

Making Disciples

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The Need

After WWII, the Episcopal Church, along with other denominations, took a long, hard look at its process of forming people for faithful living. Consistent reports from the battlefield indicated that many soldiers had “lost their faith” in the trenches – or at least didn’t find that their faith sustained them. Belated embarrassment about how long it took us to recognize what was happening to the Jews and the Christian communities reluctance to speak out earlier also fueled the subsequent introspection.

Being the Episcopal Church, we, of course, set up a blue ribbon commission to study the matter! This ultimately resulted in the call for a new children’s curriculum which ultimately became the Seabury Curriculum. No sooner had the staff been assembled to begin writing than the focus shifted from children to adults. We, as the church, could not educate children effectively if we didn’t also educate their parents.

So, we built an extensive adult education program. The Church’s Teaching Series was born out of that effort – largely written by seminary professors. The Rector’s Forum became a popular format in which clergy taught laity, often using the Church’s Teaching Series or other books being published by Seabury Press. The national church’s adult education staff at the time had 22 people who wrote, traveled and taught at churches and conferences. Weekend parish renewal experiences were popular.

The financial crisis and an ongoing discomfort with what we were doing in Christian Education led to a second blue ribbon commission which encouraged grassroots development of programs and resources. We sold Seabury Press – which was losing money – and beginning in the mid-60's onwards, began downsizing the Children, Youth and Young Adult staffs and disbanding the Adult Education Office. When I took the position in 1990, we had reduced the staff from 22 to 1. Three years later we eliminated the Adult Education office entirely.

On the local level, we saw diminishing attendance at the Rector's forums and, frankly, less commitment to teaching on the part of many clergy. During that same timeframe, clergy as counselor became more common – a role supported by Clinical Pastoral Education which became an almost universal requirement for ordination. Increased administrative work due to diminishing staff and rising expectations for programming consumed clerical time and energy.

Meanwhile, the focus on baptism and the ministry of the laity gave birth to program like EFM, the popular education for ministry program from Sewanee, and diocesan training program for Lay Eucharistic Ministers. Clergy began to share some ministry and teaching roles previously held only by clergy.

While all of this was happening, something, perhaps more significant, was happening in the culture. America was moving from being a largely Christian culture to being a multi-faith, even secular culture. Those of you here in the South are still in the earlier stages of this shift, but I can tell you that in other parts of the country, that shift is already very pronounced. And it has had and will continue to have a profound impact on us.

When I grew up, the adults in my church and my parents could rely on the culture to help me form Christian values, attitudes, behaviors and even knowledge. If a group of kids in the neighborhood decided to steal apples off of Mr. Brown's tree, another neighbor was likely to catch them, march them to Mr. Brown's house to make their apologies and give them a lecture about how stealing was a sin. If two children got into a fight at recess, the teacher was likely to deliver a lecture on how Jesus wants us to love each other. My school day started with the Pledge of Allegiance and the Lord's Prayer. Public speakers regularly referred to biblical stories. And so on. My life as a Christian was formed just about as much by the culture as by the church.

Today, we can no longer rely on the culture to form our youth. And many of our adults, especially those under 50, have had very little Christian formation by either the church or the culture. We missed a couple of generations in there. The group of adults under 50 have far less understanding of what it means to be a Christian because the church failed them. We cut back our efforts in adult education because we THOUGHT all was well. But we did so precisely at the time when the culture was no longer contributing to that general process of formation. So, the end result is: we have a goodly number of adults in our churches who have some level of Christian belief, a minimal level of knowledge and understanding and are often even less engaged in Christian practices.

The whole situation with electing a gay bishop and people's reactions to this has been a "wake up call" for many clergy. I can't tell you how many have talked about how they realized that the basic job of Christian formation had not been done with large numbers of adults in our congregations. In many cases, adults have joined our churches from other denominations or have come from a background of

minimal church participation. Just going to worship services now and again is not an adequate preparation for a crisis of faith. So, when something comes along that shakes us up, we have no foundation – no experience of thinking theologically, no adequate understanding of Anglican theology or polity, no practice in discernment, dialogue or even being in community. The good news is that NOW lots of people are becoming aware of the great need we have for adult education.

Education to Formation

The question now becomes: What do we do?

The first thing we need to do is recognize that the job is different than it was even a few years ago. One of the clues to this is that you now hear people talk about “formation” instead of “education” -- a way of heightening the shift from giving people information to helping people acquire the attitudes, beliefs, values and behaviors of a Christian. In the past, we could get by with just giving people information about God, the Bible and the church because they could absorb the attitudes, beliefs, values and behaviors of a Christian life from their family and the culture in general. Today, we no longer have that luxury. In fact, the culture is forming people to be secular or, sometimes worse, pseudo-Christians. So, the church has a new imperative to form people as Christians – to make disciples of Christ.

