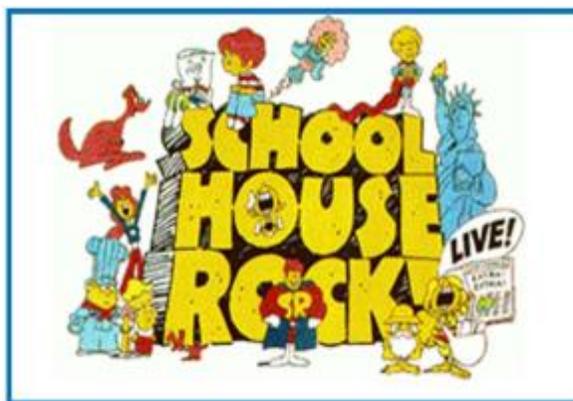


The Questions We Ask

An introduction to the RenewalWorks process, based on a keynote address given by the Rev. Jay Sidebotham at the 2014 Convention of the Diocese of Washington, February 1, 2014.

Let me begin with a parable, drawn from real life. After college, my first job was in the field of animation, doing drawings for a cartoon series called Schoolhouse Rock. Schoolhouse Rock began with a question asked by a man who worked with ABC TV. This man had a number of sons, attending some of the finest private schools in Manhattan, doing miserably in math. He pondered this mystery: His kids couldn't remember the multiplication tables, but they know every word to every rock song on the radio.



Soon, songs that imparted knowledge of multiplication tables, civics, history, science and grammar were born. Old bodies of knowledge were made new. It began with his question. There is something in there for the church, which may need to approach the old story of our faith in a new way. a matter of the questions we are asking.

What questions do we bring to the life of the church, the church we love? One of the learnings in the work discussed in this paper is that vital congregations embed scripture in everything they do. That fits with the Anglican tradition which says that one of the ways we find our way forward in the journey of faith is through engagement with scripture. As the psalmist said, the word is a lantern on our path.

So we begin with these verses from the letter to the Ephesians:

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what God has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life. (Ephesians 2:8-10)

In this passage, we are reminded that the church, that wonderful and sacred mystery, is a community brought together by grace, as gift, not because of what church members have done, but because of what God has done in Christ. And the grace is just the starting point. The story doesn't end there. As Annie Lamott says, the grace of God loves us enough to meet us where we are, but loves us too much to leave us there. So let me pose a few questions we must ask, prompted by the letter to the Ephesians: What is the way of life that lies before us? What is

that way for our congregations, for our leaders, lay and clergy? What is the way for each person's spiritual journey?

Those questions leads to others that have prompted the work described in this article. There is the question posed by Brian McLaren, pastor and teacher, keen observer of American Christendom. He asked:

The life-and-death question for each of our churches and denominations may boil down to this: Are we a club for the elite who pretend to have arrived or a school for disciples who are still on the way?

We can ask questions raised by Dr. Dwight Zscheile who has articulated an authentic Episcopal expression of discipleship in his book *People of the Way*. In the introduction to the book, he asks 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? How does the shape of life in the Episcopal Church foster depth and commitment to the way of Christ and how does it undermine it? Who are we as Episcopalians and what are we here for?

We can ask questions that occurred to me after a number of years serving as rector of a large Episcopal congregation. I was wondering if we were getting through to folks, as I was concerned about how I would be sustained in my own ministry.

Were we doing and being all we're called to do and be? Does more programming, more activity produce more growth in a church? Shouldn't we look a little bit more like the church described in the Acts of the Apostles? What do we expect from church? What's the connection between the spiritual vitality of the congregation and the spiritual vitality of its individual members?

