Finding Fall’s New Rhythms

For most of us, the fall season ushers in a new year whether we have children in school or not. Activities that have slowed over the summer ramp back up, and families and individuals set new rhythms to match busier schedules and added responsibilities.

As first the cacophony of events vying for our time drowns out the mellow, relaxing cadence of the summer months. This issue of Episcopal Teacher reflects the busy-ness and jumble of the beginning of a “new” year.

From Long Island, we hear about a new “interdenominational spiritual formation ministry that brings their congregations together to share their Christian journey, experience God’s presence, build community and learn and live Christ’s ways.” We also hear about their summer “Spiritual Arts Camp” for children that opens hearts and minds to God’s love and beauty through artistic exploration.

Another writer challenges us to embrace the absurd in comics and superheroes as an “effective way to engage young people in conversations about their own potential for heroism.” Using cartoon characters, she adds, “also makes discipleship relevant and authentic.” Members of the St. John’s Church youth group in Barrington, RI, explored questions like, “What does it mean to be a disciple/sidekick?”

A priest from North Carolina provides sound tips for planning retreats, while Cindy Coe, last year’s guest editor for Episcopal Teacher shares her love of having plants in classrooms. She includes practical suggestions about the kind of plants that endure erratic watering schedules and other tips for keeping them alive.

Vicki Garvey from the Diocese of Chicago reviews a new curriculum for adults called Covenant Bible Study, while a young priest in urban Washington, DC, gives us pointers about using this kind of resource with millennials.

When we were talking to writers and rounding up articles for this issue, we realized that the content was a bit like a collage, mirroring the many different kinds of church programs that exist. We hope you’ll read and mentally bookmark the articles and reviews that might fit the rhythms of your parish.

Happy fall!

Dorothy Linthicum

Lisa Kimball and Dorothy Linthicum, editors
Kate Siberine, graphic designer

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November 6-9, 2014
Seeking the Sacred Thread ~ Celebrating the Heart of Life
Lutheridge Conference Center
Arden, NC
http://www.lutheridgeconference.com/

November 11-12, 2014
La Crosse, WI

November 13-14
Eau Claire, WI

Do What Matters!
Vibrant Faith @ Home
For more dates and places visit:
http://www.vibrantfaithathome.org/

December 6, 2014
Godly Play Commuter Core Training
Module III (Parables)
Saint Paul’s Episcopal Church
Philadelphia, PA

January 28-30, 2015
Forma Conference
Magnolia Hotel
Houston, TX
http://episcoforma.org/forma-annual-conference/

April 20-23, 2015
Faith Forward 2015
St James Cathedral and Commons
Chicago, IL
http://faithforward.org/
Churches Share Christian Journey to Experience God’s Presence

By Leslie Mazzotta

On the north shore of Long Island in Manhasset, NY, two neighboring churches are working together in a new, path-breaking ecumenical way. For 200 years, Christ Episcopal Church and Community Reformed Church (RCA) shared land and a historic cemetery, but ministered independently of one another.

Since 2012, these two churches have created an interdenominational spiritual formation ministry that brings their congregations together to share their Christian journey, experience God’s presence, build community and learn and live Christ’s ways.

As their director, I am paid jointly by both churches to develop curriculum, lead educational programs, organize service projects and plan fellowship opportunities for all ages. Our partnership started with our children and tweens, who share a weekly Gospel-based Sunday School, as well as many special events, including Spring Planting Sunday, a winter pajama party, and World Children’s Day (when all of the children and youth lead us in a summer worship celebration).

Our commitment continues with the youth group, which is open to neighboring churches and the community at large. To date, youth from six other churches—including Congregational, Lutheran and Catholic—participate in the group, and we are in the process of creating a community youth council so our young people can help shape the most meaningful opportunities for their peers.

Together, the group plans multiple spiritual, social and service programs, including a New Year’s retreat; a Lenten supper and service night; a high ropes adventure day; a car wash fundraiser; a Christmas trip to New York City; and an annual summer mission trip.

