

THE ROLE OF CHRISTIAN EDUCATION IN WELCOMING, ENGAGING, AND RETAINING MEMBERS AT ST. MARK'S

A Snapshot in Time (Summer 2017)

By Co-directors Lucy Brown and Joe Calizo¹

Individuals who find a church community at St. Mark's, newcomers and established members alike, cite certain attributes that they believe provide solid ground for them to pursue their own faith journey and find a spiritual home. Attributes often cited are: authenticity and honesty, an inclusive community, nonjudgmental acceptance of personal stories, honoring questions and avoiding doctrinal answers, creating bonds across generations, and building lasting and caring relationships. Together, these form St. Mark's "ethos," although its elements are not exclusive or static.

What role has and does Christian Education in general, and experience-based adult education in particular, play in creating and sustaining our community?

WELCOMING

Christian Education (CE) offers one option for finding a smaller community within the larger St. Mark's congregation. A strength of the program has been, and continues to be, the Sunday School program for children and youth. For younger children, ages 3-10, the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd curriculum – which recently celebrated its 20th anniversary at St. Mark's - allows them to discover the Jesus story through parables and interactive pedagogy. Historically, youth in the middle school and senior high classes explored their own faith journeys and responses to the world in more discussion-based classes via an experience-based or "functional" method of learning, although more recently other curricular approaches have been introduced from time to time.

Vibrant children's and youth programs are essential to attract families, but St. Mark's distinguishes itself from other churches with the richness of its offerings for adults. In recent years, St. Mark's youth and adult programs combined annually have involved around 400 people as participants, leaders and supervisors, plus clergy and staff. The impressive "wheel" or "mandala" displayed at the 2016 Christian Ed Weekend showed involvement by approximately 60 leaders/teachers/supervisors, and a multitude of offerings including Sunday School and adult Bible classes, The Guild, liturgy planning, Beyond the Frame arts' programs, the Jesus Seminar on the Road and several diverse one-time offerings such as the Lego Class.

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It is important to note that participating in a class or group, however taught, is not the only way of engaging with St. Mark's. Each of our "pillars," or main programmatic areas, including choir, outreach, liturgy planning, etc., offers a means of joining more fully in our common life. Plus there are options such as meditation that seem to cross

over between pillars. However, participating in classes and groups clearly is one very direct way an individual, couple, or family can enter more deeply into our common life and begin to find a place to belong within the broader community.

ENGAGING

Becoming known by others in a class or group often leads to greater engagement at St. Mark's, especially for newcomers. This is likely to occur no matter the group structure or topic. If the experience lasts for weeks, months, years or even just a few intense days or hours, participants may get to know each other's stories, relationships may evolve, and individuals may gain insights that become part of their spiritual journeys. Individuals continue to expand their circles each time they join another classes or offering.

The unique gift of a class that uses the experiential approach, formerly referred to as the "functional education" or "func ed" approach, is that the process quickly cuts to the core of engagement in the community. Here one begins not with rules of life or with "how to" programs or with answers from the Bible. Here the starting point is questions on the minds of class participants. One's personal story and spiritual growth are not left to emerge casually over time - they are the centerpiece from the first class meeting. And, with one's classmates, all explore what relevance the Christian story may have for their spiritual journeys and their lives outside St. Mark's. The founder of functional education, Charles Penniman, stated clearly that this approach "is based on the business of belonging" - a belonging that produces "persons of value" within the Christian tradition (General Notes #10 & #55).

The main tenets of the experiential learning approach at St. Mark's are found in the following:

- 1.** For decades, and particularly during the tenure of the rector Jim Adams, St. Mark's accepted that experience-based classes were the way individuals were most likely to learn and practice the skills necessary to speak their own truths, while also respecting the differing truths of others. Importantly, these skills underlie our community ethos of authenticity - and authenticity does not come naturally to most adults. Practicing authenticity requires a safe environment such as a well-run class.
- 2.** Through the experiential educational process an individual's unique faith story is honored - and efforts to impose a "right" answer on another are rejected. As Verna Dozier, a leading theologian, lay preacher and long-time member of St. Mark's, said

in a 1995 sermon, “The power of darkness is our need to be right.” Asked for her position on some question, she famously would respond, “Here is where I am today. Tomorrow I may be somewhere else.” At St. Mark’s, recognizing and naming the ambiguities of life is an integral part of the process and helps us avoid an “us vs them” mentality.

- 3.** Based on our own life experiences, the experiential process strives to help us identify what sustains us and enables us to stand upright and feel supported on our journeys, and it does so within the context of the Christian story.