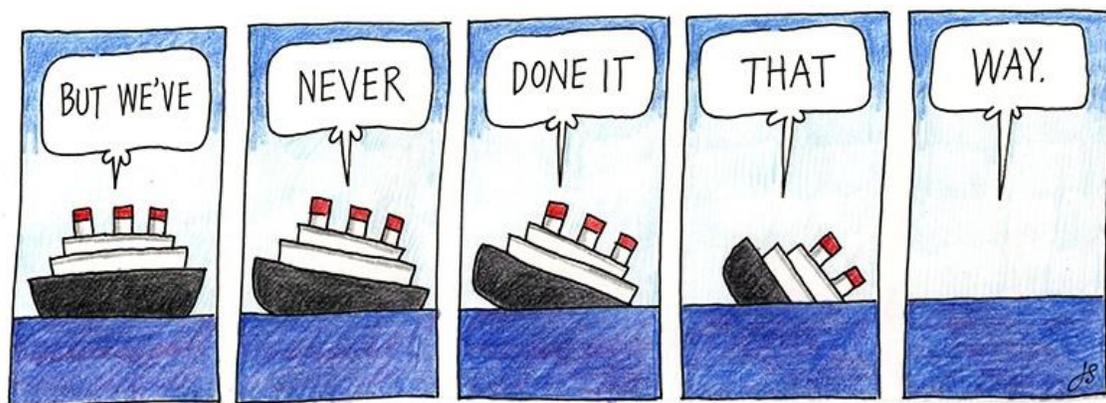
These and other questions have led to a ministry called RenewalWorks, an effort which on many levels has to do with the questions we ask, questions having to do with where we are and where we hope to be, as congregations, as church leaders, in our individual spiritual lives. It's a process of discernment which through the questions we ask, seeks to renew the church we love.

We launched this as a pilot program in a number of churches. Not everyone embraces the name Renewalworks. When one church in the Diocese of Chicago declared minimal enthusiasm for the name, we invited them to come up with their own name for the process. They spoke of the effort as "The Great Conversation." The questions probed in this work opened up the kinds of conversations, sometimes fierce conversations, that had not previously happened in the church.

This is a pilot project, very much a work in progress, these letters indicating this wisdom that the process of making things new is never really completed. (The letters stand for the following: Please be patient God is not finished with me yet.)



It is undertaken out of the conviction and with a sense of urgency to address that need in the Episcopal Church, we need to be learners, to learn from other sources marked by vitality, to find out what we don't already know and to share that with our congregations, in the confidence that we can't just keep doing what we've always been doing in our church, as the times, they are a changing.



So we ask questions like: What do we have to learn? The work of RenewalWorks began by watching Willow Creek, a large, vibrant non-denominational mega-church in the Chicago suburbs, by many measures one of the most successful churches in America. We eavesdropped on questions they were asking about their own community. That community looked hugely successful to outsiders, but there were challenges under the surface. Consider this excerpt from a book by Diana Butler Bass, a book entitled *Christianity After Religion*:

Willow Creek CC suffered membership stagnation and a lack of enthusiasm among the faithful. Bill Hybels confesses that although Willow Creek is successful at some things, it has failed to meet the congregation's deepest spiritual needs. A quarter of core members described themselves as spiritually stalled or dissatisfied with the role of the church in their spiritual growth. Church leaders found that 25% of the stalled segment and 63% of the churches dissatisfied segment contemplated leaving the church. A good business model brought thousands to Willow Creek. But did it work as a community of deepening connection to God and others? Maybe not.