Finally, we offer ecumenical adult programming, which includes a Sunday Bible study, a New Year’s Retreat Day and a Lenten supper series. A joint women’s ministry, which includes women from five other local churches, works together to provide opportunities that inspire and celebrate women’s lives.

Our ecumenical partnership is powerful in its ability to unite the community, while helping to bring faith into every area of our lives. We recognize that all people, no matter what their denominational background or where they are on their spiritual journey, desire a place where they can fully and safely explore their faith. Our Christian diversity creates exciting opportunities to share in meaningful ways, while continuing to honor our denominational traditions through individual worship services on Sunday mornings.

Together, we dream big and create vibrant programming that invites faithful solutions to real-life challenges that affect society today. Last spring, we led a retreat day for women and teenage girls that focused on body image, beauty and self-esteem (this will be an ongoing program); we offered a day-long Youth Leadership Lab with a trip to the United Nations to examine problems in the world and how to address them. (This year’s Leadership Lab in February focused on poverty.)

Finally, we are creating a family ministry program to discuss the complex issue of bullying. This will include a resource guide and a series of seminars, beginning in January. These events would not be possible if we didn’t come together as a larger faith community in support and participation.

In the past two years, Christ Episcopal Church and Community Reformed Church have found endless benefits in working together. As two small churches, they are able to offer more by sharing expenses, space and resources. The community is richer and wiser as the congregations explore new ideas and challenge one another in our faith.

Both churches have grown in membership. Most importantly, the joint-church campus has become a central hub for neighborhood residents, who join us to participate in our unique offerings while enjoying an open and welcoming community. This is a new model for ministry in the 21st century that most definitely feels like God’s work here on earth.

If you want more information on our spiritual formation ministry or you have your own stories to share, please contact me at lesleymazzotta@gmail.com or 917-623-4554. I would love to hear from you!

Lesley Mazzotta is Director of Spiritual Formation, Christ Episcopal Church/Community Reformed Church, Manhasset, NY.
Bible Study Can Be a Wild Ride

By Becky Zartman

In the last few years, reading the Bible has become trendy again. Popular and well-packaged curricula, like Covenant or The Story, can help your church move through the entire Bible in the span of one year. Aside from curricula, there are many books available to pursue this endeavor solo or in a group, most notably Brian McLaren’s We Make the Road By Walking (Iceto Books, 2014). Bible challenges are popping up all over the country in parishes and dioceses to read the whole Bible during the summer, in six months, or a year. All in all, getting Christians to read the Bible can only be a good thing—biblical literacy is shockingly low, even among regular churchgoing, mainstream Protestants. The truth is, unless one is firmly embedded in a supportive, consistent, and engaged small group, actually getting through the entirety of the Bible is really difficult. And too often, even if one manages to actually get through the Bible without a support group, engaging the often troubling or confusing content can be problematic at best.

Not to mention getting lost in the wilderness—after the high of reading the drama in Genesis and the great escape out of slavery in Exodus, many people quit when they get to Numbers, because, well, it’s boring. And unlike the Israelites who were stuck wandering around for forty years, the reader has the prerogative to shut the book and get on with life, never knowing that it’s perfectly okay to skip a chapter (or a book) and keep on going.

Most people and groups who try to read the Bible take the advice the King gave to the White Rabbit in “Alice in Wonderland” “Begin at the beginning, and go on till you come to the end; then stop.” The trouble is, the Bible isn’t a normal book. Not only is it not a normal book in structure, or in the vast time span between the composition of its different pieces, but also the Bible is Scripture. Not a textbook, not just history, not just fiction, not quite non-fiction, not just law or poetry or pithy sayings, not just primordial myths or piercing insights, not just life-changing parables and not just visions of the way the world can be if we let God change it, but the Bible is more than all of those pieces combined. And we’re just going to hand over this beautiful, dangerous and complicated mess to a chartered reading plan, some half-hearted discussion questions and a quick prayer? I think not.

Like a group of travelers in the wilderness, the group that travels through Scripture is in for a wild ride, and they need to be prepared with supplies and a map. There are some in your parish who are experienced wilderness guides, nurtured through years of study and life experience who can lead others.