BELONGING and RETAINING

The most direct route to getting beyond initial engagement, so that members can continue to be nourished on their faith journey at St. Mark’s, is by taking on greater responsibility for the community. The Belonging Class (described in a later section) provides an opportunity to help identify what that responsibility might be. During one of its final meetings class members are asked what commitments they are willing to make to deepen their connection to the community. This is later followed by a Sunday service welcome ceremony in which class members may choose to publically state their intention of becoming members of St. Mark’s.

An unspoken goal of “doing” something at St. Mark’s is that when we “practice our religion” at church it often results in our being more likely to confidently take that religion into the wider world outside of church. Building connections and accepting more responsibility are ways that many increase their sense of belonging and their desire to make St. Mark’s their church home.

LOOKING AHEAD

Today’s world seems to be growing exponentially smaller and smaller. Our world is interconnected to a degree not experienced before and far away events have a visible impact here. Individuals are more likely to bump into and interact with others not like themselves than in decades past. In the 1950s a primary concern was world destruction via atomic bombs. Today we worry about the destruction happening to the environment and our natural resources, and recently, again, the growing threat of nuclear war. The racism many of us thought had faded has again reared its ugly head. The solutions are complex. On the one hand, strident religious voices that emerged in the 1980s are met on the other with a reluctance to claim any particular religious tradition, making the “Nones” our fastest growing religious group. On a local logistical level, traffic issues impede mobility and access for many church members or prospective members, especially those that reside beyond our neighborhood on “The Hill.”

Older generations at St. Mark’s commonly embraced Penniman’s “functional education” model with its more formal process, its focus on self-introspection and its lengthy time

commitments. Many older members will tell you “func ed” changed their lives and that it still lies at the heart of their relationship with St. Mark’s. Today, however, younger members show less interest in “func ed” and generally appreciate shorter time commitments. They tend to prioritize activities that provide opportunities for service and outreach. It appears more young newcomers walk through St. Mark’s doors these days seeking religious teaching and church traditions than was the case with earlier generations. Questions newcomers might raise today include: How do I make my mark in the world? I have a plan...but it has hit a snag – so now what? How do I serve, improve my community and improve the world?

Change can be difficult, confusing and slow. This is perhaps nowhere more evident at St. Mark’s than within the Christian Education program, where attendance for “func ed” style classes has been steadily falling and emotions can run high. The program must keep evolving to address changing times while retaining what is most meaningful from the past, namely that which supports St. Mark’s “ethos.” Although described as “lay led,” the program has always been shaped by the vision and support of its rectors, which has varied considerably over time. This will not change. The opinions and commitment of our current rector, Michele Morgan, will be integral to the shape and success of the program’s future.

Recent program highlights and changes:

Introduction to Life at St. Mark’s

This class is offered for those who are interested in learning about St. Mark’s beyond the Sunday worship experience. The format was recently changed from one class held on a Sunday afternoon to three classes held over three consecutive Sundays. This change was made in response to a perceived need for a more in-depth perspective on the community for those considering membership. With the class now being taught consistently by clergy and the youth minister, it also offers more in-depth information on family and youth programs for new families.

The Belonging Class

Formerly Life, Community and Faith (LCF), the Belonging Class is for individuals interested in deepening their relationship to the St. Mark’s Community. A class goal is to help those taking it find a smaller community within the larger one. The class, as was LCF, is offered over a 10-week period. A format change was made this year to eliminate the two away-weekend retreats. In recent years recruitment became more difficult due to the time commitment and cost. Future classes will include at least one full in-town weekend day session to better address topics requiring more than an evening class. Having the rector participate on the teaching team and changing the format yielded the first successful class offering since 2014 - with 14 members.

Christian Education Weekend

Christian Education has annually offered an away-weekend retreat with a relevant topic or theme. Beyond that, a goal of the weekend has been bonding for those with affinity for the program. This year, in an effort to attract individuals who may not typically attend, the weekend was held at St. Mark's. The effort was successful and greatly increased participation from the previous year. The weekend leaders also received positive feedback for allowing attendees to identify and focus on topics that were most pertinent to them. This approach facilitated an action-oriented outcome, allowing participants to take greater ownership for next steps on identified topics.

Connection to the Family and Youth Program

A stronger connection has developed between CE and the Family and Youth program to better address the current needs of families at St. Mark's. This was demonstrated by the Family and Youth director facilitating the development of new parent groups as well as forming a stronger connection to the Sunday School Program. Both programs can be better served by allowing the relationship to evolve through mutual support. With the important role that families play within the St. Mark's community, CE can only benefit as this connection increases.

