

More Lessons from Unlikely Sources: When a Market Researcher and a Megachurch Meet the Episcopal Church

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Q: What is the mission of the Church?

A: The mission of the Church is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ.

Q: How does the Church pursue its mission?

A: The Church pursues its mission as it prays and worships, proclaims the Gospel, and promotes justice, peace, and love.

Q: Through whom does the Church carry out its mission?

A: The Church carries out its mission through the ministry of all its members.¹

The statement of the mission of the church, reflected in the questions printed above, calls for the restoration of all people to unity with God and neighbor. It implies a gap between where people are and where they are called to be. In order for restoration to take place, there must be movement. There must be growth. There must be change. The Prayer Book asserts that the mission of the church is to work toward that kind of growth, to close the gap through spiritual practices, exercised corporately or individually, to be a place of transformation. This is not just work done by clergy. All the members of the church are to be involved in this process.

How will we, with God's help, fulfill that mission? How will we respond to the grace of God that meets us where we are, but loves us too much to leave us there (to borrow a line from Anne Lamott). For starters, do we understand where we are spiritually? Do we have a vision of where we'd like to go, as communities of faith, and as individuals in

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¹ From the Outline of the Faith, also known as the Catechism, in *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Church Hymnal, 1979), 855.

those communities? These questions have been explored throughout the history of the church, in a variety of ways. Reformations and revivals pose these questions. They are currently explored in many ways in the Episcopal Church, as cultural shifts around the connection to religious institutions (especially mainline congregations) call for renewed focus on mission. Authentic Episcopal expressions of discipleship are the topic of many conversations. Dwight Zscheile, in the introduction to his book *People of the Way*, captures the issue in these questions: “What does it mean to be a disciple in today’s world? What does it mean to be a church member? Are they the same thing?”²

One of the current paths of exploration in the Episcopal Church is called RenewalWorks, a ministry of Forward Movement. Forward Movement, now more than seventy-five years old, has been animated throughout its history by its mission to reinvigorate the Episcopal Church through renewed focus on discipleship, and specifically through personal spiritual practices. RenewalWorks offers one pathway to further that mission, applying learnings which originated in the work of researchers engaged by Willow Creek Community Church in suburban Chicago, one of the largest churches in America. In 2011, I was honored to write an article for this journal, reporting on the beginnings of a process by which research from Willow Creek was brought to the Episcopal Church in the Diocese of Chicago.³ That research had been gathered over more than ten years. Over two thousand congregations and over half a million congregants participated, in denominational and non-denominational contexts. The research was prompted by Willow Creek’s interest in understanding more deeply what was going on in the spiritual lives of its members. Statistics like average Sunday attendance, financial commitment, or participation in church programs did not tell the whole story. Leaders were eager to understand what was going on in the hearts of members. They discovered, upon asking, that some of the most active members with the longest tenures described themselves as stalled spiritually or dissatisfied enough to think about leaving the church. Some of those dissatisfied members included leaders at the heart of the community, the Willow Creek equivalent of wardens and vestry members.

² Dwight J. Zscheile, *People of the Way: Renewing Episcopal Identity* (New York: Church Publishing, 2012), 3.

³ Jay Sidebotham, “Lessons from Unlikely Sources: What a Market Researcher and a Megachurch are Teaching a Few Episcopalians about Growing the Church,” *Anglican Theological Review* 94, no. 3 (Summer 2012): 495–505.

Church leaders at Willow Creek had operated with one paradigm, one model to explain spiritual growth: More church activity meant greater spiritual growth. The research indicated something different. Spiritual growth was of course impacted by the role of the church, but there was an interior and personal dimension which pointed to a deepening of relationship as part of growth in love of God and love of neighbor. Spiritual growth certainly was influenced by effective parish leadership, and the power of engaging corporate worship, but it also involved personal spiritual practices—how people took responsibility for living out their lives of faith from Monday through Saturday. It had to do with service, especially with service to those in need, and especially service that was theologically and biblically rooted, setting it apart from the efforts of charities and organizations like the Rotary Club or the United Way. In other words, research indicated that the measure of spiritual growth was not the amount of church activity. It was a matter of the heart, the ways that people described themselves growing in love of God and neighbor.

