

DEVELOPING A CULTURE OF CREATIVITY IN CONGREGATIONS

By Rev. Kathy Barlow Westmoreland

*“For everyone born, a place at the table...a safe place for growing...” **

Fundamental to the life of the church is helping disciples of all ages find their place at the table, a place where they can grow in their faith and find new expressions of God’s Spirit which dwells within them. It is part of the sacramental covenant the church makes at baptism. Yet, often we do not devote as much energy to nurturing this growth among older disciples. The result being the mindset that they have little left to contribute to the life of faith or that they have “done their bit” for the church and it is time for others to take on those roles. The church loses all the potential gifts of those whose life experience and maturity of spirit could enrich and strengthen our witness. The disciples themselves lose opportunities to deepen their relationship to God in Jesus Christ, and find ways to share their faith. Thus it is essential that the church be looking for new and innovative ways to tap into the gifts of God found in every age.

Older disciples are often already creative and resourceful people. As they live through the losses that aging brings - strength, mobility, health, relationships, lifestyle - they are constantly finding new ways to live well within those limitations and losses. To do that requires certain qualities, such as imagination, willingness to risk and fail, curiosity and playfulness. The result is the ability to adapt to a variety of circumstances and find new life beyond loss and limitations.

In addition to this creativity already at work in their lives, all people have a need for some form of self-expression. It can be discussing the events of the day, or writing a letter to a friend (hopefully never a fully extinct art!), or gardening, or the arts. Self-expression is one way we make a contribution to the created order and we work for the common good. It is done in our way, a way that is meaningful and purposeful to us.

The church can utilize these in nurturing spiritual growth as well. We are resurrection people, those who seek to be renewed and refired for God’s holy purposes. This means we are to be open to try new things, experiment with new expressions of our faith and who we are as God’s people. The church should be a safe place for that to happen, fertile ground for spiritual growth.

The church should be the place where people turn when wanting new experiences of life and faith, when they seek to express and create the messages of our faith. We are to be the encouragers of those who are uncertain, affirming their efforts and applauding their growth.

What might this look like in a congregation? The only limits here are our imaginations! But here are just a few sparks for your dreaming:

- Worship: prayer, hymn, and liturgy writing; drama groups for scripture presentation; liturgical art expressions in a variety of media.
- Education: spiritual journaling; interfaith/cross cultural cooking classes;

intergenerational art or craft groups; mentoring someone in a creative outlet; experiencing scripture through the arts - music, painting, drama.

- Mission: finding creative ways to reach out to underserved neighbors in the community; groups that cook or knit for the homeless or cancer patients; music with and for other unnoticed groups in the area; starting choral groups with other congregations who are demographically different from yours.

How this looks in each faith community depends on the context, gifts and people involved. How the Holy Spirit leads in one place will be totally different than in another. The key is to be looking for those signs, be willing to risk and fail and try again, be open to something new, and to go wherever the Spirit leads. It is about the establishing a culture of imagination and creativity, where folks are encouraged to try things, to experiment, to venture out. In many ways this is recapturing the spirit of the New Testament church who used gifts they had no idea they had, went places they had never been, and always experiencing God in new and growth producing ways.

Imagine how rich the Body of Christ would be if all were nurturing and using their gifts for the common good of the body?

...and God will delight when we are creators of justice and joy, compassion and peace...*

* from *For Everyone Born*, a hymn in *Glory to God*, #769, text by Shirley Erena Murray.

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