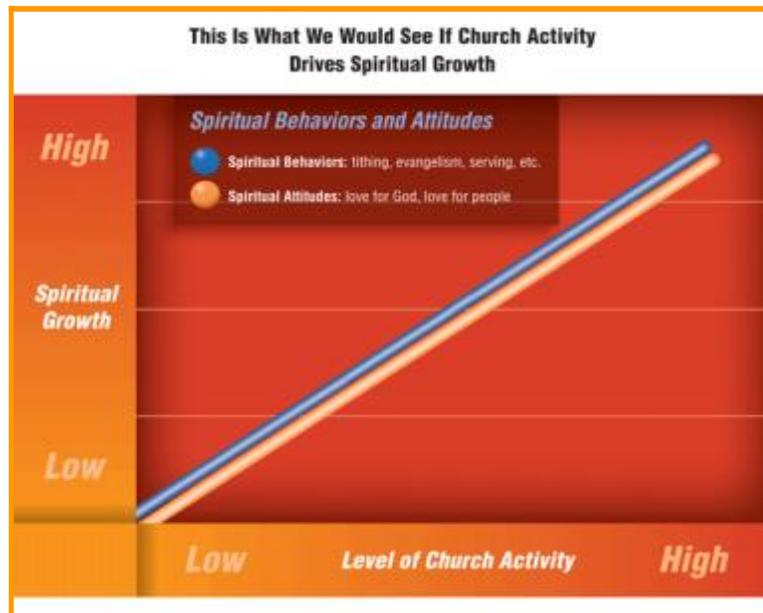
Willow Creek embarked on a decade of research studying spiritual vitality in congregations. They tapped into research methods used to evaluate products that have intangible benefits, products like Nike or Allstate. The research looked at the ways attitudes affect behavior. They

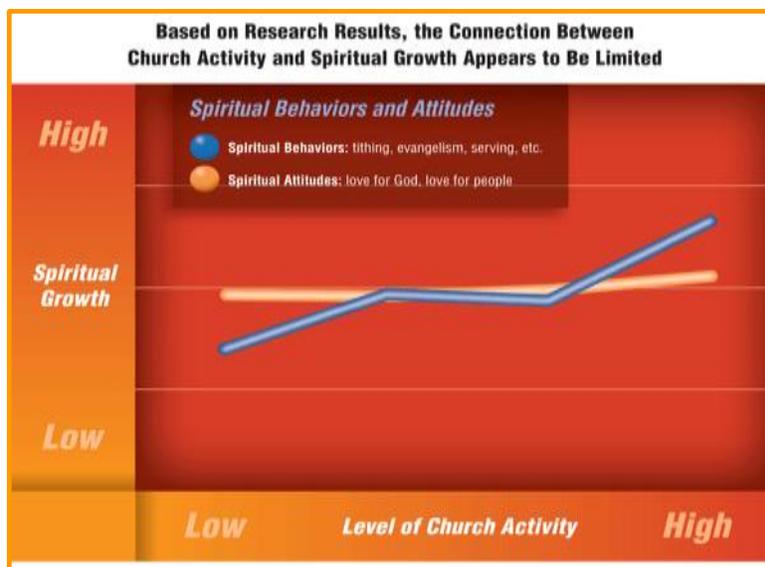
dared to ask whether there was a spiritual counterpart to that as they posed several strategic questions:

- What drives spiritual growth in individuals?
- What are the characteristics of growing vital congregations, seen through the eyes of parishioners?

In commercial terms, they considered church from the perspective of the users or consumers, people experiencing the life of the congregation. They longed to discover what was really going on in that experience. I was intrigued by this approach not only because I had a background in advertising, but also because in my congregation, I had people with various degrees of connection to the core of the community. Some of these folks were what I call Plutos, circling in wide orbit. I found myself asking: Do I know what's going on with them? Where are they in the spiritual journey? What drove them toward the church? What may have driven them away?

The model that Willow Creek had been using for 25 seemingly successful years was this: More church activity would mean more spiritual growth. If increasing participation in church activities (such as, attendance at weekend services and participation in small groups) drives spiritual growth, one would expect some correlation between low-medium-high levels of participation and low-medium-high levels of spiritual growth.





The research showed some increase in spiritual behaviors as participation in church activities increases, but little correlation between low-medium-high levels of participation and increasing love for God and love for others. What did seem to make a difference, as research unfolded, was how people felt about, talked about, responded to questions about a relationship with God and neighbor. Based on those responses, there was a correlation between spiritual behaviors and spiritual attitudes. This correlation indicated a continuum, people moving from one level of spiritual growth to another, categorized as moving from exploring the faith, to growing to deepening to a discipleship centered in God's life. The discussion of the spiritual continuum, with distinct catalysts moving people along in that progression, led to another question: What do we mean by spiritual growth? Try asking this question in your congregation. You may find as others have found that people often do not know the answer, or do not agree on an answer.

