

# THE LINE

Newsletter of the Convocation Of The West  
OF THE MISSIONARY DIOCESE OF ALL SAINTS



*"To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven."* [Ecclesiastes 3:1]

This year has been a season of change and challenges for us all. It has been a season for sad fair-wells and joyful reunions. And it has been a season of trying to understand what has shifted and changed, not only in our own little corner of the world, but also more importantly in our churches. For this reason, this New Year, it seems all the more important to take the time to sit in silence, pray, and try to hear that still, small voice of God.

For many of us, we are facing a crisis in our churches. Our numbers have dwindled and our programs and services have suffered. This is not true of all our churches, of course. Those in the south and southeast tend to be still growing. Those in the Northeast, the north and the west, however, tend to be shrinking, though this also is not true for all. Some have closed. Others are deciding if they should close. For the churches that are starting or continue to struggle, many are feeling the need to do something to save their churches, their traditions and their

communities that they have formed and loved. Others have resigned themselves to what will be a move to closing their churches eventually. And all of this has created a sense of panic, worry or just plain feeling morose.

We are a society of "doers". We are to have a "can do" attitude and persistently work. Thomas Edison once said that genius is 1% inspiration and 99% perspiration. But this makes it all the more problematic when we work hard, but still do not see the results for which we are struggling. For us clergy, we look at the mega-churches and wonder how and/or why. Even our own sister churches in other parts of the country that seem to be growing and prospering has caused us to ponder how and/or why. But then comes the critical part – the self-analysis. And here is where we sometimes fall down.

It is easy to look at growing churches in other geographic areas and say to ourselves that



## **The Convocation of the West Summary Statement**

*We are a missionary people living out the historical, Biblical Christian faith in the Anglican tradition.*

the reason those churches are growing is because of geography. The culture of that area is different, and this is often correct. But what about our sister churches that are growing in the same area as we are? Do we self-examine or do we decide that they are different (different worship service, different parishioners, different music, different style, etc.) and stop there. It is easy to dismiss if it means change; it is hard to be self-critical and change.

I know that all my clergy have worked hard. We have tried to worship the LORD appropriately and made Him the center of our churches, but we do not seem to grow. Our parishioners are few and tired. They seem to have no energy to reach out and evangelize, or they fear repercussions, even if these fears are not really well founded. And then there is the attitude that some parishioners have that it is the “job” of the rector to grow the church. After all, isn’t he “the professional”?

As a result, many of our clergy hope and pray for a program or a means to grow their church that will work – a magic bullet if you will. But no such program really exists. This we have found out the hard way. And that has cost some of us our enthusiasm. But we are always hopeful, trying to find, not a “magic formula” but rather something that will help us grow and not die out. To date, none of us have found a program that works everywhere for every one at all times, and there is a reason why.

But, before we look at this, I need to provide you with one cautionary tale. When I was a teacher, we had to implement programs that were thought to help children learn better. In our school district, being poor and full of second-language learners, trying to make up for an educational gap that put our children one or two (or more) years behind the better performing districts was always the goal and always the challenge. One program worked. It was based on data; it employed tried and true teaching techniques; and it used the existing curriculum. But there were two other factors as well. One was consistency throughout the school. We had to change the culture and every teacher had to buy into the program. The second was just plain hard work. However, even though it was hard, we saw results almost immediately. It worked because of all of these factors. In other schools it failed because the teachers never wanted to change.

But, the improvement started to dissipate over time. This was, in part, because our best students were moving into charter schools. As a result, toward the end of my teaching career there was a panic to improve. The district and the principals were desperate. They started trying one new program after another. Many had no real good supporting data. And, after several

ill-conceived programs, I remember talking with another teacher. She was explaining the need for one more new program, some more changes. My reply was, “How do we know this will work?” meaning where is the data. Her reply, since there was none, was, “We have got to try something!” I cautioned against this. The “something” can clearly be worse than what is being done currently. Whatever has to be done must be an improvement. It cannot produce the same result or a result that is actually worse than what is happening now. And this means ascertaining what the problem is and ascertaining how to solve it.