These can read the entire Bible in a year, who know how to form cohesive groups of reflection and support, and who can shepherd a group into the promised land of biblical literacy and theological reflection. These experienced guides would flourish with a curriculum like Covenant, which teaches the Bible thematically, with appropriate background and helpful scholars via engaging video content.

But what if you don’t have guides, or parishioners who are convinced that a 32-week Bible series is good use of their limited time? My parish’s Bible study has matured through years of study and life experience who can shepherd a group into the promised land of biblical literacy and theological reflection. The scholars discussing each topic change according to their expertise, but the Bible is more than all of those pieces combined.

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Emphasizing God the Creator in Christian Formation Classes

By Cynthia Coe

Look at any Sunday School room, and you will likely see symbols of the Christian faith, such as crosses, stories of Jesus’ teachings in various formats, maybe even pictures of eucharistic bread and baptismal water. But a huge part of our faith – the belief in God as Creator – is often missing from our Christian formation programs.

Creation is a continuing process, not just something that happened way back in the first few chapters of Genesis. All of life is in a continuous state of transformation. As humans we are a part of our world and interact with it constantly.

We are not just stewards of our environment; we are players in the environment. Nature affects us, and we affect nature. As Christians, we believe that God created all of nature and the marvelous processes of life around us.

But are we teaching the concept of God as Creator in our Christian formation programs? Where do children and youth see visible signs and symbols of God the Creator? How do we incorporate stewardship of our environment in our teachings?

An easy first step towards bringing the concept of God as Creator to people is updating the furnishings in Sunday School rooms. Are these rooms full of objects and materials created solely by people? Do we illustrate our respect for God’s creations by including them in our spaces?

As a Christian educator, one of my favorite tasks in preparing for weekly lessons was the early Sunday morning process of putting out flowers and water for young children to use in their Catechism of the Good Shepherd atrium. The time spent in quiet, fairly mindless labor helped me to spiritually prepare myself to minister to the children.

Before we started any of the lessons, children would arrange flowers in small vases and put them on the prayer table. Others would water and prune plants that lived in pots around the room. Time with plants calmed the children, preparing them to listen attentively to lessons themselves.

Adding plants and flowers to a Sunday School room is an easy way to introduce to children a sense of awe and wonder in God’s creation. Even the smallest flower is an object of beauty more delicate and well-designed than anything we could create ourselves.

Plants not only supply life-giving oxygen, but also make us more in tune with the natural world. If we bring plants and flowers into our Sunday School rooms – a relatively inexpensive undertaking – we can set an example of care and appreciation of the natural world for our children. We can also illustrate the continuing work of God in creation in our world, bringing to life the scripture and theology of Genesis.

Cynthia Coe is Environmental Stewardship Fellow, The Episcopal Church, Richmond, VA. The hand-crafted furniture gives children a new way to create their own worship experience.

Tips for using flowers and plants in Sunday School classrooms:

• Use potted plants and flowers that don’t need a lot of water during the week. Orchids, readily available in many grocery store floral departments, need only a few tablespoons of water each week, and provide spectacular, long-lasting blooms. Boston ferns and African violets are also readily available, fairly easy to maintain, and inexpensive.

• Ask parish families to share cut flowers from yards and gardens to cut down costs. This invites participation in your program from parishioners who may not have young children.

• If using cut flowers, use scissors to trim off the ends of stems and any leaves below the water line of your vase. Fill your vase with fresh water. Consider sending flowers home with children or give to others who might appreciate them after your time together.

• To keep potted plants watered during the week, use a pot with a water reservoir in the bottom. You might also try a watering bulb to keep plants watered. Make sure all pots for plants provide drainage for root systems.

• Don’t use “floral foam,” many of these products contain highly toxic chemicals.

• If your plants die from lack of water, it’s a teachable lesson in the importance of clean water for living things. If we don’t take care of our environment, we lose it.

Resource Recommendations

For more information about environmental education in your Christian Formation program, go to www.spiritualearthed.org, Cynthia Coe’s +EarthEd website of ideas and recommended resources.

