

Lessons from Unlikely Sources: What a Market Researcher and a Megachurch are Teaching a Few Episcopalians about Growing the Church

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I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect. For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. (Romans 12:1–3)

As a parish priest, with a heart for the Episcopal Church and an eye on disheartening statistics about the state of mainline congregations, the following question has been on my mind of late: *Is the church doing and being what it is called to do and be?*² The question, originally posed by my theology professor at Union Seminary in New York, came back to me recently as clergy colleagues gathered to bemoan flat attendance and flat pledging. We consoled ourselves by saying that flat is the new up. After more than twenty years in parish ministry, and more than seven years in my present cure, I have come to believe that, actually, up is the new up: there is in fact hope for growth, because the Episcopal Church and the Anglican tradition have much to offer in the contemporary religious context. At the same time, I have come to believe that there is urgency about this call to a new way of being and doing church, a call to a new vision for the individual spiritual journey, for the sake of the church we love.

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Let me be specific about the call. I have come to the conviction that we are called to three critical aspects of spiritual growth in Episcopal congregations:

1. A more transforming encounter with God, especially in our common prayer, our worship, and our engagement with Scripture.
2. A deeper life of discipleship, marked by personal spiritual practices that infuse all of life, not just time spent in a church building.
3. A more compelling orientation toward putting faith into action, specifically in service to those in need and work for justice and peace, with clear articulation of opportunities to do that.

As I survey the wondrous church, I see a big gap between what we are called to do and be and what we are actually doing and being. In order to close that gap, I believe we need to experience the kind of transformation suggested in Romans 12: a renewal in our thinking and way of being that transforms the lives of individuals and church leaders, as well as the common life of our congregations and denomination. We also need the kind of discerning, sober judgment to which Paul alludes, moving us to a deeper sense of expectation, responsibility, and challenge.

This essay tells the story of the journey of one parish, the Church of the Holy Spirit in Lake Forest, Illinois, a congregation committed to exploring new understandings of church growth and sharing those discoveries with other congregations. It is a story about what we are learning in our conversations with faith communities that represent a different expression of the Christian faith, including the nondenominational Willow Creek Church in the suburbs of Chicago. These conversations have been an interesting and clarifying exercise for us at Holy Spirit, bearing insights into the theology of our church. Perhaps the most compelling insight we have learned is that the spiritual vitality of any congregation flows from the spiritual vitality of its members. Developing spiritual vitality in the members of the community thus poses a significant challenge for the lay and ordained leaders of those congregations.

Leadership is key. As I puzzled about the level of vitality in the congregation I had been leading for seven years, I reflected on my own spiritual vitality. Was I doing and being what I was called to do and be? When had I experienced spiritual growth? When had I stalled? What factors contributed to both of those experiences? In the lead-up to a sabbatical two years ago, I took inventory of my ministry. I noted, wistfully, that some periods of spiritual stagnation or inertia in my life were times when I was preaching and teaching and working my tail off. I wondered if parishioners could tell.

That personal inventory made me realize that if I was to continue in parish ministry, it would not be because I would or could work harder. Rather, I needed to work differently. I applied that personal assessment to the parish. We did not need to do more. In recent years, we had more than doubled the number of programs and ministries, to little visible effect. We probably needed to do less. But we needed to do it differently, and perhaps with a better vision for our mission. There needed to be a cultural shift in our parish. I, as rector, needed my own personal culture shift, in the hopes of attaining greater clarity about my role as spiritual leader.

The model which I had presumed would lead to congregational growth was not working. It was a consumerist model that tried to offer as much creative programming and activity as I could imagine, and I have a pretty good imagination. As one bishop warned me, "You dance. They'll clap." This model based success on the amount of time people spent at the church, participating in church-organized programs, especially those that I created, shaped, and directed. Though the number of programs had expanded, there was little evidence of greater spiritual depth or engagement, not to mention little if any movement on attendance or contributions. Based on those dynamics, what I was doing as a parish priest, and what we were doing as a congregation, seemed unsustainable.

Aware that the definition of insanity is continuing to do what one knows does not work, I began to pray for insight into another path. It can be surprising, even risky, to pray, "Come, Holy Spirit." A number of questions fueled the search: Why didn't my congregation look a bit more like the church described in the Book of Acts? What is my part in it? What is not my part? If I am here and I want to get there (wherever *there* might be), does it happen by adding programs or doing different programs? Was it a matter of doing less liturgy, more

liturgy, different kinds of liturgy? In our congregation, how could we maintain a spirit of welcome, hospitality, and inclusion—hallmarks of our tradition—while at the same time answer a call for a deeper level of commitment and elevated expectations? How could we grow in grace? In the vision of Romans 12, how might we be transformed? That led to other questions: What resources, what best practices could I explore? Was there learning to be had from other Episcopal churches? Should we look outside our denomination? Should we be thinking about growth in terms of number of programs, number of people attending, number of pledging units? Were there other ways to think about what it means to grow?