A word about the culture forming pseudo-Christians – something that is a general problem but may be even more serious in the South. There are several forces doing this from industry to politicians. Yesterday, I saw an ad in the NYC subway that said: This Christmas, make her believe all over again. Ah, one might think, an encouragement to believe in the Christ child, incarnation, the love of God, the

meaning of Christmas or at least the joy of giving. No, actually, an ad to sell a diamond necklace.

Likewise, we hear public figures regularly call use religious language and imagery...they present themselves as Christians, even conservative Christians. But it often turns out that they are using religion as a way of getting their message across to people who do not listen carefully. These speakers, often politicians, are religious people and they do believe in Christ. But their religion is in the minds and in their hearts, but not in their feet. If you listen carefully, you can see that they have adopted religious language, images and even religious “causes” – and they are deeply moved by their relationship with God, their heart is committed to Jesus and their religious fevour is often visible. But when you look at their actions...there’s a disconnect. It’s like watch a man’s head and heart moving in one direction while everything from the waist down moves in another direction.

The problem with this is that it this “use” of Christianity is persuasive and deceptive. Not that I think those who use it are necessarily conscious of being deceptive. It’s just that one can be fervently religious, very devout, speak passionately about God and Jesus, pray, read the Bible and “look like” a Christian without having ever understood or internalized Christian values, beliefs or behaviors. So they talk about Christian values (usually moral “hot button” issues) but their behaviors go against everything Christ stands for. If you listen carefully and watch the feet, you will not see actions of loving God and loving your neighbor....you will not see Christ’s ministry of reconciliation being carried out. You will not see the Gospel message being lived out.

This makes our job even harder. Not only do we have to form Christians who are being formed by a secular culture but we have to deal with forming Christians who are being formed by a pseudo-Christian culture. And it is not easy to tell the difference between a cultural Christian and a disciple of Christ....until you look at the feet. And in today's entertainment culture, we are more drawn to seeing the face and hearing the song and joining the dance than watching the feet.

So, our job is to make disciples – to form people as faithful followers of Jesus, as people who walk on The Way, who travel together on a journey of faith in a land that is becoming increasingly less Christian and more confusing. This requires more than just information about God, the Bible and the church. This requires formation as well as education.

Doing Formation

Education can be done in a single Rector's Forum on a Sunday morning. You can transfer information that way – although we know that people only retain about 20% of what they hear. Nonetheless, if you have a good speaker, people will come and they will retain some of the information you give them.

And it is important to do this type of large group lecture. It is a good entry point for people who like to disappear into a large group. And it holds us the teaching ministry. The Windsor Report issued by the Anglican commission charged with recommending next steps regarding the consecration of a gay bishop, called attention to the need for bishops to be the chief teacher in the church. I agree with that. Not because I think our bishops are great teachers – some are and some definitely aren't – or that they have the corner on what should be taught. I agree

with the need for bishops to be teachers – and for clergy to be teachers in their congregations – because it symbolically holds up the ministry of teaching. I also believe that bishops and clergy need to encourage, support and hold up the ministry of educators in their congregations and dioceses – to help the church value the ministry of educators. And finally, perhaps even more importantly, bishops and clergy must model being learners as well as teachers – they must be actively and opening learning from their experience, from the laity in their congregations, going to continuing education and the like.

So, traditional education is still important. But if you want to help people develop Christian attitudes, values, beliefs and behaviors, you need more than that. You need to have small group programs that engage people in thinking, discussing, trying out actions, reflecting on them, challenging each other, praying for each other. You need to have programs that have trained small group leaders to lead effective small groups. You need to build learning communities in which people can be transformed by Christ.

The good news is that there are a host of good programs out there. Our organization, LeaderResources, publishes 15-20 adult education programs developed by congregations and dioceses of this church and other publishers have equally excellent programs. No one of them is the magic bullet but probably most of them will meet the needs of someone in your church. The trick is to offer a variety of programs and establish a way for people to decide what they need at this point in their spiritual journey and help the congregation's leaders decide what the congregation as a whole need for where it is and where it needs to go next.

One mistake we make in establishing adult education programs is that we assume that the latest great program will be “the one” so we promote that one and then are disappointed when a few people come and it doesn’t seem to fit everyone or fix all of our problems. That’s because our congregations are far too complex for any one program to fix it all! People’s needs are very diverse and so your programs need to be diverse.

I recommend that congregations use a simple rule when planning their adult education – plan to have at least one program for every 25 people you have attending your church on Sunday morning. So, take your average Sunday attendance (which includes children and youth) and divide by 25. If you have 100 people in church, you need four adult education events a week. If you have 50, two program; if you have 500, you need 20.

