



The Rev. Jay Sidebotham

Cartoonist-Turned-Priest Creates Process for Congregations to Grow Spiritually

An interview with the Rev. Jay Sidebotham
Founder of RenewalWorks™

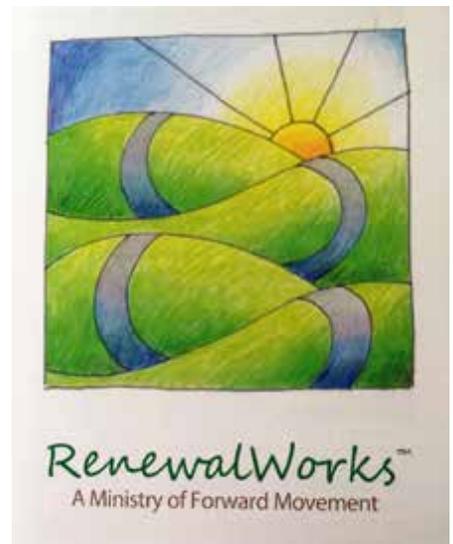
Editor: *Why is RenewalWorks™ a process and not a program?*

Jay: We really view it as a discernment process – I would say in many ways - this is a helpful way to think about it – it’s like spiritual strategic planning. And I guess one of the things I would say about it, it’s led by people within the local parish. And we find, after we’ve done about 140 Episcopal Churches, we find that there is great variety in the ways that people respond and that that response comes as reflective of who that congregation is, and where they are in their own spiritual journey and their history - as opposed to somebody just dropping a program on a parish in a cookie-cutter way. It’s really about the parish using the tools of discernment and strategic planning to figure out what God is calling them to do, and where they’re called to go.

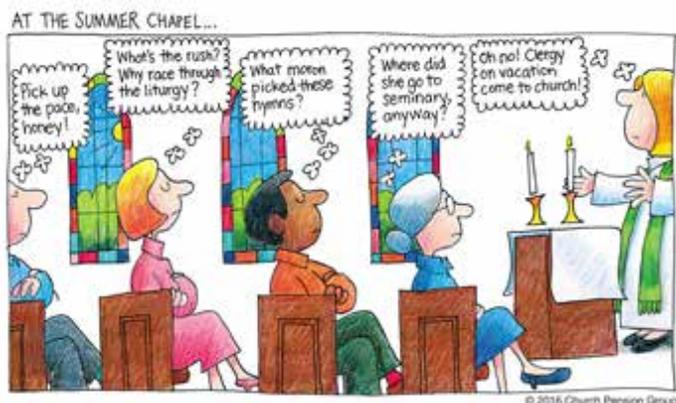
I have found after being a priest for 26 years, that those kinds of conversations don’t always readily happen in the Episcopal Church. We have glorious worship. We do great outreach. We don’t always have the opportunity in our congregations for people to talk in an authentic way about their own spiritual experiences - what God is doing in their life, what the struggles are, what the challenges are, what the joys are. This process, among other things, allows for that to happen. We say that this work is as much about culture change as it is about introducing program, about making spiritual growth the priority in a congregation.

Coming out of the research that’s been developed, there are certain best practices that congregations are invited to explore and that’s part of the report that they get - based on the wider database of churches and what churches have found is helpful – principles like embedding Scripture in their common life, having people have a sense of ownership for their own life in the church, having a sense of outreach which we call, “pastoring the community.” Sometimes, those will lead us to suggest a program like, for instance, some of the things FM offers, but it’s not what our primary focus is. It’s really about inviting churches discern where they feel called to go, and what would be the steps that they think might take them there.

Editor: *It sounds immensely satisfying – a four-step clear process that you engage in that has an outcome that yields future plans.*



For more information about RenewalWorks™ in WMA, visit the homepage of the diocesan website and click on the icon. Contact the Rev. Canon Pamela Mott at Diocesan House if you have questions.



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For nearly fifteen years, Jay has created the cartoons for the CPG (Church Pension Group) calendar.



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J: It's about next steps.

It's very biblical kind of Exodus stuff. How do we move together? How do we get to that next place to which we feel called? How do we get there together? How do we deepen individually?

Editor: Especially helpful in a parish that may feel like it's wandering right now.

J: We have a lot of places that seems somewhat spiritually inert. Part of what this process is hoping to do is to be provocative and evocative, in a way of getting people to take some next step that would strengthen their spiritual growth and deepen love of God and neighbor.

Editor: It's caring for the soul of the community first.

J: Yeah. People dispute this, but I've really come after all these years of working in parishes, to say that a healthy, vital congregation – its key - is that it's constituted, it's made up, it's filled with people who are spiritually vital or spiritually healthy. It's sometimes called the cellular model - it's as healthy as the cells in it. There's a great emphasis – not the only emphasis – but a great emphasis on personal spiritual practices and where people are experiencing God in individual life and then the worship and service of the community as an outgrowth of that.

Editor: Are you sick of people asking you about "Schoolhouse Rock?"

J: It is "the thing." That was fun to do and I did that for about three years. It's not work I could do now. I did it the old fashioned way.

 Jay traced the origin of "SchoolHouse Rock" - an ABC educational cartoon that ran from 1971-2008 - to a conversation among cartoonists of which his father was a part. Lamenting a son's C+ in Math, one of the creatives said, "He can't remember the multiplication tables, but he knows every song on the radio." The group got to work creating education cartoons with music. An entire generation of Saturday morning viewers can still sing, "I'm Just a Bill," and "Conjunction Junction."

Jay: I think there's something in there that's a preaching moment. I think there's something in there about what the Church needs to do - to find ways to be teaching the stuff that's engaging and memorable, and brings old stuff to new life.



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