Based on that research, Willow Creek changed the ways it did ministry. It focused not only on what the church was doing when congregation gathered on Sunday, but also on other elements that contributed to spiritual growth. It recommitted itself to the formation of disciples. That kind of institutional change is rare among religious institutions. Could that kind of discernment, self-analysis, reflection, and action take hold in the Episcopal Church? How would that research play out in a tradition that is both rooted and restless, but mostly rooted?

Based on research findings, and mindful of the ways in which Willow Creek responded to research about congregational development, a process was initiated by which we sought to apply that same research to Episcopal congregations interested in learning more about where they were and where they were being called to go. We explored the ways they would be called to live into a process of reconciliation and restoration at the heart of that mission statement articulated in the Outline of Faith.

In a parish, that process begins as the leadership recognizes the need for honest and rigorous examination of the congregation in its spiritual development. Clergy and lay leadership agree to participate, which can be a courageous step. But as one of the leaders of Willow Creek put it, “facts are our friends.” Another leader noted that we measure what we value. The process seeks to learn where people are, through an anonymous, online inventory (or survey) which explores

the spiritual lives of individual members of the congregation. Then that community identifies a group of people (not unlike a search committee in its constituency) to reflect on the results of the survey, first as an indicator of where the parish is. The group then follows up with expression of where the parish is called to go, and how the spiritual life will go deeper. Those next steps are as much about cultural change as about programmatic change. One of the great values observed in the process is that it opens up the kind of conversation that can be a rarity in the Episcopal Church, conversation that shouldn't happen at the exchange of the peace and rarely happens at coffee hour. We have learned that people have been in their churches for decades and never talked about their beliefs and practices, about their prayer life, about their engagement with scripture (or lack thereof), about their interest in spiritual friendships, about their call to the contemplative life, let alone their questions about why any of this mattered. This process carves out space for those important conversations.

What have we learned? To date, our efforts have engaged almost one hundred Episcopal congregations around the country. It has been fruitful to work through the diocesan structure of our polity, so that we have gathered churches in the Dioceses of Chicago, Washington, Rhode Island, New York, Long Island, and Southeast Florida to take the journey of the process together. In addition, we have worked with individual congregations around the country, focused at this point regionally in the east, the south, and midwest. Our work has included a number of congregations that are relatively large for the Episcopal Church (fifteen hundred to twenty-five hundred members), but most of our work reflects the character of Episcopal congregations which are smaller, many with average Sunday attendance between fifty and one hundred members. Congregations are urban and rural, but most are suburban. There have been a few which might be described as more evangelical, but most seem to fit the liturgical and theological description of broad church. We will continue this work with the hopes of reaching more congregations to gain a clearer picture.

Already we are finding a pervasive denominational culture, characterized by relatively low levels of spiritual practice and a complacency and contentment about that spiritual state, all of which can breed spiritual inertia. One participating parishioner, when hearing that this process had to do with elevating expectations for her life of the community, responded that she didn't expect much to happen to her or for her in the life of church. She didn't expect the church

to expect much from her. There was little expectation of transformation. That was an important insight, as I suspect that this participating parishioner is not alone.

We have learned that the process is both adventure and experiment, exploratory and often provocative. There are any number of reasons why research from a place like Willow Creek might seem irrelevant to the Episcopal context. The religious cultures differ indeed. One participant noted that theologically, liturgically, and culturally, we are talking apples and oranges. But we continue in this work, confident that there are lessons to be learned from this research, and that we ignore these learnings at our peril.