Now before you go into shock, let me give you some ideas for how you manage to have that many offerings. First, you build small groups and give up on the idea that any one offering will attract more than about 8-10 people. This prevents you from feeling like you failed when the usual 8-10 show up. And, 8-10 people is the ideal small group size. If it gets past 15 people, you need to divide into two groups anyway.

Second, never just announce a program. Find someone – preferably two people – who feel this is something they really want and need for themselves. Not that they think others “should have” but something they want. Get them to identify that need as clearly as you can. Find a program, book, resource, video, discussion guide, etc. to help them meet that need. Ask them to personally invite 6-8 others to join them in exploring that topic or issue or learning that skill. Oh, and you can announce

when the group is meeting so the 1 or 2 volunteers can join. But never try to set up a small group without personal invitations.

Third, convert existing meetings into learning opportunities. For example, our Outreach Committee spent an entire year at its monthly meeting studying the biblical concept of charity. They met for two hours, studied for a hour and a half and took about 20 minutes at the end to make whatever decisions they needed to make. They got the same amount of work done during the year as they had the previous year, but their vision of their work changed radically because they were engaged in serious study and theological reflection instead of arguing about how to divide the outreach budget.

You can do the same thing with the Christian Education Committee, the Liturgy Committee, the Pastoral Care Team, the Altar Guild and even the choir! The director of our children's choir took time at every rehearsal to discuss the lessons and the anthems, make sure the children knew the Bible stories referred to in the hymns and talked about the values and beliefs imbedded in the musical pieces they were learning. It became a singing Sunday School.

You could do the same thing with an adult choir. In some cases, the work will take more time than the study – you do have to rehearse the anthem! In other cases, the study will take more time than the “work” because many committee meetings are a case of the work expands to fill the time available and often don't do work that is really valuable to the church or the committee members. My point is that you have small groups that already meet, they already have a common passion – why not turn those into learning opportunities instead of trying to get those people to come to a separate education event?

Formation in Christian Practice

Those are just a few ideas....if you show up in my workshop later, we can talk about others. But I want take just a few minutes to talk about where I think the cutting edge is in adult education. I've talked about the rising need for adult education in a culture that no longer helps form us as Christians. I've talked about the shift from education (information about God, the Bible and the church) to formation (shaping values, attitudes, belief and behaviors) as one response to that need. There is now a rising body of work about the next phase – which is a focus on Christian practices.

I taught a course at General Seminary a couple of years ago entitled “Spiritual Formation of the Congregation” that focused on integrating organizational systems theory and Christian practices as a way of helping a congregation, as a whole, grow spiritually and be transformed. And just a couple of weeks ago, Diana Butler Bass's new book from Alban, *The Practicing Congregation* was released; it gives us some research on the results of this type of work.

What Diana and I and many others are saying is that the church needs to move from focusing on just the Christian formation of individuals to also focusing on formation of the congregation. And the way you do that is by focusing on Christian practices. There's a popular Anglican adage that says “praying shapes believing” which highlights our understanding that one of the key ways we teach, one of the primary ways we form people as disciples of Christ, is through our liturgy. How we pray together shapes what we believe. It gives witness to the power of how doing something can shape what we believe and who we are as the people of God.

Diana Bass's research indicates that congregations that are intentional about Christian practices are vibrant and growing – even stodgy mainline churches like ours. In fact, she points to the decline of mainline churches as “old news” because, almost unnoticed by most of us, many congregations are re-inventing themselves. And they are doing so around Christian practices.

What is a Christian practice? It is simply an activity that Christians do together over time that brings them into closer relationship with God and each other in Christ. So, singing together is a Christian practice. Praying is a Christian practice. The healing ministry is a Christian practice. Hospitality is a Christian practice.

Well, isn't that what we're all doing? And how can that change our congregations? The congregations that are revitalized are doing more than just going through the motions. They are being intentional about taking these practices very seriously. Let me give you an example from my own ministry.

My parish decided to introduce the laying on of hands for healing during the Sunday liturgy. But instead of doing what most churches would – making an announcement and then just doing it – we engaged in an intensive, parish-wide engagement in looking at the ministry of healing that took about a year. I preached a series of sermons on healing. We had several different types of adult education programs. The children discussed it in Sunday School and the youth group discussed it at their meetings. We taught parents to pray with their children when they were ill. We did a gifts discernment process to identify who in our midst might have the gift of healing. We trained those folks in becoming pastoral care givers so they could take their gift to those in the hospital as well as exercising it in the liturgy. We had books and videos about healing at the coffee hour so people

could check them out. Articles in our newsletter. Special displays on the bulletin board. Discussions during vestry meetings. Choir anthems selected and discussed. Movie nights and TV specials many of us watched and talked about. And so on. In other words, we immersed ourselves in the Christian practice of healing....oh, and eventually we started doing it at the Eucharist. But that action became a visible expression of a congregation that was together learning about and beginning to practice the ministry of healing.

