

An Organic Approach to Adult Formation

-The Rev. Kelly Moughty

Sometimes we find ourselves frustrated when we offer adult formation opportunities to our congregation...and then nobody comes! Maybe it's just a scheduling issue, or maybe it's that we aren't offering classes on what folks want to learn. How do we find out? We can ask!

When I served at Grace Church in Trumbull, CT, we knew that the congregation was hungry for more opportunities to learn about their faith tradition, but we weren't entirely sure what topics they'd like to discuss. We also had an idea that this struggling congregation might benefit from a liturgical marker to strengthen their sense of call and empower them for ministry. We decided that a renewal of baptismal vows in the presence of the bishop during the Easter Vigil service could be a powerful experience, especially if we spent some time building up to it.

So we called our program "Yay! I Choose This!" It was our way of contextualizing the renewal of baptismal vows as a way of saying, "yay! I choose this Christian life!" and "yay! I choose Grace Church!" This was especially important for people who had been baptized as infants and confirmed too young.

But in order to make that joyful choice, folks needed to know more about what it was that they were choosing. That's where the adult formation classes came in.

For several Sundays running, the bulletins had colorful cards in them with a brief invitation. The invitation was to write down any questions they had about Christian history, faith, worship, the Episcopal Church, or Grace Church itself.

One Sunday during announcements we asked folks to write down the one question they thought they were never allowed to ask in church. Then we invited them to put their questions in the offering plate. *We explained that our questions about our faith and about God were indicative of our desire to be in deeper relationship with God...and as such, all of these questions were, in fact, offerings to God.* So we brought them forward and blessed them as we typically would on a Sunday morning with the other offerings in the plate.

Then, over the course of the next 6 months or so, we planned a series of "Yay! I Choose This!" gatherings in response to people's questions. We got a whole host of topics which included:

- How is the Episcopal Church different from other expressions of Christianity?
- Why is there an American flag in our church?
- How can we forgive others?
- Is the Bible true?

These questions were really illuminating for the leaders. Some of them were surprisingly basic to us, which told us a lot about the congregation's previous formation experiences. It also meant that the prep time for many of the classes was not exorbitant. Depending on the topic, we'd have one or two Sunday morning gatherings for discussion after coffee hour, which the congregation really seemed to

enjoy. And because the classes were on topics that featured some of their big questions about their faith, they showed up!

About 60 people showed up to the Easter Vigil service to “choose this.” I don’t think this approach to planning adult formation needs to be contextualized in the renewal of baptismal vows, etc...that was just the approach we took. But I do think the liturgical action of having folks place those questions in the offering plate and watch them get blessed is important. It emphasizes that the questions aren’t unfaithful, but rather coming from a desire for authentic relationship with God. Our questions are sacred, and taking that approach helps folks feel like they’re in a safe space to ask more questions and have real discussions in the classes.

If you have questions about this process, I’m happy to answer them – shoot me an email at kmoughty@stalbansmaine.org.

*Credit for this whole process also belongs to my supervisor in my seminary internship at Grace Church, the Rev. Elsa Worth.