Taking our cue from the question that was asked of Jesus when someone wanted to know what it meant to inherit eternal life, we see that the path is simple, not easy. It is about relationship, about growing in relationship with God, with neighbor, with the world, and with oneself.

Jesus said: The first commandment is this: Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is the only Lord. Love the Lord you God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, with all your strength. The second is this: Love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other greater commandment than these.

In the course of research, the question was asked: What are the things that go on in churches and in people's lives that help them move forward in the journey, that help them to be people of the way, that help them grow in relationship in all the ways that can happen.

As churches were studied, these variables were identified, factors that helped people move forward in the spiritual journey:

- Reading and Reflecting on scripture
- Embracing/clarifying core Christian beliefs
- Engaging in personal spiritual practices
- Serving those in need

- Being in Spiritual Community

Based on these insights, a process was developed that would guide congregations through discernment of what God was calling them to do and be, how they were called to grow. And it began, as you might have guessed by now, with questions, asking individuals in a congregation to take an inventory (a survey) about their own spiritual lives.

The inventory: The questions we ask individuals

The process begins with this online, confidential and anonymous survey that asks people to respond to questions about their own spiritual journey. If there is distinctiveness to this survey, it is its focus on the experience of individual in their life with God and neighbor, in their spiritual growth. One parishioner who had been at his church for 40 years reported to his rector that he had dutifully taken every screwball survey the rector had ever suggested. He thought he'd seen them all. He said this was the first one that asked about personal spiritual practices like prayer or spiritual friendship, scripture engagement or connection to beliefs of the church.

In conjunction with the inventory are four workshops asking four key questions about the spiritual journey, the spiritual continuum for individuals and for congregations. Again, it's all about the questions.

And here they are:

- **Where have we been? Workshop One**
- **Where are we now? Workshop Two**
- **Where do we feel called to go? Workshop Three**
- **How do we get there? Workshop Four**

Where have we been? Workshop One

We begin in the first workshop by asking about the congregation, and about the individuals in them. We start by asking what spiritual growth means, anyway. Can we arrive at a common understanding?

Then we ask people to reflect on their own spiritual journey. When did they grow or move forward? What was that about? When did they stall? In the structure of the program, clergy take part in this reflection. It was a powerful moment for me in my ministry to meet with this small group and describe not only times when I felt spiritually vital, but also times when I felt spiritually stalled, when the well was dry, because they were also times when I was standing at the altar or in the pulpit, needing to be fed, needing to be made new.

Where are we now? Workshop Two

The second workshop asks another question: Where are we now? This workshop explores the results of the inventory, as a way to measure spiritual vitality, and get a reading, a snapshot of where the congregation (and its members) might be at that moment. Researchers came up with what they call the Spiritual Vitality Index. It may sound like corporate jargon, but it has

important implications for all who lead the church. It says that spiritual vitality in an individual's life, based on all these folks from all these different places who have done this work, includes the church's role. But that's not the only factor. Vitality also springs from personal spiritual practices, how people relate to God and neighbor and self, Monday through Saturday.

Examples: Do people have a rhythm of a prayer life? Is there a commitment to solitude and silence? Do they have spiritual conversations? Do they read the Bible? Thirdly, a key element in spiritual vitality has to do with intentional service to people in need, either in the church or in efforts outside of the church.