CHILDREN’S MINISTRY

Joseph Cornell, Sharing Nature with Children (Dover Publications, 1996). This handbook of activities introduces awareness of nature to children’s groups. Although it is a secular book, many of the activities might be used with camp or Christian formation groups in preparation for writing liturgies or prayers by children or youth. This book has been used extensively by both Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts.

Richard Louis, Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder (Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2008). This is a must-read for those who care about children. In recent years children have become out of touch with nature, and suffer from “nature-deficit disorder” according to Louis. This book will challenge you to find ways to help children experience nature more and why it is essential to their development and well-being.

THEOLOGICAL SUPPORT FOR ENVIRONMENTALISM

Sallie McFague, Super: Natural Christian How We Should Love Nature (Fortress Press, 2009). This beautifully written book is for those wanting to take a “deep dive” into the theology of including nature as part of a church’s mission and ministry.

Fred Bahnsen and Normarn Wierenga, Making Peace with the Land: God’s Call to Reconcile with Creation, forward by Bill McKibben (InterVarsity Press, 2012). This highly readable book would be an excellent resource for church book groups, challenging readers to think about what they eat, what they consume, and how these practices use or misuse the land.
Reconnect, Renew, Refresh: Retreat!

By Ginny Bain Inman

Retreats, as time and space set apart from the everyday demands of life, offer the possibility of renewing ourselves and our relationships with God and others. Throughout the Gospels, we find Jesus retreating for prayer in the midst of his preaching, teaching and healing. Retreats can be especially effective for a parish or specific group within a congregation. All you need is advanced planning, a clear understanding of your target audience, and a little creativity. Here are steps to take in planning a successful retreat for a parish or specific group within a congregation.

PURPOSE AND AUDIENCE

What is the purpose of your retreat? Retreats can be designed to build community, to accomplish a task, to provide time for study and reflection, or to serve as sanctuary. A retreat gives participants a time and space to be fully present, to do work that is hard to accomplish, or to partake in reflection that eludes us in the regular rhythm of our lives.

Who is your target audience? You may offer a retreat for people representing one age group, an intergenerational age range, or a specific area of interest or topic. A youth group retreat has a distinctly different vibe than a retreat for young mothers seeking a sense of community and respite, whereas a vesture may need a weekend to complete its annual planning. We are a “save the date” society. Communicate the date well in advance.

TIME AND PLACE

Creating a time and space apart requires planning. Consider how much time your audience can comfortably commit. A Saturday retreat may work for young mothers seeking a sense of community and respite, whereas a vesture may need a weekend to complete its annual planning. We are a “save the date” society. Communicate the date well in advance.

Conceiving in a different environment offers an immediate sense of separation from daily life. Many camps and conference centers specialize in retreats. If your budget allows, these spaces provide food, lodging and a variety of gathering spaces. Consider the specific needs of your group. Is mobility or transportation an issue? Does the space offer activities? Most groups benefit from the opportunity to be outdoors.

If you don’t have the funds or ability to go off-site for a retreat, consider transforming the space you will use. Use candles and music, fabric and flowers to make a familiar space special. Set up prayer stations or an indoor labyrinth.

SCHEDULE

Effective retreats intentionally provide safe space where participants experience both comfort and challenge. Hospitality begins with a warm welcome. When people arrive, a greeter should welcome them and be ready to answer questions, provide name tags, and paper and handouts if appropriate. The first session sets the tone for the retreat. Contract with the group about the use of electronic devices—allow the group to set its own boundaries. Icebreakers work best when they reflect both the audience and the larger theme.

Create a schedule that allows for time together and time apart. While large groups are good for imparting information, small groups work well for discussion or brainstorming. Make time for movement for transitions in activities or meals. Walking from one space to another often changes the pace.

Time apart may invite reflection, questioning, and quiet. Offer introductions to spiritual practices that may be unfamiliar, such as lectio divina. Include time for worship and praise. The most memorable part of many retreats is play.

SUPPORT

Using a planning team promotes creativity and builds support for a retreat in the parish. Begin the retreat planning process with prayer. Ask a core group to pray for the retreat and its participants before, during, and after the event.