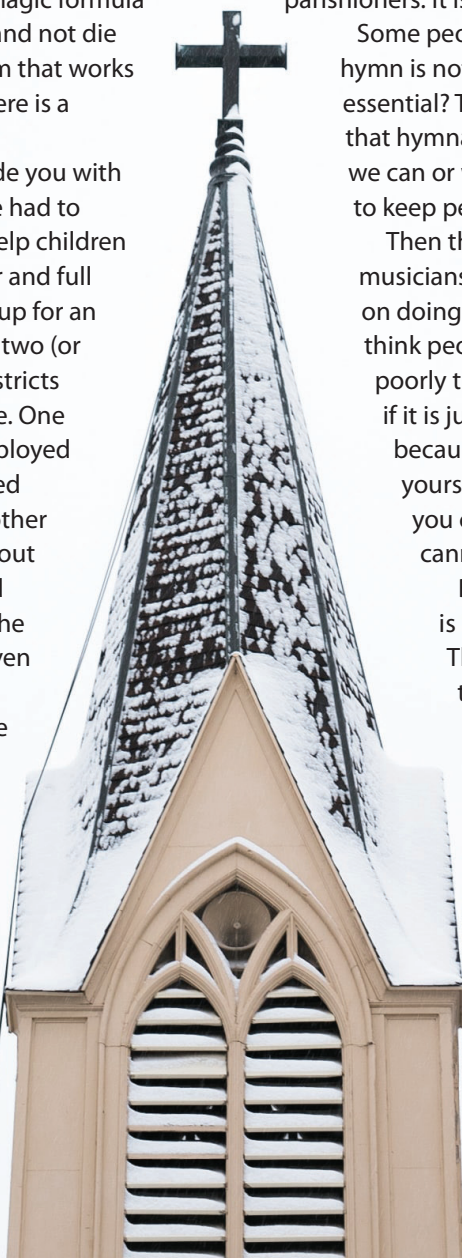
Here is where we have to be open and honest with ourselves. We have to look at ourselves and try to understand what we are doing or not doing. Then we have to decide if it is something we can or should change. Remember the mega-church? How many of us would want to give up being a sacramental church in order to attract more people? It may work, though personally I doubt it, but is it something we are willing to do? Still there are probably areas that are amenable to change. Let’s look at one example of this, which is loaded with emotional baggage for many of our parishioners. It is music.

Some people are wedded to the 1940 Hymnal – if the hymn is not in there, they do not want to do it. But is this essential? There are very beautiful hymns that are not in that hymnal. Would opening up the music be something we can or would want to do? And if we do, would it help to keep people in our churches once they are there.

Then there is the insistence by some people (clergy, musicians, or even parishioners) who stubbornly insist on doing music, even if it is done badly. What do you think people visiting will think if the music is done so poorly that it is painful to hear? Then back it off. What if it is just not done well; or what if no one is singing it because no one knows it or can sing it? Then imagine yourself as a new visitor to the church. Here is where you can start to review what you are doing, but we cannot stop here.

Being, what we used to call, Seeker Friendly is always essential, but now, this is not enough. This cannot be the end of our evaluation. We then have to move to bringing people into our churches. These may be those who have never heard the Gospel or they can be people so badly burned by religion or so indoctrinated by the ongoing anti-Christian propaganda that they are actually hostile to the Gospel. To figure this out, we must turn to Holy Scripture.

Jesus has given us three commandments during His time on earth. The first is, “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul and with all thy mind.” The second commandment is, “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.”



And the third is, "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost; teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you." With these three commandments, we have a means to evaluate our churches.