I was describing this index to a friend who was both skeptical and slightly confused by this index, doubtful that spiritual vitality could be measured. As I unpacked these three elements, she had an epiphany. She was a person who had been in recovery for years. She said: That's the practice of the spirituality of AA: You go to meetings, gathering regularly. You practice your program day by day, on your own, a day at a time. And you see where you can be of service. That was a light bulb for me too, because it indicated that the spiritual wisdom of AA, wisdom that marks one of the great spiritual movements of recent generations, corresponds to this understanding of the spiritual journey.

As we look at an increasing number of Episcopal churches, we find consistent patterns in the research, a profile of Episcopalians, which indicates that most are in the first two stages of the spiritual continuum, described as exploring or growing.

As more and more Episcopal churches take the survey, there are some things we are learning about our denominational culture. There are strong signs of vitality in individual lives and in congregations that have to do with welcoming, with formation of our young people, with focus on pastoral needs, prayer and commitment to the liturgy. Embrace of belief statements is relatively low, as are personal spiritual practices. There is a strong commitment to service to those in need, though not a deep rooting in theology or scripture. Like many churches in other denominations, there is a sense that church exists for what a person gets out of the experience. In all churches, there are small groups of folks who indicate deepened sense of discipleship and centeredness to God in Christ.

We're finding a distinctive and pervasive Episcopal culture, though not a strong sense of expectation for their life in the church. The call to service is strong, bringing with it a call to biblical or theological roots. It's a strong culture that will be hard to change. As Dilbert says: change is good, you go first.

Looking at the spiritual continuum, there are things that help people move forward along the spiritual continuum. As people come to the church, the eucharist seems to be a key catalyst in people experiencing God's life in deeper ways. As people grow in their spiritual lives (again, described as deeper love of God and neighbor) solitude figures large in folks moving forward in their own spiritual journeys. Prayer for others and prayers of gratitude make a difference. Service is a strong catalyst for growth. We need to celebrate and build on the spiritual strengths found among Episcopalians. We need to challenge members of the Episcopal churches to embrace their growth opportunities.

Where do we feel called to go? Workshop Three

We come to the third question, and in the RenewalWorks process, there's a workshop for that, based on a good question for each of us in the spiritual journey. In this workshop, we begin with an exploration of basic beliefs and practices embraced by our congregations. Part of the interesting conversation between Episcopal congregations and congregations from other denominations and non-denominational churches has been the challenge of articulating beliefs and practices. Again and again, I've heard: "That's not us. That is not our language. That's not how Episcopalians talk. We do not speak about spirituality, about our faith this way." What this "great conversation" tries to do is to say: Okay, that may not be our culture, that may not be our language. But what is our language? How can we speak not only about what we are not, but also in a positive way affirm beliefs and practices that can guide us? We are gifted at critical thinking. We are more reticent about expressing what we believe. What can we learn from other churches, that will help us know where God is calling us to go?

When research had been done with a large enough sample of churches, there were congregations that seemed to exhibit distinctive vitality. They were different in many ways: rural and urban, conservative and progressive, small and large. Researchers gathered a group of these churches. They were asked separately what was going on in their congregations that might explain their vitality. When they got back together, they discovered that there were certain characteristics held in common. These were identified as the best practice principles.

These best practice principles include the following:

- Getting People Moving
- Embedding Scripture
- Creating Ownership
- Pastoring the Community
- The Leader's Heart.

The Leader's Heart

At the center is the leader's heart. So the question: What are characteristics of leaders of vital congregations? As described in the book entitled MOVE, four characteristics were identified:

First, taking a cue from Jim Collins monograph on *Good To Great*, Mr. Collins notes that the best leader combines deep personal humility with intense professional will.

Second, in the same way that I have come to believe that congregations are only as spiritually healthy and vital as the members of those congregations, so the leader's heart is key.

Third, leaders of these congregations are models of discipleship, which includes a sense of vulnerability and transparency. For more on the importance of the theme of vulnerability, consider the work of Dr. Brené Brown, who speaks powerfully about the need for this attribute to be in evidence among leaders.