Encourage practical support in the form of preparing and providing food. The youth could cook dinner for a seniors retreat, or a church committee could provide lunch for a women’s day retreat.

Finally, good retreats require both advanced preparation and flexibility. After establishing a framework for participants to reconnect, refresh and renew, get out of the way! God is at work.

The Rev. Ginny Bain Inman is Associate Rector at Holy Trinity Church, Greensboro, NC.

By Heather Annis

Recently came across a comic book entitled, “Legions of Ludicrous Heroes.” It features such characters as Antisocial Man and Captain Optimist, with superpowers like being able to put their victims feet to sleep.

When you stop and think about it, most mainstream superheroes are no less ludicrous: X-ray vision? Bending steel? Capes and tights? Comic heroes are the very picture of absurdity.

Kids, as it turns out, love the absurd. If you have any doubt at all about the veracity of this statement, consider for a moment the popularity of cartoon characters such as Mighty Mouse or the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. Comics cater to our fascination with the outrageous—from masked superheroes and their bumbling sidekicks to the adventures in which they become entangled.

Like the creators of these characters, God has a definite knack for choosing unlikely candidates for heroism.
Comics can be an effective way to engage young people in conversations about their own potential for heroism. Using the language of cartoon characters also makes discipleship relevant and authentic.

What are the qualities of superheroes? How do those qualities overlap with the qualities of Jesus? What does it mean to be a disciple/sidekick? How can you develop your own God-given superpowers to benefit others?

Members of the St. John’s Church youth group in Barrington, RI, spent last year exploring these same questions and creating their own comic book in response. The result is a ludicrous story featuring a superhero named Mr. Peace.

By day, Mr. Peace operates a factory that manufactures fake mustaches. The factory employs a cadre of smiling pigs…and one goat. Mr. Peace drives a VW bus, captains a starship, and mustaches. He calls on us to do his work in the world. He calls us to peace and to healing and to embrace our inherent hero qualities. This obvious absurdity parallels the outrageous idea that God calls on us to do his work in the world.

By Leslie Mazzotta

When the children are in activities from 8:30 a.m. to noon each day, they are immersed in the chosen spiritual theme, using unique storytelling formats and multi-sensory materials. Our spiritual theme is reinforced with an engaging lesson and group discussion.

For the final two sessions, we welcome art professionals, theater artists and special guests, who bring their gifts and life experience to the camp to further explore the spiritual theme in unique and creative ways.

The first session includes a theater arts experience: storytelling, improvisational drama, puppetry, movement, and music, to name a few. The last session of the day is dedicated to making art: Painting, sculpture, arts and crafts, collage, mixed media and drawing are all part of the program. No limits are placed on the children’s artistic expression.

This past summer, the camp focused on the spiritual theme, God’s Great World, as described in Nehemiah 9:6. You made the heavens, even the highest heavens, and all their starry host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them. You give life to everything, and the multitudes of heaven worship you.

We explored the world as a creative celebration, deepening our appreciation and connection to all of the beauty and wonder: earth, wind, water, flowers, trees, animals, and most importantly, each other!

We made art with an amazing variety of materials, from arts and crafts, drawing, painting and collage supplies; items from nature; recycled materials; everyday objects and even trash. Everything was included as we explored how to care for and live more fully in this remarkable world, knowing that we are God's greatest creation!

Lesley Mazzotta is Director of Spiritual Formation, Christ Episcopal Church/Community Reformed Church, Manhasset, NY.
Journey into Baptism
Helen Barron
Candle Press, 2014
www.candlepress.com

If you are looking for a book to explore baptism with individuals or groups, check out Journey into Baptism by Helen Barron (Candle Press, 2014). This book, which is also available digitally, would be helpful for parents and godparents, confirmands, and those seeking baptism for themselves.

The format also makes it useful for group study for those who are new to the Episcopal Church. At the bottom of each page are questions for further reflection. In a section about belief, for example, the question is: “What are some things that I know I believe?”