Measuring Spiritual Vitality

These questions drove our congregation into an unexpected discernment process. Our congregation was contented, solvent, and large by the standards of our denomination. One aspect of the parish profile which caught my attention in 2004, when I was called to serve as rector, featured the observation of a visiting bishop: The parish was rooted and restless and ready to grow. It became clear to me not too long after I was installed (can somebody please find another verb to describe the beginning of a ministry?) that the split between rooted and restless was not 50/50. We were really rooted. We had that figured out. The restlessness and the readiness to grow? Not so much.

During my years at the parish, I had been made aware of work done by one of our parishioners, Eric Arnson. As a highly successful market researcher, he had been invited to consult with Willow Creek Church, a nondenominational megachurch in the Chicago suburbs, rated number one in influence among churches in America. That seemingly successful church had realized its old models were not working. Research indicated that many of its parishioners were spiritually stalled. Many were dissatisfied. Many were leaving the church, including people in leadership positions. Exit interviews showed a number were going to a church down the road, one that offered more intensive Bible teaching. What was going on?

Eric had spent his career finding ways to assess intangibles (things like how people feel about perfume, insurance, or athletic shoes). He took on the task of devising tools to measure the spiritual vitality of congregations. The insights gained from the research done with

Willow Creek were challenging, but the church leadership paid attention, and changed the way they did church, as they identified trends and themes among congregations that exhibited spiritual vitality. Spiritual vitality was not just about creative programs and engaging worship services. Those things were important, of course. But vitality also had to do with individual spiritual practices outside the church walls, and with a call to active service to people in need. There were stages of growth in the journey, and identifiable catalysts that moved people from one stage to another.

Working with staff from Willow Creek, Eric created an online survey and developed follow-up workshops to assess the vitality of congregations. While Eric was hard at work in the world of Willow Creek, he also spoke with our parish leadership about the research's application to the Episcopal world, noting the unsustainability of what we were doing and suggesting we explore a way to apply these learnings to an Episcopal setting. I wondered: Would the learnings translate? Would they have something to say to us? Or was the theology, polity, and culture too different? The promise of what we might learn through the exploration of these questions seemed to me to be worth the risk.

There was cost along with the promise. We had to build consensus as a community, getting people to believe that there was merit in this path of discernment, and that did not come easily. As I promoted the use of material from a nondenominational, evangelical context, I spoke of the value of encounter with "the other." Based on my experience with interfaith dialogue, I believed that that kind of conversation would clarify our own Anglican identity, bringing greater self-awareness. I was convinced that conversation with Willow Creek would provide a useful tool for Episcopalians, as we were challenged to think about what the body of Christ means to us. So we asked together: Do we have anything to learn? Was the theology of Willow Creek too different from Anglican theology? At the same time, I wondered: Do we have anything to lose? I was heartened to experience the openness and hospitality of the community at Willow Creek to our questions and concerns, as we moved forward.

My clergy colleagues and the wardens of the church were supportive, which was key. Any one of them could have derailed the process. The vestry studied the research from Willow Creek, and looked at Jim Collins's monograph *Good to Great*, as it applied to nonprofits. After lengthy discussion, with some expressions of skepticism and the

occasional eye-rolling, the vestry unanimously endorsed the survey and workshop process, encouraged by the support of our bishop and his staff. We communicated extensively to the parish as we invited congregants to take the survey, which was followed by a series of workshops focused on discernment of what we were called to do and be. We got a good response in the survey, though we also raised suspicion and anger. A number of our parishioners felt the language of the survey was too foreign. Many feared we were abandoning our Anglican heritage. One parishioner told me it was a charade, a useless exercise. Another said that I would have done less damage if I had thrown a hand grenade down the center aisle of the nave. A bit dramatic, but I was surprised by the depth of angst, animus, misconception, and prejudice that surfaced in people's understanding of nondenominational churches. We pressed on. If nothing else, we had people's attention. In the process, there were important lessons about how we do theology in churches these days.

