

It Takes a Community

It takes a community to form a disciple. We experience this at Calvary Church in our confirmation program as well as in other areas of ministry. We really are a congregation to be a collection of disciples of all sorts and conditions: children, youth, and adults together in this parish community providing the questions, discernment, dialogue, decisions and resources which aid the form of Christ's modern day disciples. The Holy Spirit present in this community provides for this transformation to take place and hold, and encourages discipleship growth for our community of faith. Calvary Parish is a community of disciples who takes the Gospel story into the world so that it can be made real in the lives of evolving disciples. It is the community that provides the variety of gifts that is essential to disciple formation. It is the community that offers the experiences of deepening, equipping, and ministering that form disciples.

I say this to you as I prepare to depart on May 1 for my professional development leave granted to me by the Vestry in February and approved by the Bishop's office in March. One of the educational events which I will participate in is my continued work at Hartford Seminary where I have begun work toward a **DOCTOR OF MINISTRY PROGRAM degree**. So with tons of reading, I have rediscovered the challenges of academic classroom work.

Jeffrey Johns in the latest (March 2008) Alban Institute Publication writes at length about Parish growth and evolution.

"One of the great blessings of the postmodern world is that it has enabled us to move beyond this 'head tripping' about faith and recover the importance of practice in forming disciples. It's not that congregations didn't engage in practices during modernity, for that's always been the way people have really learned the lessons of faith and life. Rather, because we were less than clear about the importance of practice and less aware of the practices we were actually engaged in, we sometimes didn't practice what we preached."

Recent secular scholarship has ascribed a new learning process for Americans placing great emphasis on the social nature and practice of learning as well as the importance of developing hands-on practices through which people experience as they learn. Etienne Wenger, in *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*, focuses on an insurance claims department to demonstrate that the knowledge that was essential to performing the job was acquired in a social context around a set of practices that established a learning community. Wenger notes that, even in a business setting, not everything that is essential to effective functioning can be codified, described, and placed in a manual. Tacit knowledge is essential. We experience the same when we choose to pick-up an instrument, or begin work on a Habitat House, cook for the W.A.R.M. Shelter, or pull out another thread from the bag as we make the kneelers for our Church.

Take a moment and think for a minute about how this is true for you as you seek to live as a faithful disciple. The knowledge it takes to live as a faithful disciple in this Easter Season will never be written, collated, and contained in a manual! Discipleship requires more. Through the ages, the church has recognized the reality of that "*something more*" by making the Gospel Story, conversation, coaching, and apprenticeship an important part of the life of the Parish community of faith. Indeed, Scripture relied on storytelling to convey its message before the discovery of the written word and the printing press, and they were certainly a faithful people. To form disciples, we need to be even more intentional about becoming involved in a ministry.

A way to reinvent our Christian commitment to practice more than we preach is through the reinvigoration of traditional Christian practices. Choose something which challenges your body, mind AND spirit, and become one who shapes the life and faith of the Calvary congregation. Diana Butler Bass sees these practices as falling into four broad areas: worship, prayer, moral formation, and life together. Recognizing the "collective amnesia" of contemporary society in which we forget our identity and purpose, she notes, "Christian communities can no longer assume that congregants know their story; it must be imaginatively

told, retold, and enacted, so that tradition becomes a living thing. Practicing congregations are dynamic learning communities in which this process occurs.”

I pray that I will see Calvary Parish with new eyes as it has weathered a new Spring wave of practice - as this is what discipleship is all about. It is the way disciples are formed. It is the task of the community of faith to be an involved community serving Christ in Ministry. It is accomplished as we are a Parish community which provides opportunities for deepening, equipping, and ministering in the name of our risen Lord.

As you will be reopening, equipping, and ministering through practice of our faith in these weeks ahead, I too will be off studying, fishing, reading, planting, and participating in the wonder of God's gift of earth, sky, and sea - discovering again what called me into ministry, love, parenthood, childhood and Christ's fellowship of disciples.

May God Bless us all in the days ahead.

The Rev'd Mark K.J. Robinson
Rector
Calvary Parish
Stonington, CT
www.calvary-stonington.org