Fourth, leaders focus on growing hearts, not growing attendance. Growing attendance, growing number of pledging units may come, but the primary call is to be singleminded about forming disciples, and seeing everything we do as churches through the lenses of how it contributes to spiritual growth.

Which leads to yet another question: How do we support leaders in our communities? Early in my parish ministry, I did a cartoon indicating all the things I felt I needed to know as rector, things I was not taught at seminary.



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How many parish profiles have you read and wondered if even Jesus would get a call back? We need to ask questions about how we are calling and supporting leaders, and how they can be best equipped to do the work of forming disciples, and focusing singularly on spiritual growth. Are we expecting too much from our leaders? Are we expecting the wrong thing? If spiritual growth is our singular focus, can our leaders be freed and equipped to guide us into spiritual growth.

I share this heartbreaking note which came to Diana Butler Bass anonymously from a member of the clergy, which points to a challenge all too common among clergy who have been at it for a while:

After over 20 years of parish ministry I am leaving it. I have resigned from all my denominational roles, and no one has said a word. Yet we are sad to leave, because of what it means. It means to us the church has become irrelevant to us. We care about spiritual disciplines of study, worship, confession and forgiveness, discernment, fellowship, and mission. In the church, I spent more time discussing the replacement of the church roof than on discerning our purpose as a church. We miss the liturgy and the relationships, but I do not miss the constant bickering over meaningless garbage,

evening meetings, and working every weekend.

Not too long ago, I was given a copy of a letter that Evelyn Underhill wrote to Archbishop Lang, the guy who does all the weddings on Downton Abbey. In it she writes about the clergy of her day. Here are some excerpts. (You can find the entire speech online.)

May it please your Grace: I desire very humbly to suggest with bishops assembled at Lambeth that the greatest and most necessary work they could do at the present time for the renewal of the Anglican Church would be to call the clergy as a whole, solemnly and insistently to a greater interiority and cultivation of the personal life of prayer....The real hunger among laity is not for halting attempts to reconcile theology and physical science but for the deep things of the Spirit...We look to the clergy to help and direct our spiritual growth....God is the interesting thing about religion and people are hungry for God.

I love the phrase: “God is the interesting thing about religion and people are hungry for God.” I know in my own life, in my own ministry, I’ve occasionally lost sight of that.

So with a recognition that the leader is essential in the spiritual vitality of congregations, that the leader’s heart is key, how can that leader and his or her congregation think about the other four best practice principles?

Get people moving:

The first principle stresses the need to get people moving, which is about how we draw people into the life of the community, setting them on this journey of spiritual growth. It is a lot about newcomer welcome, member incorporation, for sure. It is also about how we help people to grow in understanding of the mystery of our liturgy, with particular focus on teaching about baptism and the eucharist. It is about elevating expectation that we have both the freedom and the responsibility for the course of our own spiritual journey. It is about motivating people who may have been around the church for decades to see how they can jumpstart their own spiritual lives.



This cartoon appeared on the Episcopal Church Memes site, and caused a long stream of messages. A number of people saying this kind of thing doesn’t happen, that it takes a cheap

shot at our welcoming denomination. Others could cite time and place where such an encounter occurred. It's all meant as a challenge for the church to create a culture where everyone, not just those assigned as greeters or ushers do the welcoming, the first step in the spiritual journey, in the spiritual growth that every member is called to pursue.

Embed scripture:

The second characteristic of vital congregations is that they embed scripture in the life of the community, folding it in to everything they do. We as Episcopalians do that more than we imagine, maybe even more than we'd like to admit. Our Prayer Book is shot through with scripture. Any given liturgy includes reading of much of scripture. Lectionaries exist which help us read scripture in a systematic way. Ordinands pledge that they believe scripture to contain all things necessary for salvation. We hear scripture in worship and we respond by calling it the word of the Lord, confident that in the scripture we can hear what the spirit is saying. These days, around the church, there is a movement underway, that says the engagement with scripture distinguishes us. So a quote from a favorite little book called *Shaped by the Bible*, by Will Willimon, who in his introduction wonders how the church differs from the Rotary Club or the Durham Bulls game. He notes that often the people at Rotary Club are kinder and that the Durham Bulls game is more successfully integrated. So what makes a church distinctive? He writes the following:

