

SOME THOUGHTS ABOUT "RETHINKING FAITH FORMATION: CHRISTIAN IDENTITY AND PRACTICE IN A PLURALISTIC WORLD"

I attended the Rethinking Faith Formation Conference at Luther Seminary in St. Paul in July of 2014. Each of the eleven speakers was given 35 minutes for a presentation, although several took more time. Then there was discussion among the participants to process what they heard and think about how to apply it to their own setting. Professor Rolf Jacobson posted questions between the sessions to stimulate conversation and thinking. I took a few notes and have listed a few highlights from some of the speakers.

Deanna Thompson from Hamline University in St. Paul had some thoughts in regards to virtual reality and faith formation.

1. She talked about the mystical view of the Church universal mediated through virtual reality through the example of the Caring Bridge web site when she was dealing with cancer.
2. She said that the body of Christ has always been a "virtual" reality but in today's world that shows up in the digital environment. The apostle Paul helped shape Christian identity when he only visited a few times. He was present through the letters he wrote.
3. We need to acknowledge that the virtual world is our reality - many people no longer "go" on-line. They are there most of the time.
4. The problem that she sees in the internet age is the dissipation of attention & energy to too many people.

Amy Sevimli, bishop's assistance in Metro Washington DC Synod, talked about young adults and their relationship to congregations. Some of her thoughts as heard by me:

1. Young adults who do not go to church give the same reasons as older adults.
2. Preaching really matters
3. Young adults who do show up in church are looking for God. They are open to God but we do not answer their questions. They are seeking an identity with God and need relevant language. They do not want condescending comments, conflict, financial crises, or invitation to join a committee.
4. She emphasized forming faith formation groups and eliminating all non-essential committees.

This presentation aroused these questions in my mind: What might be some non-essential committees? What are best practices for faith formation small groups?

Rodger Nishioka stated, "We need to speak as a Christian in this multi-cultural world." We should not be so politically correct that we water down our Christian point of view. Faith formation is best when there is nearness and directness. All ages need to be around faithful people and doing faithful things regularly. There should be specific times when faith is presented directly to young people with a challenge to make a commitment.

David Lose talked about identity and behavior as Christians. Identity is constantly evolving and can be shaped by the stories that we tell ourselves about who we are. Key idea for me: Behavior shapes identity more than we realize. Behavior will always trump belief. We change our beliefs when our behavior does not match. I wonder what that means for us in faith formation.

A favorite quote from Dan Taylor, an author, "Faith is a story, not an argument to be won or a puzzle." I could ponder that comment for a while.

Dorothy Bass talked about the need for practical wisdom in our culture. We have lots of knowledge and content but do not know what to do with it. She said that a good practitioner of practical wisdom has 5 qualities:

1. flexible
2. aware of nuances
3. identify what matters most
4. sets a goal
5. able to lean in a company of mentors.

Kelly Chatman discussed the world view of acquisition in our culture. We accumulate knowledge, friends, time and money. How do we in the Lutheran church have an attitude of acquisition? Lutherans do well with cognitive IQ but not so good with the emotional intelligence of our faith. Faith formation is more about a relationship than cognitive acquisition. We should not be arguing for Christianity but providing a radical experience of welcome. It made me wonder: What does a radical experience of welcome look like?

I found the conference were thought provoking and wish that I had attended with a team from my congregation or others from congregations close to mine so that we could continue pondering some of these ideas and questions.

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