I have to tell you one quick story as a result of that practice. Not only did our intentional practice of the healing ministry gradually persuade many people that God really did have the power to heal, but it also got absorbed into our bones – it became part of who we were. The day I knew that had happened is when I got a call from the parents of an 8 year old boy. After noticing some spots on his legs, he had been diagnosed with bone cancer at the local hospital. Since they were a military family in Dover, DE, they were referred to the Walter Reed Army Hospital where the boy underwent extensive tests with the same results. The doctors there wanted to do a bone marrow procedure immediately – this on Thursday. The parents talked with the boy about his illness and the procedure. “No,” he said, “first I want to go home and have Pastor Linda pray for me.” And he was adamant. He was absolutely convinced that if he came for healing prayers, all would be well. After some conversation, the parents decided to honor his request. Hence their call to me.

Well, you can imagine the church that morning as we gathered and together prayed for the healing of this child! It was all done as usual, he just came forward with his parents at the appointed time and we did the usual Prayer Book prayers in the usual Anglican way. On Monday, when they went back to the hospital to have the

procedure, they did a third round of X-Rays to pinpoint the cancer – and couldn't find anything! They sent him home with some very baffled doctors, who theorized that maybe they had mixed up the X-Rays – twice, at two separate hospitals?!?

What I just described to you is a story about a congregation being intentional about incorporating a Christian practice into their lives. They didn't just read a book about it. Or have a program about healing. Or add prayers for healing to their liturgy. They immersed themselves in learning about and practicing the healing ministry in every level of the lives. Parents prayed for their children and children prayed for each other! Lay people visited the sick and the shut ins and prayed for them. Committee members would be visited by other members who would pray with them. One woman started a small support group at her school, where an unusually high number of teachers developed cancer in one year. She would pray for and occasionally with her fellow teachers.

That Christian practice brought new life and vitality to individual people and to the congregation as a whole. No we didn't expect miraculous healings every time – but the power of that child's healing stayed with all of us a lifetime. It never got overly fundamentalist or pushy – we were terribly Anglican and did all things decently and in good order! But, we became a people who experience God as one who heals. So, we now had a common experience of God that was really Good News that we could share with others – that others absorbed from us as they entered the community or even sensed as they encountered us in our daily life and work. And that drew people into the congregation.

So, I can see why Bass's research shows that congregations that intentionally engage in Christian practices grow in faith, vitality and in numbers. I believe this is

the next phase of adult education in the church – helping congregations, as a whole, enter into a deeper relationship with God by re-introducing, re-learning and re-inventing traditional Christian practices. Doing that will require learning about Christian practices and learning how to engage an entire community in not just learning what it is but actually practicing it! That’s our cutting edge today.

Developing this skill of re-inventing traditional practices is a care skills for survival in to day’s world. In addition to becoming more secular and more religiously complex, the world is also changing fast and at an ever faster pace. It took 20 years to put phones into a million homes; it took 18 months to put a million cell phones into our hands. That’s just a sign of how fast things are changing.

Because everything is changing so fast and so radically, we can no longer rely on our past experience to predict the future. We have to learn from the future as it approaches us. I often talk about this as building the plane while we are flying. We can not assume that we are simply transmitting a static faith to the next generation. We have to be actively working with the next generation in re-vitalizing traditions to make them meaningful again. Just like our children and grandchildren are teaching us how to re-program the VCR; we need to have our children and grandchildren working as partners with us while together we re-invent traditions. And that does not mean modern music, words projected on the wall and strange rituals. Often it means re-discovering the old practices and using them in new ways. Like the youth who pack St. Mark’s Cathedral in Seattle for sung Compline. Like the child who led our congregation to finally, really believe that God does heal.

A couple of years ago, I ran into him, his wife and child. After he introduced me he said to his wife: “This is the priest that taught us how to pray and believe in God.” Notice he didn’t say “taught us about prayer or God” but rather “taught us how to pray and believe in God.” That is the new teaching task of the church – working with people of all ages where together we learn how to pray, how to believe in God, how to be faithful Christians.

We can no longer assume that people will be formed as faithful disciples of Christ just because they live in America or even just because they attend church. We have to be much more intentional about forming Christians – about helping people on their lifelong journey of being and becoming the people of God. And the good news is that the Episcopal Church has the gifts, the skills, the people and traditions that enable us to do just that. We are probably the best situated denomination to take advantage of the current trends in Christian formation, because they draw on our natural strengths. So, I say, let’s get on with it! We’ve got a church to grow and a world to save!

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