The research, coordinated by market researchers who focus in particular on “intangibles,” points to the idea that spiritual growth is primarily a matter of the heart, an expression of deepening love of God and neighbor. A spiritual continuum was detected in the research, one which said that respondents self-identify at different stages of spiritual growth, maturity, or depth. The research identified catalyzing forces that help people move along that continuum toward deeper love of God and neighbor, catalysts that help people grow in faith. The goal of that continuum, in the language of Willow Creek, has to do with discipleship, with closeness to Christ, with movement toward being fully centered in Christ. To use the language of the opening questions from the Outline of Faith, it has to do with movement toward reconciliation, toward union with God and neighbor in Christ, a process of closing the gap. That progression is captured in the aspiration of the prayer attributed to Richard of Chichester that asks to see God more clearly, to love God more dearly, to follow God more nearly, day by day. It is a prayer that asks for a closer walk with God. If that is indeed the mission of the church, then it is important to understand where people are, and to think about what it is that will move people into that closer relationship, what will foster deeper discipleship and encourage Episcopalians in their walk with Christ.

As we add to the number of Episcopal churches who have participated in this process, we learn that there are distinct catalysts among Episcopalians that help move people along the spiritual continuum. In the early stages of spiritual growth, participation in the eucharist appears to be one of the key catalysts. This has been telling, as we have noted that one of the differences between a place like Willow Creek and the local Episcopal congregation has to do with the power of the sacraments. If we are looking at a spiritual continuum that aims at

closeness with Christ, we should not be surprised to find that, among Episcopalians, the eucharist moves us toward that goal, as we take the bread and are more deeply incorporated into the body of Christ. The eucharist may well provide the Episcopal counterpart for describing a relationship with Christ, often language ceded to evangelicals.

In the spiritual continuum, the various ways people pray matters a great deal and evolves along that continuum, moving first from prayers of intercession and prayers for help, to prayers of praise and thanksgiving. The resources that the Anglican tradition offers in terms of the practice of prayer represent a gift for those wishing to grow spiritually. A critical component of spiritual development seems to be time spent in solitude and contemplation. Our tradition celebrates that focus on stillness in the presence of the divine.

We are discovering in this work, which involves translation from a non-denominational megachurch to the Episcopal Church, that we get mixed reviews. One of the interesting developments has been to offer this process in dioceses, leveraging one of the strengths of our polity which links individual congregations with each other. Joey Rick, Canon for Congregational Vitality in the Diocese of Washington, has led the way in this effort, now shepherding congregations in her diocese through this work. She finds varied reactions to the process, with a combination of excitement and tension. As in much of life, the thing that is attractive is the thing that challenges. Churches are enthused about exploring a new opportunity imported from another tradition, hopeful that it might contribute to growth precisely because it is differentiated. At the same time, Canon Rick notes apprehension. A new resource from a tradition that reflects evangelical disposition might require change, and the Anglican culture is often change averse. (Aren't we all?) She notes among clergy and lay leaders an excitement about the possibility of spiritual conversation, approached in a straightforward manner, backed by research. Many of the findings dovetail with what is already part of the Anglican tradition (a call to worship, an emphasis on spiritual practice, a heart for service to those in need). She also discovers reticence about any explicit conversation about the spiritual life, along with uncertainty as to whether the process will be dispiriting and whether the congregation will actually participate. Congregations reflect that ambivalence. There is a curiosity about whether this kind of exercise might help them grow, and at the same time, congregants suspect that the work which comes from this other tradition might not honor Episcopal culture. Leaders express

concern that they do not wish for the congregation to be subjected to a test, or to receive a spiritual grade. There is skepticism that spiritual vitality can even be measured. The spiritual life is, after all, for many, a profoundly private matter. Overall, as a process that is designed to help congregations move, we discover hunger for movement, hunger in tension with resistance to change and suspicion of a process that did not originate in the Anglican context.