This gentle book, with lovely illustrations by Victoria Bergesen, defines the terminology and the theology about baptism, without being pedantic or overbearing. After a brief introduction about what baptism is and isn’t, the book follows the order of the baptismal service from the Book of Common Prayer, pages 299-307.

After purchasing the book, you can also buy the entire book, in five units, as a pdf for $10. The master can be sent to as many recipients as you choose. You can, for example, send the book to out-of-town godparents to read before they come to meet with you.

This book grew out of a supply priest’s request for “something” that would help him work with a candidate for baptism. It would be a good tool for clergy and lay leaders to keep on their shelves.

-Dorothy Linthicum

The Season of the Nativity:
Confessions and Practices of an Advent, Christmas & Epiphany Extremist
Sybil MacBeth
Paraclete Press, November 2014
Paracletepress.com

Sybil MacBeth’s favorite liturgical season of the year is Advent. In this book of reflections about the “season of the nativity,” she tells us why ignoring the booked seasons of Advent and Epiphany takes away from our enjoyment and understanding of this pivotal time of year.

This book is not just for programmers looking for the perfect activity or event, although she includes ideas ranging from creating your own Advent calendar to hanging stars around the house for Epiphany:

While many will flip past the reflections in the first part of the book to the following “how-to” sections, to me MacBeth’s primary audience is people who are looking for a more serious, contemplative approach to Advent, Christmas and Epiphany.

She confesses that her joy in this time of year gives her permission to be religious: “Religious means having an outward way to make visible inner feelings like gratitude, awe and sorrow... Grateful, awestruck, and sorry need a framework for their expression.” Practices and rituals are important to me because they give form to my devotion and evolving belief and provide a structure for worship and study.

The author of Praying in Color books, MacBeth brings the same sense of whimsy to the reflections and activities in this book. At the same time, she shows how the nativity seasons set the stage for the rest of the year, starting the journey through scripture by focusing on the preparation and birth of Jesus.

In MacBeth’s list of reasons to read this book, she moves from spirituality— “You have little time for reflection and meditations but want to do something to prepare spiritually for Christmas”—to activities— “You want some simple, quick Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany activities.”

I recommend this book for those looking for a new way to approach this time of year, who “would like to understand what the Christian/Christmas story might add to your spiritual life.”

-Dorothy Linthicum

Jesus Era Episcopal
Chris Yaw
Leader Resources, 2014
http://leaderresources.org/jesus-era-episcopal

Me creé en Nueva Inglaterra, con sus raíces católicas, protestantes y su emergiendo presencia evangélica, y me recuerdo siempre teniendo que tratar de explicar que significa ser episcopal a mis amigos porque nunca habían oído de la Iglesia Episcopal. Tengo que admitir que continuamente tengo dificultad detallando lo que significa ser episcopal, aún siendo adulto, porque a veces es más simple comparar la Iglesia Episcopal a otras denominaciones.

Lo más interesante e significante de todo es que este libro ha sido traducido al español. Eso es una victoria importante para la Iglesia Episcopal. Falta de recursos siempre ha sido uno de los grandes obstáculos que a menudo limita los ministerios disponibles a los feligreses de congregaciones latinas. El poder compartir este libro con los miembros de mi parroquia ha creado entusiasmo para aprender más sobre la historia de la Iglesia Episcopal y el significado de ser episcopal hoy en día. Ha sido útil para ayudar descubrir el origen de donde ciertas prácticas provienen y abunda una gran variedad de historias fáciles de entender y accesibles desde un punto de vista formativo.

Pienso que este libro es un recurso ideal para cualquier congregación latina.

La guía de estudio de 15 sesiones del libro Jesús Era Episcopal permite que los grupos vayan de capítulo a capítulo usando programas sencillos de 45-60 minutos. Cada sesión puede ser un programa independiente sobre un solo tema o se puede combinar con otras sesiones para crear foros para adultos, grupos de discusión o clases de confirmación o para los recién llegados. Está disponible para bajarse de la internet por $5.95.

José Reyes, estudiante en Virginia seminario teológico.
SAVE THE DATE!

e-Formation
June 1-3, 2015

Help shape the church’s conversation about confirmation
Look for a survey in your congregation’s inbox!