

Annual Chaplains Report - 2011
January 16, 2011

“Where Are You Staying? – Come and See!”
- John 1,39

Perhaps you’ve had this experience. You go home for a holiday and run into an old friend. The friend asks, “Where are you staying? With your mother? Your sister?”

They’re just being chatty. The question here in John’s gospel is not simply a conversational gambit. The verb used is the same as is used for the descent of the Spirit at the Baptism by John. So hear “Where are you staying?” as “Where are you taking your gift Jesus, your talent, your grace; your inspiration, literally.”

“Come and see.” Which is really no answer. Nazareth? Jerusalem? West Lafayette? Purdue? Good Shepherd? Wherever the Spirit gives a sign of the Glory to come here in John’s gospel.

“Come and see”, on this the occasion of our annual meeting, where we at Good Shepherd are staying. Actually, in almost exactly the same place we were staying five years ago.

In 2005 just after our move here from Hayes St., with support from the Presbyterian Church’s U.S. Congregational Life Survey, we conducted a survey of our old members in our new situation.

In 2010 we spent our own money and conducted the survey again to see how much we had changed in five years. The thinking went that, well, the bloom should be off the rose by now, the break-in period must be over; insert your own cliché here. How were we different?

We weren’t. Really. In 2005 we had 51 responses to our questionnaire. Guess how many we had in 2010? You’re right – 51! Not the same 51 people to be sure. We turn over 20% of our congregation each year if you compare annual communicants lists. But again 51 people exactly took the survey.

The responses were very, very much the same.

Are my spiritual needs being met? In 2005 – 83% agreed or strongly agreed. In 2010 - 82% agreed or strongly agreed. Is the minister a good match with the congregation? In 2005 – 94% agreed or strongly agreed. In 2010 - 98% agreed or strongly agreed. Does the congregation have a clear vision? In 2005 – 77% agreed or strongly agreed. In 2010 - 80% agreed or strongly agreed.

The 2010 survey asked, in a new section, about leadership issues “going forward.” What should be the congregation’s highest priority? The top two were “Worship” (81%) and “Community Among Members” (79%).

The bottom two were “Stewardship” (44%) and “Education in the Bible and Theology” (44%). Thus confirming the campus ministry conventional wisdom that says people who are in a classroom most days are not much interested in sitting in a classroom on Sundays.

The congregation’s strengths were “Community Involvement” (98%) and “Worship” (98%). The congregation’s weakness was “Evangelism” (39%).

The biggest area of interest was “Life Transitions”. The congregation was least interested in “Divorce” and “Suicide”.

Where are you staying? Come and see.

To put our common life in a larger context, let me recommend to you a big, fat book; *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* by Robert Putnam (he authored the bestseller *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, a wonderful commentary on the decline of community in America) and David E. Campbell. If nothing else, read pages 35 – 70. In a chapter entitled “A Tale of Two Trinities”, the authors describe two Episcopal churches, Trinity Church in Concord, Massachusetts and Trinity Church, Boston, and compares and contrasts them to Rick Warren’s Saddleback Community Church in Orange County, California.

You’ll laugh. You’ll cry.

Listen to this description offered by a member of Trinity, Concord:

“The Episcopal Church is often considered to be a “middle way” between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism. Though maintaining liturgical practice as the core of worship, the denomination affords a significant amount of autonomy to individual congregations, which hire their own priests and are governed by lay committees called vestries. While possessed of a canonical, Bible-based theology, Episcopalianism places equal emphasis on the roles of reason and experience in the evolution of church belief and practice, and this is nowhere more evident than at Trinity Concord. *“I’ve never seen so many Ph.D.’s teaching church school,”* says Buquor, noting that to the faithful of Trinity Concord, “education and the mind are very important.” One congregant describes the parish as *“a highly educated, reasonable church, filled with thinking people.”*

- p.40

That could be us. They are so darn cute. But what a niche. Such a boutique religion.

The “soft center” of American religion once represented by mainline Protestantism is gone. There are two extremes, suggest the authors. On the right, a patriotic moralism which is the property of evangelical religion and “Anglo” Catholicism, and on the left, the fastest growing group in America, the “none’s” - those without a religion who often wish a pox on all religions.