We pay particular attention to the critique that spiritual development is not a linear continuum. We admit that this model of the continuum is not the only way to envision the spiritual journey. We consider it one model among many. Spiritual development has its ebbs and flows, and may be more akin to a circle or spiral than a progressive line. We know that in the spiritual journey there are peaks and valleys. We know that in the spiritual journey we never arrive at a final destination. We admit that we often have to begin again, and that some of our best teachers are those who are just beginning the spiritual journey, or those who have failed in it. We look at catalysts for growth and recognize that sometimes the strongest catalyst is crisis or challenge. We have been energized and informed by the many ways people speak about the spiritual journey, and we are grateful for the ways that this process has triggered conversation. We are discovering that this conversation is not always easy.

We are also finding that the process can open a new chapter in the life of a congregation. Our hope is that this process of an inventory (or survey) and workshops will prompt and even provoke shifts in the life of a parish that will go on for years, as congregations focus single-mindedly on spiritual growth, embracing the mission of reconciling people to God and each other in Christ, making movement toward that place of oneness, and refusing to allow other distractions to draw the congregation away from this mission: spiritual growth.

So what does this research look like when it goes to work in a congregation? Among the two thousand churches surveyed, some seemed to exhibit a distinctive level of spiritual vitality. A small number of those congregations were studied, and out of that exploration, several best practice principles were identified, principles which are characteristic of these vital congregations. These five best practice principles include:

Getting people moving: By this, we mean the ability to get members of the congregation launched in the spiritual

journey, getting them to recognize spiritual growth as a value, providing “on-ramps” for deeper connection with the community and a deeper sense of God’s presence in their lives. Of course, this principle has to do with welcome, invitation, and hospitality, but it involves so much more. It suggests member incorporation, in the literal sense of how members are more deeply incorporated into the body of Christ. This is important for newcomers. We’re learning that it is even important for people who have been in the Episcopal Church for decades, many of whom have shifted into disengagement and infrequent attendance at their local congregation. It is important for those we refer to as the Christmas and Easter crowd, or those who are in wide orbit, affectionately referred to as “plutos,” with some gravitational pull to the core of the community and the opportunity to be drawn closer to the center.

Embedding the scripture: Research indicates that the greatest catalyst common among spiritually vital congregations is intentional engagement with scripture in all aspects of the life of the community, for all ages. Churches often find the greatest energy for transformation as they enter into deliberate conversation with scripture. In the Anglican model we bring tradition and reason and experience to bear on that process of reflection on the text, recognizing the deep ways that our tradition has already embedded scripture in the liturgy that shapes the community.

Creating ownership: The call to a culture of participation and stewardship in the life of the community and in an individual’s spiritual journey is captured in the words of one senior pastor who said to his congregation: “I can’t read the Bible for you.” In response to the grace of God, each member of the church has a responsibility for the movement in his or her own spiritual journey. A cultural shift occurs, moving from a consumer model of church (what’s in it for me) to a model that focuses on oblation, the offering of the ministry of all members of the church.

Pastoring the community: Engaging in a missional perspective, we find in the Episcopal Church a great variety of ways that pastoral care is practiced. This principle reflects the

promises of the Baptismal Covenant, with its focus on service. It includes everything from outreach efforts, to advocacy in the public sector, to interfaith dialogue, to partnerships with secular groups that tackle issues of justice and peace.

The leader's heart: The vitality of a congregation depends in many ways on the spiritual vitality of the leader, especially the senior leadership who must be committed to their own journey of faith, their own spiritual development, and who must model that life of discipleship with humility and transparency.

These five principles are being applied in innovative programs and in cultural shifts in parishes. We see examples unfolding around the Episcopal Church, where the first step many congregations take is to find some intentional way for the community to engage with scripture, either embracing programs like The Bible Challenge or The Story, or designing their own program that fits their community. (Programs developed by St. James' Church in New York City and Trinity Copley Square are notable examples.) One church responded to the call to get people moving by having the whole congregation read Rowan Williams's new book, *Being Christian*. Copies were purchased for each member of the parish, and they read this study together in Lent, as it focused on baptism, Bible, eucharist, and prayer. Other congregations have designated ongoing groups to guide the spiritual growth of the congregation.

