregationalist, Scottish Presbyterian); (3) Liberation (political groups against socio-economic and cultural oppression--English Diggers, the True Levellers; Presbyterian Peek-of-Day Boys--cf. Irish Catholic Defenders); (4) Planned (Pietist, "to revitalize dead ecclesiastical structures and to provide a prophetic witness within society"; collegia pietatis in Germany & Holland; Herrnhut Moravians, the early Methodists with their "bands," then "classes," then even community-of-goods "select societies")....
These "common features in the early Protestant communities" (pp.198f): (1) Arose "during periods of acute social stress," reacting against "religious and political, institutionalized and social, entropy" but then submitting themselves to institutionalization; (2) Heavily depended on the quality of their leadership; (3) Ran "into opposition and persecution from the establishment"--resulting in death, or independent life (outside the est. church), or cooptation. Yet "every one of these community movements...have had a profound impact upon the church, and in many cases upon the social order."

4. The small group is a mobile unit in God's Kingdom--kosmikoi en kosmo, ecclesiolae in ecclesia (little churches in the bigger church)--with worship at its center. Rafael Avila (WORSHIP AND POLITICS, Orbis/81) says (p.29) that in the patriarchal period, cult was grounded by associating patriarchal deeds with the old Canaanite sanctuaries; but postExilic Judaism "culturally objectified history in order to celebrate it as an historical exploit of God and the people in mobile form."....
P.70: "Jesus put the cult of praxis and of justice above the formalistic cult of words" and "emphasized fellowship as the precondition of cult."....P.105: True Eucharist includes "solidarity with the exploited class and conflict with the exploiting class." So you can't take Holy Communion unless you are "working for liberation," including suppressing "the objective conditions making exploitation possible."

5. Leonardo Boff (JESUS CHRIST, LIBERATOR, Orbis/78) says all theology has "two locations in mind" (which we may represent as foci of an ellipse), (1) the place given to faith and (2) "the social reality within which the faith is lived out" ("Theology always works within a certain type of analysis of social reality."). True theology, as that of the base communities, is "the view from the base" (meaning both the Bible and the condition of the poor); it's "reflection upon praxis" (p.22)....When the Vatican hit him, he and his brother Clodovis came out with LIBERATION THEOLOGY: FROM CONFRONTATION TO DIALOGUE (Harper & Row/86)--an excellent 100-p. primer. First sentence (p.5):"Theology is no longer for theologians. Now it involves (the) whole people of God, clergy and laity alike. Theology (through the base communities) has become genuinely and truly ecclesial" and "a public phenomenon.... (6) a process at once ecclesial and social."

6. Segundo's "hermeneutic circle" (p.8, THE LIBERATION OF THEOLOGY, Orbis/76) uses Scripture to break the "ideological circle" of the rich. "Each new reality obliges us to interpret the Word of God afresh, to change reality accordingly, and then to go back and reinterpret the Word of God again."

7. Vernard Eller (CHRISTIAN ANARCHY: JESUS' PRIMACY OVER THE POWERS, Eerdmans/86) traces the anarchic tradition from the prophets through Jesus (whom he calls the founder of Christian anarchy), Paul, the left wing of the Reformation, Kierkegaard, Blumhardts,Barth,D.B., Ellul.