We are not in decline in this place where we stay. We have had a 15% bump in attendance since the move. Even in a recession, we made our pledge number. Our active baptized members have increased by two over 2009.

But our attendance is down 17% for the year, or about 10 people a service. No, we can’t blame the student service. It has remained stable at 12 students a service; twelve students and one baby. The decline is at this service. The people we have now – and there are more of them – come to church less than the people we had.

We can turn back to *American Grace* for the explanation. While churches are the most common form of voluntary association in America, attendance at mainline Protestant churches has and will decline. We have fewer children. We are less likely to insist on attendance. We are less likely to entertain, to market. Attendance declines by age cohort too. The younger you are, the less you go to church. There is little brand loyalty. Liberals are most likely to move to “none”. Nobody, and this was our old vanity, “trades up” to our “Cadillac” religion from an entry-level “Chevrolet” religion. People consider themselves “frequent” churchgoers if they come twice a month.

We return to our authors for a description of the American reality in religious affiliation:

“One of us (Campbell) is a Mormon. He is the product of what was initially an interfaith marriage-as his Mormon mother married his mainline Protestant father. Eventually, his father converted to Mormonism. His mother too had been a convert years before. As a child she left Catholicism to become a Mormon, along with her parents but only some of her siblings. Consequently, a reunion on either side of the family brings together a multi-religious mix.

The family tree of your author (Putnam) also encapsulates the religious churn that is so common in America. He and his sister were raised as observant Methodists in the 1950's. He converted to Judaism at marriage; he and his wife raised their two children as Jews. One child married a practicing Catholic, who since has left the church and is now secular. The other child married someone with no clear religious affiliation but who subsequently converted to Judaism. Meanwhile, Putnam's sister married a Catholic and converted to Catholicism. Her three children became devout, active, evangelicals of several different varieties. So this homogeneous Methodist household in mid-century America has given rise to an array of religious affiliations (and nonaffiliations) that reflects the full gamut of American religious diversity.”

- p.36

Honestly, the numbers don't bother me. From Eastern European peasant stock, I am built for disaster. Having spent my entire career in campus ministry, I am accustomed to failure. Success frightens me. But I would ask us to acknowledge and to own this community as the “place where I am staying”. Acknowledge that, own that, and understand that showing up is an important part of that identification. When you're not here, we all feel like losers.

Encourage others to “come and see” this full and free church. Now a minority opinion in American Christianity, we enjoy a democratic organization and a big closet full of spiritual wares, full of both old and new ways of acknowledging that God is with us.

We remember the man Jesus. (Our ritual promotes memory.) We remember Him as the one who brought in the kingdom for the poor. We reject the residential segregation of our age and remember Him in the places where we live and work.

We perform individual acts of charity frequently and generously, but understand, with the Salvation Army of the last century, that those acts are often like trying to empty the ocean with thimble. We say that insecurity breeds fascism, as our continental friends learned through two world wars, and wonder if a “culture of personal giving” is either as possible or as admirable as many would suggest.

We believe in a religion that is communal in its creation and communal in its vocation. So we work for social equality in matters of race, sex, and gender. We hope to create a world where workers can receive living wages, decent pensions, and reasonable employment protections, where executives show restraint in remuneration, where conglomerates honor their public incorporation, and where we can care well for our ailing grandma's and grandpa's.

We break open the Word. We break open the Bread. We break out from the church. We are a family of notorious do-gooders. We are politically active.

“Come and see where we stand and stay.”

With our annual awards we take note of folks who have made this a place where we may comfortably stand and to which we might invite others to come.

The Kathleen Johnston Award, given annually to the adult who has provided distinguished leadership in the past year, goes this year to Tammy Conard-Salvo. The award is given not so much for her work as Senior Warden, though that was excellent, as for her work with the Episcopal Student Association, and for her helping to invent the annual Good Shepherd freshman scholarship.

The Angela Falzone Student Leadership Award goes this year to Mario Melendez. It is given in appreciation for the energy Mario brought to the ESA (Episcopal Student Association), and for his work in promoting a successful campus dialogue with our gay and lesbian friends, as well as a conversation on the life of the spirit with the non-theists here at Purdue.

Many thanks to them and to you. Please come and see us at the annual meeting of the Chapel of the Good Shepherd immediately following the service, upstairs in the church.

Amen.