For starters, theological work, at its best, synthesizes Scripture and tradition with the instruments available in the culture. In this process, we offered our corollary to the adage attributed to Karl Barth, who said that the preacher ought to have the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. We are to take what the culture presents and use that as a resource for theological reflection, in tandem with other resources (Scripture, tradition, reason, experience). In this case, we turned to expertise developed in the marketing and consulting world to chart behavioral patterns. We explored the science of market research, and found it to be a useful tool for assessing and bolstering the dynamism of the church.

We learned that theological insight and change come out of a place of need. The survey showed what I have already suggested, that our congregation was plenty rooted and not all that restless. The Spiritual Vitality Index devised in this research measured three components: (1) the role of the church, (2) the role of personal spiritual practices, and (3) the role of service to those in need. The measures of our spiritual vitality were low when measured against 250,000 people from congregations large and small, urban and rural, mainline and nondenominational. Perhaps the most challenging finding: our congregation was contented with low indicators of spiritual vitality.

Equally disconcerting: there was a gap between what we said we valued and how we acted. While our congregation indicated that we highly valued service to people in need, we were quite low in actually

doing it. Daily spiritual practices were also given high value marks, but in reality, in these practices we were well below other congregations. We said we valued programs for education for our children, but participation in these programs had dropped in a marked way.

Overall, we got a low grade, and let's just say we were a congregation that was not used to getting low grades in anything. That assessment presented opportunity and impetus for learning and growth. It reminded me of the first beatitude: "Blessed are the poor in spirit," which has also been translated, "Blessed are those who know their need of God." That seemed to indicate that even with low grades we were blessed, because we came to understand that we had some work to do, and that we would only move forward with God's help. Everything was not okay. It helped us to get clear indicators of those facts, rather than just suspicions. The Reverend Carol Anderson mentored us in this process, and as we puzzled about where our discernment was leading us, she asked: *What is the one thing you cannot do without God's help?* My answer: Make the necessary culture shift. We prayed for that to happen.

Theological Insights Leading to Spiritual Vitality

We discovered a number of theological insights by engaging with a community that was not quite like us. From the outset, in our church we met with resistance to the language embedded in the survey. It was not our language. That led us to a new appreciation for the power of language in the theological work we were doing, and the necessity for translation. The breakthrough came for our small working group when the Reverend Clarence Langdon, who works for the diocese and wisely shepherded us through this process as facilitator, pointedly asked: *If that language is not our language, what language shall we use to describe who we are? What are the beliefs and practices that matter to us?* We crafted a list of more than thirty Episcopal beliefs and practices, a draft document to help us get a clearer sense of who we are as a church, and what we value. The following theological insights were embraced in the process, affirming rather than diminishing our Anglican heritage:

- We found a renewed commitment to a trinitarian understanding of the reality of God in our lives. When presented with the Christocentric focus of the survey, we came to a sense of how

deeply we value our understanding of God in the mystery of the Trinity: a relationship of worship with the Eternal Majesty, discipleship of the one called the Incarnate Word, all of it empowered by the Spirit.

- We articulated our faith as fundamentally relational, and recast our mission to see how what we are doing and being contributes to growth in relationship with God, with others, with the world, and with ourselves. Said more succinctly, it was all about love of God and love of neighbor. Again, a key dimension to that relational understanding of our faith was to recognize that discipleship of Christ was essential. We needed to find an authentic Anglican way to speak about what discipleship meant to us.
- We deepened our commitment to worship at the center, with the recognition that we were united as Episcopalians by common prayer. Following findings from Willow Creek, we were led to elevate expectations about worship, encouraging a shift in trend lines on attendance, inviting prayer prior to worship, embracing Søren Kierkegaard's vision of worship in which God is the audience and we are the actors, making worship our most excellent and beautiful offering to our God.
- We grew in our commitment to the sacraments. We noted, with some sense of irony, that the language of the Baptismal Covenant was not all that different from the evangelical language that challenged us, as it asked if we accepted Christ as our savior, put our whole trust in his grace and love, and promised to follow him. We knew that participation in the eucharist mattered deeply for our own spiritual health and vitality, providing strength for the journey.
- We underscored the need for spiritual practices beyond the walls and schedule of the church. We found in our tradition, and especially in our Prayer Book, a wide range of practices, like the Daily Office, which could deepen our spiritual lives.
- We affirmed that we each have responsibility for our own spiritual journeys. One of the insights garnered from Willow Creek was the challenge the pastor gave to his congregation: *I cannot read the Bible for you*. We are now entering into conversation about what that responsibility looks like, as we deepen our sense of accountability without making the church sound like a scold.