Look at the first. If we love the Lord this should be reflected in our form of worship. It should be the most beautiful we can make it. This does not mean we do what another church can do but rather what we can do given our parishioners and our abilities. Our worship should be a great act of love, encompassing our hearts, our souls, and our minds. If we achieve this, it will be a great strength for all parishioners who are attending and visitors will feel it when they attend one of our worship services. This may also help inspire our parishioners to invite others to our churches.

The other thing I would also suggest, if you have the ability to do so, is to adjust the services at your church to be in harmony with the Church Calendar. Worshipping the Lord in the beauty of holiness on the date set aside for each of the Feast Days does two things. First it honors the Lord over our earthly obligations. Second, it brings the whole parish in synchronization with the life of Jesus Christ our Savior. This serves greatly our goal to catechize all our parishioners.

Let us now turn our attention to the second commandment. God loves justice AND mercy. We are to love our neighbors, especially those who cannot take care of themselves. Here I would give great caution. There is much each church can do, but if the parishioners are unable to do something that once was a cornerstone of the church's charity, it may be best to let it go. However, that does NOT mean that we do not try to find something that the parishioners CAN do – and there are many. Reading programs in schools, outreach to the elderly, and helping out at the office of a charity are all things one can do without being too exhausting if done right. A little imagination and finding out what the parish would like to do and, more importantly, what it CAN do helps.

The final commandment that we are looking at today, however, is the most important when looking at saving our churches from dying out. We often think about the requirement of baptizing all nations, but what about the first part. What about teaching? What about the command to "Go." This is not a passive command; it is not the command to do no evil. It is active. It is

dynamic. Go and educate. This is not a command only for clergy; it is for ALL Christians. We are to teach. Teaching, to be effective, must be done gently, kindly, and often with a bit of humor. When someone knows little of Christianity, reaching out to him or her is easier. But now we have a growing segment of the population that is actually hostile to Christianity. This means more, not less tack. And it means, like the early Christians, courage.

But there is something else that I think is important. Those churches that are doing well are NOT afraid of their faith. They do not "couch their words" in the hopes of being more palatable. No, the churches that are growing seem unafraid of what others think. They proclaim their faith proudly. And we must do the same. This is not to which we Anglicans are used. Discussing where we go to church over martinis is not enough. Proclaiming the Gospel is. Being unashamed of our faith is. And stating our beliefs plainly is. People are drawn to the truth, and they are drawn to courage. That is what we need.

This article, I hope, will stimulate thought and discussion, but this is not where it ends. Our diocese

has commissioned the Anglican Council and Canon Mark Eldredge to help us in this endeavor. At the beginning of January, I will be meeting with Canon Eldredge to discuss their specific findings as to our churches in the West. After that, I hope to be able to discuss these issues in greater detail. And that will be my next article.

But, in the meantime, I ask you to hearken back to this passage from the First Book of Kings:

*"And, behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks before the LORD; but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake; and the LORD was not in the earthquake: And after the earthquake a fire; but the LORD was not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice. And it was so, when Elijah heard it, that he wrapped his face in his mantle, and went out, and stood in the entering in of the cave."* [1 Kings 19:11b-13a]

I would ask everyone, both clergy and lay, to pray and to listen for what the Lord is asking us to do in each of our individual churches. And then, we are to do it.

Amen.



Photo by Nicole Michalou

# ENLIGHTEN US, O LORD

By The Right Rev. Winfield Mott

A lot of insects are irresistibly drawn to the light, any light. In many ways, we humans are similar. We spend most of our productive time in the daylight, even though few of us moderns have jobs, such as farming, where natural light is important. Feeling handicapped in the dark, we rely on artificial light, streetlights, searchlights, flashlights, headlights and such to dispel darkness around us. You know when someone refers to “the dark side” of a person, or “the dark state,” or “dark deeds,” that nothing good is meant. Night is regarded often as a time when evil and criminal acts abound “under cover of darkness.”

Currently, nature is in its darkest phase. People who live in far northern places, with little or no daylight in midwinter, generally suffer from high rates of depression and suicide as a result. It is not surprising that cultures around the world have developed festivals of light to counter the natural phenomenon.