We are left with our question. What makes the church, your congregation and mine, different, utterly essential, without equal, unique? Let me venture a response: A congregation is Christian to the degree that it is confronted by and attempts to form its life in response to the Word of God

For me that is a helpful way to think about our engagement with scripture, as we seek in our communities to be confronted by the word of God, and to form our life in response. Again, it's as much about the questions as the answers.

Create ownership

Third, vital congregations were noted for creating ownership. I might look for a word other than ownership, perhaps stewardship, or skin in the game. Essentially this principle says that we not only have the freedom to experience the vitality of spiritual growth, we have responsibility for pursuing it, that it is not something church delivers, nor is it church as performance, but that we are in this together.

It's here that I've come to see role of clergy and other lay leaders in role of spiritual coach, and it's captured for me in what Bill Hybels said to his congregation. He stood up one Sunday and told his congregation: I can't read the Bible for you.

We could substitute any number of spiritual practices, as we challenge members of our churches to own their own spiritual development, as we coach and encourage them to take the next steps, to exercise their faith, to practice it in every sense of the word practice. By practice,

we mean put it into action. By practice, we mean get better at it the more we do it. Or in other words, to grow.

Pastor the community

Finally, vital congregations don't exist in a cocoon but have an outward focus, which is not only service in the form of hands on ministry, like a soup kitchen or a ministry like Habitat. It can also be advocacy for justice and peace, like congregations that unite to combat gun violence or battle discriminatory practices. It can be expanding connections with the community through ministries like interfaith conversation. In each of these cases, it is a matter of reaching out. This mark of spiritual vitality found in churches of all kinds is a fulfillment of the baptismal covenant found in the Book of Common Prayer (p. 304ff) in which three of the five promises are focused outward, proclaiming good news by word and example, seeking and serving, striving for justice and peace, honoring the dignity of all.

What do we do next? Workshop Four

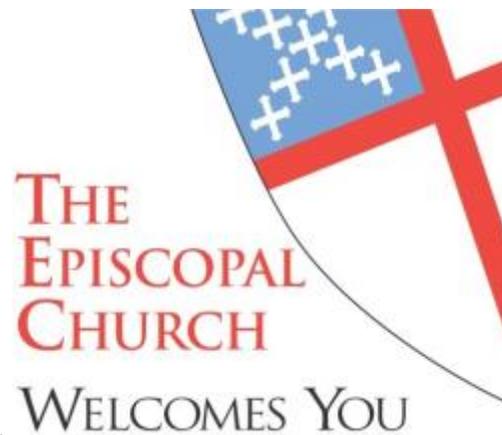
The final question, after we have asked where we've been, where we are, where we'd like to go, is how do we get there. What steps can we take? Going back to Jim Collins GOOD to GREAT it seems to me to be about a rigorous, singular focus, viewing everything we do through the lens of spiritual growth. It's about being brave enough (again, take a look at work by Dr. Brené Brown, especially her book *Daring Greatly*, to do a few things well, and to challenge people to grow, to live into the grace God has for us.

It's about elevating expectations in our community, calling people to live into the grace already received.

What does it mean to elevate expectations?

It can be a challenge because as we noted earlier, there is complacency and contentment evident in many of our churches. I recall responding to the parish profile for my church in Chicago, a marvelous place for sure. The cover of that parish profile indicated a congregation that was rooted and restless and ready to grow. I liked that. In my mind, I expected a 50-50 split between rooted and restless. I came to realize that both elements were there, but that it wasn't exactly a fifty-fifty split. Maybe 90% rooted and 10% restless.

