

Reflections on Faith Practices

From Salmon Nation Participants

Reflecting on our conversation with sociologist Mark Shibley, Melinda Wagner writes about the role of faith practices (rituals) in her congregation:

I appreciated the sociological definition of religion: “A means for people to make life meaningful. Its purpose is to connect people with God and with one another (to make meaning and make community). Sociologically speaking, religion is about the cultural systems, beliefs, and ritual practices organized around what people find to be sacred.”

It leads me to ask, how do we do these things, as Lutherans? How do we connect people with God? With one another? What would change if a pastor focused on these two essential elements and let some other things go?

The definition also causes me to reconsider the value of rituals in congregational life. In our congregation, rituals include the Sunday gathering of worship, sacraments, coffee hour with Happy Birthday in Swedish... There are also rituals of study groups, women’s circle, Council meetings, serving together at Loaves & Fishes, etc. There are life passage rituals of baptism, Sunday School, acolyting, confirmation, marriage, funeral... These rituals are probably more powerful and necessary for my people than I realize. Something that could be seen as simple or even boring routine could also be seen as a ritual that makes meaning.

— from Melinda Wagner, “Reflections on our time with Mark Shibley,” Feb. 12, 2007

Reflecting on our conversation with religious sociologist Diana Butler Bass, Aaron Couch writes about the need in our region to be intentional about faith practices:

One thing that Diana Butler Bass said that jumped out at me (because it is so consistent with everything I’ve experienced) was describing Trinity Episcopal Church as an “intentional community of Christian practice.” My experience with First Immanuel Lutheran Church in Portland (which is different from my experience elsewhere in the country) has been that the factors that could be *assumed* to support Christian identity and church participation in other places, and here in the past (belonging to a Swedish community, for which Lutheran identity was part of the mix; belonging to a network of extended family relationships, for which church membership was expected; supporting and attending a congregation out of a sense of duty, or what is right) are no longer significant at this time in the Pacific Northwest. What does matter is Christian faith that is upfront about itself, that doesn’t apologize or try to be something other than it is; specifically, a Christian faith that is joyfully owned and believed. In this setting, the change-over is underway, as we shift from being a community that could make assumptions about the bonds of family and faith identity that brought people to church, to become a community made up of many individuals with little or no previous experience of Christian faith, who are finding something of great value. In the church’s worship and fellowship, they experience joyful belonging to the people of God. In the church’s proclamation, they receive the gift of God’s Word that offers hope and a sense of purpose. In the church’s serving, they discover an experience

that adds depth and meaning and richness to their lives. All of it, though, needs to be *intentional*. I found Diana's writing to be helpful in directing my vision toward a variety of aspects of congregational life that can be a source of faith-shaping vitality.

— from Aaron Couch, "What I learned from Diana Butler Bass"

Reflecting our conversation with religion professor Sam Torvend, Martha Maier writes about some faith practices that might be particularly meaningful to those in the Northwest:

Increasing numbers of people are drawn to apophatic* prayer forms such as Centering Prayer where the focus is on "letting go and letting God," instead of word-laden approaches. The increasing use of the labyrinth for prayer reflects this focus as well – one is often counseled to "let go of the details of one's life" while walking to the center of the path.

I can see where an apophatic faith may bode well for the environment. If our focus was on "letting go," this might extend to our material life and accumulation of possessions. If our faith is more about letting go of our conceptions of God and less on accumulating all the answers, maybe we will see the benefit as well of letting go of our need to accumulate so much stuff. This could help reduce our carbon footprint, which is of concern to us green types in the Northwest.

Sam Torvend encouraged us to look to our history to see what gems are present for our future. I'm sure there is much apophatic theology which can be claimed from our Lutheran and Christian past – the theology of the cross is one example. Another example is claiming/reclaiming icons which could help us understand and reverence more of the deep symbols we need for a healthy and compassionate society. More focus on the mystical/apophatic could re-enchant our worldview.

**Apophatic*: of or relating to the belief that God can be known to humans only in terms of what God is not

— from Martha Maier, *Samuel Torvend Reflections*, January 2008

In his reflections on our conversation with Shibley, John Rosenberg writes about the limitations of our current ways of practicing the faith:

I don't believe that our current practice of church life speaks very meaningfully to most Pacific Northwestern "non-affiliates" especially younger ones in the 18-30 year-old range – people like our neighbors and our kids. [Question from my 24 year-old daughter who is passionate about justice: "Dad, why is the ELCA STILL arguing about welcoming gay and lesbian people?"] We seem to be the prisoners of an institutional structure that is designed to preserve and conserve tradition and stability in an era that calls for flexibility and imagination. Something will have to give and I think it will be our structures. "Membership" in a corporately structured institution and "discipleship" in a community of pilgrims and followers of Jesus are not the same things, as our children are among the first to tell us. Something will need to give if we are to adapt to this brave new world and I sincerely believe (and hope) that it will be our structures. I don't know what the shape of church-life will be but the "present form" is surely dying before our eyes and I'm not sure it's good stewardship for our best and most highly trained leaders to continue trying to prop it up.

— from John Rosenberg, "Reflections on our Conversation with Mark Shibley," May 5, 2007