John the Evangelist begins his Gospel with the thought: “In him was life and the life was the Light of the world” (John 1:4-9), as he introduces Jesus. When the early Church established festivals to celebrate the year, the earliest except for the Pascal cycle was Epiphany, fixed on January 6. Epiphany in Greek means to “shine a light upon” something. A bit later, the Church placed Christmas, the observance of the Nativity of Christ, even more directly at the peak of darkness on December 25. Since no one knew, or much cared, when the actual birthday was, the Church deliberately chose the very darkest time in the northern hemisphere.

Some modern scholars, regarding themselves as quite sophisticated, see in this that the pagan solstice dominated the whole holiday, with Christians being duped into thinking it their own holiday when it was really nothing more than the continuation of the pagan festival of light. That is not what happened. In modern times, the Church tends to hide from confronting the world, preferring to retreat into its own bubble where it will not be challenged. But earlier Christians, confident in the victorious power of their Lord, placed the celebration smack on top of the big pagan event, “baptizing” it. The general theme of light is common to both celebrations, the Nativity festival could be placed anywhere but fit perfectly at the darkest time, with its stress on Jesus as the light of the world. As a result, the populace made an easy transition to celebrating Christmas.

Thus, the keynote collect prayer for Advent, beginning on the first Sunday and prayed throughout the season, begins “Almighty God, give us grace that we may cast away the works of darkness and put upon us armor of light.” The works of darkness are those thoughts, words and deeds not pleasing to God, not loving God or neighbor, in other words, sin. A moment of pondering this definition will lead to the realization that the works of darkness absorb a large share of life for each of us. The

collect makes no pretense of putting the blame for these works on “those sinners.” It asks for help that “we may” cast these works away.

There is certainly a plethora of works of darkness right now. War and serious oppression rage in Ukraine, Palestine, Syria, Congo, Mali, Nicaragua and elsewhere. Our own southern border is a place of great state-caused suffering. The greed of large corporations causes a wide disparity of resources, from multi-billionaires to people who are starving and/or homeless. And we fail badly to be responsible stewards of God’s earth. Just to mention a few of the obvious works of darkness.

Nevertheless, Advent, which begins the cycle of the Incarnation season, starts with you and I, not with the problems “out there.” Jesus asks us to love our neighbor as ourselves, which means we cannot successfully love our neighbor until we know how to love ourselves. Likewise, we cannot successfully condemn the works of darkness elsewhere until we wrestle down the darkness in ourselves. The Advent journey is an internal one. Epiphany, on the other hand, is an external journey, in which we make the “light shine upon” the darkness and showing Christ, the Light of the world and the answer to our darkness. In between is the explosion of Christmas, the cosmic entrance of the Light. Four smaller holidays within the festival cycle illustrate the stages of the process.

1) Holy Innocents, 28 Dec., is a remembrance of total evil and darkness, the mass slaughter of infants and small children motivated by a dictator’s fear of losing power and control.

2) St. Stephen’s Day, 26 Dec, commemorates the killing of the first martyr by people who thought they were helping God by eliminating a heretic, but in fact were committing an act of great darkness against a wonderful servant of God.

3) St. Thomas Day, Dec. 21, which tells the story of a disciple who had enormous doubt and skepticism which stimulated a search for the light of solid truth, and with Jesus’ help, found unshakable faith in Our Lord. It shows that we need not fear doubt, rather doubt can be the motivation to search for the light.

4) St. John the Evangelist Day, Dec. 27, honoring the writer of the Gospel of John, which begins by explaining that Jesus is the Light of the world come into the world on that first Christmas.

Put together, the entire cycle is an opportunity to review your life, take the necessary “time for amendment of life,” (as the eloquent Prayerbook language puts it), celebrate the festive celebration of Christ’s birth into the world as the beacon of true light, and focus in Epiphany on the reflection of that Light through your sharing of God’s grace shining on those around you.