

Article for “Good Idea!”

Catechetical Evangelism in the Anglican Parish of the Resurrection

It is the Church’s perpetual prayer that the people of God be renewed in every generation. The renewal of the heart and mind opens them up to the unifying love that is Christ, brings the desire to love and serve others, and offers peace and hope to our families, communities, and to the world. This, of course, is the Church’s mission and *raison d’etre*. In order for the local church to be effective in its mission in every generation, its pastors and leaders need to be intentional and systematic in instructing and guiding its people and ultimately its whole region. The people of God need to be loved, need to be cared for, need to be shown compassion and mercy. And the people of God also need to be instructed in the Christian life, thoroughly and systematically.

In our Canadian context we are living in a predominantly un-churched society, where perhaps only 10 to 15% of the population is affiliated with organized religion. Moreover the conditioning influence of our secular society on that 15% is substantial. Recognizing the church’s mission mandate, and well aware of societal conditioning, in 1999 the Anglican Parish of the Resurrection (www.anglicanresurrection.com), in South River, Newfoundland, began a process of renewal, educating our Christian community and re-creating ourselves.

Here is our story.

In the fall of 1999, the parish was a four point charge with small, diminishing, and tired congregations. It was evident that we would have to become one congregation, with all the difficulties and heartache that would entail, or we would die. This is how we managed with the grace of God to accomplish recreating ourselves into one vibrant congregation. We began experimenting by pooling all the human resources from the four congregations in such a way that we would function administratively, liturgically and catechetically as a one point parish. Liturgically, we had one main liturgy on Sunday morning that moved each week throughout the parish. The music was more contemporary, and the children’s church was worked into the liturgy. Those who appreciated the contemporary worship and children’s church would “move” to a different building each Sunday morning. Administratively, all four vestries met and worked as one body responsible for the entire parish; and a single financial team was put into place to manage all parish finances.

These “experimental” changes made the running and managing of the parish more efficient, and the liturgy more life giving. But the factor that gave the re-creating of the parish deeper roots and the desire to persevere was, with the working and blessing of the Holy Spirit, the intentional, systematic, and ongoing catechetical evangelization of the congregation. If the parish was going to survive, to be renewed and to be made effective in ministry and mission, it was evident that we needed to challenge those already in the pews to learn more about their faith, and to deepen their spiritual practice. In other words, we took as our very first mission mandate to evangelize and educate those already in the pew.

Thus, at the same time that the administrative and liturgical changes were instituted, the Alpha Course was introduced to the parish. All four vestries and others from the congregations, were challenged to take part in that first Alpha course. And, thank the Lord, most vestry members responded. This first Alpha was life changing for a number of those who participated, not only by deepening their faith and experience of God, but by also building new relationships across the boundaries of the four congregations. This was a major factor in bonding together those who formerly hardly knew one another, bound now in faith and friendship.

The Alpha Course in the fall of 1999 was only the beginning of the catechetical evangelization of the congregation. A Sunday "Breakfast" Bible study and a weeknight Bible study began right after that first Alpha. In addition, we dedicated two nights each week to Christian Education. Thursday nights was set aside for Alpha, and Monday nights for other Christian education opportunities such as After Alpha programming, various other programs, and guest teachers who would come to speak on selected themes.

As the faith of the congregation was deepening and maturing, many were being prepared to make the hard decisions to become constitutionally a single congregation with one vestry, to sell our old buildings, and design and construct a new House for the Church.

During this interim between the old order with four buildings and the move to the new House for the Church, the Alpha and other various courses, including Bible studies, remained ongoing and important to the renewing and transformation of our people. In addition to these Christian education opportunities, and at this particular juncture in our process, the homily in the Sunday liturgy, strategy and visioning workshops, and special lectures became very important in educating the congregation on the liturgical principles that our new Oratory would embody, and the hospitality principles that would direct the functioning of our new Emmaus Café.

After moving into our new community home in 2006, we added to our Christian Education menu a Wednesday afternoon Spiritual Reading Group. This group meets after the Wednesday mass and lunch, and has read and discussed books including such classics as Augustine's "Confessions" and the "Autobiography of St. Teresa of Avila", and popular works such as "The Shack." During the fall of 2010, the Spiritual Reading Group will be reading and reflecting on "3 Cups of Tea", the popular story of one man's encounter with the Pakistani tribes high in the Himalayas and his response to their great kindness to him.

Another strand of catechesis we've been developing over the last four years has been outreach to the wider community: marriage, parenting, bereavement, divorce and separation courses (resources made available through Alpha Canada) and relevant support groups. We've moved into this area for a number of reasons: we want to be seen as a resource to our region that is not dependant on membership in our parish; we discerned a need in this area for our region; and there is potential that when folk

participate in the outreach programs that we run out of our café, they may decide to explore faith issues with us as a parish.

Finally, for those interested in learning the disciplines of meditation and contemplation, and early in our process of recreating our community, we introduced the practice of Lectio Divina, which has become an important aspect of our catechetical evangelization. This has developed into a regular corporate practice on Sunday evenings, and, when we moved into our new House for the Church, on Wednesday mornings also.

Our schedule for catechetical evangelization in the fall of 2010 is full: the new 7 week Alpha course; Bereavement Course; Spiritual Reading Group: “3 Cups of Tea”; Sunday morning and Tuesday evening Bible studies; Corporate meditation on Sundays and Wednesdays; Sunday and Wednesday Mass; and Parenting Course and Divorce and Separation Course on request. The winter schedule will be similar, except we will add the marriage course. From our experience in renewing and developing a mission focused parish, we have clearly discovered that the ongoing, intentional and planned catechetical evangelization of the community needs to be a regular component of congregational life.

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