For a while I've been fascinated by church signs. It started with a photo I saw years ago, one of those signs on a trailer, with movie letters. It read: The Lord is Risen. No Bingo. I've used it to say that the news of the resurrection transforms. I've been collecting church signs since. Of course, perhaps the most famous in the world of Episcopalians is the sign found in almost every community which says "The Episcopal Church Welcomes You."



That says a lot about our community. The inclusiveness of our denomination is reflected in this sign. But one might ask this question: Does that welcome sign say enough?

Here's a proposal for a sign that I would add, for our congregations, for our denomination, for individuals.

**“If you come here,
you will grow.”**

That sign indicates the aspiration that in participation in the life of the community, in taking part in the journey of discipleship, growth will happen, not magically or mechanistically but as an expression of deepening relationship with God, neighbor, self and world. Here's an example of that kind of transformation in a poster that captures both grace and journey, both welcome and expectation, both love and hope.



It begins with growth in our understanding of our relationship with God, and this is how one community expressed it, savoring the power of the trinitarian language in ways that made sense to them:

If you come here, you will grow: God is at work transforming our hearts as we:

- Commit to examine and deepen our relationship with God,
- Follow Jesus, and his teachings and practices, as the supreme example of whole and authentic life,
- Passionately express our lives by responding to the Holy Spirit through worship, personal practices and service.

It comes back to focus, in the conviction that in many of our churches, our ministries are the climate, the culture, the place where growth will occur. So we ask questions of our ministries: What do you do? Why do you do that? How does what you do contribute to spiritual growth? How would you like to move forward? And again, we repeat that wherever a person is in the spiritual journey, that person can grow. There is more.

In our tradition, we seek to elevate expectation for worship, so that it is not performance or spectator sport, but an offering from everyone present, reflecting Soren Kierkegaard's vision of the liturgy:

The liturgical leaders (musicians, readers of the scriptures, preachers and celebrants) are to be the prompters in worship. All of us, the congregation as well as the liturgical leaders are the actors in the drama of worship. God alone is the audience for the drama.

So we encourage in a variety of ways people to prepare for the experience of worship before arriving in the sacred space.

We look at growth initiatives for the whole congregation. Any number of parishes in response to this work have sponsored or created parish wide/intergenerational explorations of the Bible, again in ways that reflect the culture of the Episcopal Church. We invite ministries to gather with a focus on spirituality and we challenge individuals to develop their own rule of life.

We elevate expectations for clergy calling them to deeper focus on their role as teacher, model, encourager, coach. We challenge lay leaders to see themselves as spiritual leaders. Service on Vestry, for instance, becomes more than looking at financial statements and making sure that the furnace is working. It's about spiritual growth.

Each community can come up with its own way to elevate expectations, and to invite members into deeper relationship with God and each other. One Vestry retreat at an Episcopal Church ended by asking each member of the Vestry to share a plan for spiritual growth in the coming year, establishing a spirit of accountability.

Again, it is as much about a culture shift as it is about adding programs, or hiring more staff or getting more pledges. It is about a singular focus on spiritual growth, on holding out the prospect that each individual can grow and that the vitality of the congregation will in that way be enhanced. It is about relentless pursuit of spiritual growth. It calls for lots of prayer.

So the final question we must ask, for the sake of our congregations: What would it mean to come to a renewed focus on discipleship? What are inclusive and inviting expressions of that, true to our tradition so clearly expressed in our baptism where we promise to put our whole trust in God's grace and love and to follow Jesus as Lord and Savior.

Let me close with the beautiful questions from Dwight Zscheile, and invite you to take them with you to your congregations, to the ministries in those congregations, and in your own life as a follower of Christ, however you envision and embrace that pathway of discipleship.

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? How does the shape of life in the Episcopal Church foster depth and commitment to the way of Christ and how does it undermine it? Who are we as Episcopalians and what are we here for?

In the end, it's about how we discover who Jesus is for us, what it means to follow him in a world hungry for the experience of grace.