But the response to this process is not only about programs. It's about shifting the focus of the heart of each member of the congregation. Examples include: making a commitment to open and end each meeting of the church in prayer; inviting lay-led scriptural reflection in meetings and in mission projects; and evaluating all ministries to see how they contribute to spiritual growth. These practices require no new staff, no additions to the budget, no new meetings. As this work unfolds, we continue our efforts to see not only what this research has to teach the Episcopal Church, but also to see what wisdom the Anglican tradition can bring to the process. As Brian McLaren has noted, this is the Episcopal moment. The resources of our tradition, focused on spiritual practice combined with the attendant call to service to those in need and a heart for liturgy as our most excellent offering, converge to deepen spiritual growth.

As our work has unfolded in the Episcopal Church it has been met with significant interest, an indicator that there is, as St. Augustine said, a God-shaped space inside each one of us which leads to restlessness until we rest in God's life. The process has also been met with resistance, which indicates that it is touching something important. We have met resistance to anything that locates roots in a large non-denominational church, a skepticism that anything from such a community can be helpful in the Anglican context. We welcome the skepticism, but encourage that skepticism to exhibit a humility and openness which recognizes that we have much to learn. As our work with Episcopal congregations has unfolded, we have met resistance to language that reflects an evangelical culture or context. Our response has been to invite congregations to find their own language to speak about beliefs and practices. To give an example, the language that came to us from Willow Creek spoke of scripture as the sole authority for guidance in life. Upon reflection, in our work in the Episcopal Church, we turned to the Prayer Book language from the ordination service, which speaks of our belief that the scripture contains all things necessary for salvation. As we consider the number of churches surveyed in the wider database, from both denominational and non-denominational contexts, it is not surprising that the Episcopal ethos is more progressive and less evangelical than many, if not most, American churches. We have recognized that distinction in the work we have done, but we have also noted the usefulness in the encounter, as it provides a striking contrast which can provide clarity about our own Anglican identity.

We are persistent in insisting that we all have something to learn, the kind of learning which many people experience in inter-faith dialogue: Christians can identify more clearly their own core beliefs when they are brought into conversation with other faith traditions. In the workshops we conducted in a large parish in suburban Chicago, members of the congregation resisted the notion that the beliefs held as high values by most of the churches in the survey were beliefs held by Episcopalians. Our facilitator, sensitive to these concerns, issued an inspired challenge by asking this working group: *If these are not your beliefs as Episcopalians, what are your beliefs? If this is not your language, what is your language?* The result was an energetic articulation of what we believe and practice, where we give our hearts, and how that gets acted out in the world.

We are learning that many Episcopalians come to our rich tradition as refugees from other, more dogmatic and doctrinaire faith traditions. They have responded to the sign “The Episcopal Church welcomes you,” mindful that they have not always been welcomed in other faith communities because of who they are or because of the questions they raised. We seek to honor and uphold pastoral sensitivity to those deeply felt concerns. We also have realized that a faith community cannot only be defined defensively or reactively, that the healthy future of our Communion calls on us to articulate what we believe, to speak about where we give our heart. We have learned that the sign indicating welcome is not enough, and appreciate the response of one church which added to the welcome sign this invitation: “If you come here, you will grow.”

In the Episcopal Church, we are graced with a spirit of inclusion and acceptance of all persons, regardless of where they are on the journey. That is embedded in the Baptismal Covenant for sure. But we began to ask: What are we welcoming people into? What happens in them, to them, through them that will be truly transformative and, in the paradigm emerging from the research, what will help them grow? How will they be supported in their movement toward union with God in Christ? We are grateful for the call to that kind of movement which has come through this research. We are excited about what lies ahead, as we offer this pathway to spiritual growth for individuals and congregations.