- We grew in our facility for talking about our faith, for sharing our spiritual journey with others—perhaps an un-Episcopalian thing to do on the surface, yet one which we are finding has great power when done in a way that is authentic to our tradition. The language we have discovered, with the help of our youth group, has us looking for “God-sightings,” talking about where we see God at work in the world.
- We recommitted ourselves to a broad and inclusive vision of the faith, recognizing the need for honoring other faith traditions and welcoming people wherever they are on the spiritual journey.
- We explored the possibility of spiritual growth through hands-on ministry to people in need. In a wealthy community where service often means writing a check, we are sharpening our call to grow spiritually by growing in relationship with others, especially a more personal encounter with those who are marginalized and who cry out for justice in our broken world.

One of the findings of the research with spiritually vital churches was that they embedded Scripture in all that they did. We surveyed the liturgies of our tradition and recognized that Scripture enlivens them all. Our church took on the task of reading the Bible in a year. For many of our parishioners, it was the first time since teenage confirmation classes or freshman survey courses that they had read the Bible for themselves. We followed that up with a year-long study of the Gospels, then a year-long study of the remaining books of the New Testament. As each of our liturgies embeds Scripture in its structure, so we sought to embed reflection on Scripture in our gatherings at church, even our business meetings. We found ways to do that which reflected the balance of Anglican theology, by which Scripture is informed by tradition, reason, and experience. We take Scripture seriously, if not literally, and we allow it to shape us, even as we respond to it with questions and in many cases a hermeneutic of suspicion.

We affirmed the truth that our praying shapes our believing, and so we encouraged all of our parishioners to develop and deepen their own spiritual practices. In particular, we sensed a call to personal responsibility for the journey. We discovered the truth that orthodoxy and orthopraxis are inseparable, that spiritual growth will come with service. We found power in telling the stories of our faith, in ways that felt authentically Anglican. As a leader, I tried to model that in

a weekly email message that was a witness to my own spiritual journey, with its fits and starts. The message contained no announcements about events at the church. It was all about my take on the spiritual journey, one way of building connection with a globe-trotting congregation with shifting patterns of attendance.

Perhaps one of the most challenging dimensions was to think about the leadership of the congregation. We were encouraged to clarify the role of the rector, with an emphasis on this ordained leader serving as Chief Spiritual Officer. This role involves drawing people into a deeper life with God and with each other, and modeling that life for the community. It involves single-mindedness, leading people into deeper relationship with God and neighbor, and a rigorous discipline about setting boundaries around what the leader will do and what the leader will not do. That can be a tough lesson for clergy, who occasionally, just occasionally, have control issues.

What's next? We are not done yet. Within our parish, we are evaluating the ministries, programs, and events to which we are committed, looking at them through this lens: Is this ministry contributing to the spiritual growth of our congregation and of its individual members? If so, how? If not, why are we doing it? The conversations in which these questions have been addressed have been fruitful in deepening our sense of community and engagement.

As this process unfolds in our congregation, we are sharing the process with other Episcopal parishes. With the gracious help of the staff at Willow Creek, and under the leadership of our own diocese, we have retooled the language in the survey and workshops to make them more accessible to Episcopalians. We are seeing consistent results among these congregations, calling us to a denominational culture shift, calling us to ask questions that have not always been part of the Episcopal culture: What is the individual's responsibility in the spiritual journey? When we come to church, do we expect anything to happen? Do we expect to leave even slightly transformed? What would it mean for our congregation if we lived into this aspiration: *If you come here you will grow?*

We are learning that our denomination has abiding strengths, especially a spirit of openness and hospitality. But we are also seeing that we need to grow and change. The results of the research indicate that it will require a considerable culture shift, which will involve the three critical components I mentioned at the outset:

1. A more transforming encounter with God, especially in our common prayer, our worship, and engagement with Scripture.
2. A deeper life of discipleship marked by personal spiritual practices that infuse all of life, not just time spent in a church building.
3. A more compelling orientation toward putting faith into action, specifically in service to those in need and work for justice and peace, with clear articulation of opportunities to do that.

Questions remain, and we find that as we expand this work, it continues to evolve. We consider it a pilot project. (Maybe all of life is a pilot project.) We are beginning a journey, and we seek companions along the way. It has been a prayerful process, one that has led us to deeper clarity about the things we love about our tradition, and why they matter to us. We believe we are being led by the Spirit. We are being taken to some surprising places, as we claim the aspiration quoted above for our community: *If you come here you will grow*. We invite other Episcopalians to join us in exploring these questions, as we seek to answer the call to do and be all that God calls us to do and be, to be transformed by the renewing of our minds.