Conclusion

Despite the challenge of declining church membership, St. Mark's has strengths that should help it attract new people. The CE program can provide meaningful support for:

- An open commitment to welcoming diversity and integrating new members of any age
- Theological engagement that rejects the doctrinaire
- A place for the curious, and opportunity for disciplined search
- Celebration of wonder without relying on theological clichés
- Many ways to explore the spiritual dimension of life's journey
- Authentic discussion
- A place to tell my story
- Tools to counter binary thinking in a divided society (i.e. liberal/conservative; black/white, etc.)

It is challenging to keep a program strong as it evolves to remain relevant to the times while retaining what is best from the past. Turning new communication resources into tools for community building as well as personal learning and reflection is one area where creativity is needed. We also need to find new formats that allow for convening small groups where training in authentic conversation, mutual support, and connection to the Christian story and other spiritual guides can thrive. We must continue to tell our own stories and, most importantly, find and create opportunities to listen carefully to the stories of others.

Building a spiritual path is complicated and it is work. In addition to active and vibrant programs for children and youth, St. Mark's education program historically has offered many resources to individuals engaged in that work: experience-based classes; Bible classes; discussions using parables, myths, and symbols; Beyond the Frame art offerings; and, from time to time, formal programs such as Education for Ministry (EMF) and The Guild. New offerings include the rector's pop-up sessions - one-time discussions on topical issues - parent groups and a focus on diversity to inform race relations within St. Mark's. This variety of CE offerings, whatever the approach or duration, provides one vital way people become and remain engaged at St. Mark's.

Recommendations:

- Replace "functional" code with language accessible to all (see *"Expanding Our Language to Make Christian Education Attractive and Accessible to All"*)
- Make sure all programming is informed by St. Mark's "ethos"
- Experiment by developing tie-ins between educational programs and outreach/service/art projects (e.g. a follow-up reflection after Sunday Suppers)
- Develop more classes and programs that are short, inexpensive, and convenient as to time and location (e.g. a "Me and My..." class on Sunday afternoon)
- Offer Belonging Class once a year and omit away-weekend retreats
- Offer a traditional, functionally taught class at least once a year, possibly with an away-weekend
- Hold the annual CE Weekend locally – at least every other year - to reduce cost and increase attendance

Appendix: Expanding Our Language to Make Christian Education Attractive and Accessible to All

APPENDIX: EXPANDING OUR LANGUAGE TO MAKE CHRISTIAN EDUCATION ATTRACTIVE AND ACCESSIBLE TO ALL

(By Rita Ossolinski with input and guidance from Janice Gregory)

Our opening premise: **One of the most unique elements of what St. Mark's offers is a rich educational program for adults and 'families' in all their forms.**

The key question, going forward: **What will attract a new generation? Some of their questions are:**

- How do I choose a path and why?
- How do I look at a situation from all sides?
- How do I handle setbacks or defeat?
- Who has my back when I am in need, in crisis, overextended, or uncertain?
- How can I contribute to healing a nation divided?
- How do I stay spiritually centered when everyone is polarized?

St. Mark's CE offerings may well be able to help individuals move toward workable answers to the question: "What can I do to make a difference? **The tools may already exist to help stop the trend toward binary thinking in a polarized world (i.e. good / bad; liberal/conservative; true/false; right/wrong; black/white; Republican/Democrat).** The challenge is to communicate clearly and offer opportunities and the practices that can help keep individuals and families centered so that they can contribute to that "better world" in ways that are meaningful and doable.

How does St. Mark's communicate / amplify the fact that this is what we offer?

We can be clear that we offer many hands-on programs and opportunities to engage in the work of providing for a better world and that we are open to new ideas from those who are new to our community. Suggestions for revising specific language for the tools we have in functional education follow below:

First, drop the phrase “functional education”. Call it “experience-based education” or “experience-based approach to the spiritual side of my life and work” or similar descriptions.

Second, drop the “coded” aspects of functional language and talk instead about the work we do in our adult classes to support us as we engage with the world and with other people wherever we are.

Third, experiment with class titles and formats. For Gateway Classes, we already have changed Life, Community and Faith (LCF) to the “Belonging” class; other gateway titles seem clear, but we can experiment there as well.

Conversations with our younger members will hopefully lead to ideas of what classes they would find of interest as well as formats in which to offer them. We must ask the new generation — are there places you feel stuck? Questions that bug you? Let them lead us to new offerings — or to old offerings recast with new language. We cannot expect to come up with magical formulas. We must experiment, listen, and give ourselves permission to have a particular experiment fail.

Fourth, in designing and leading new classes, DROP THE TRADITIONAL FUNCTIONAL LANGUAGE / TERMS and use instead language such as that outlined below on the right —

Functional term

More accessible

What is an “Issue”?	Being pulled in different directions or I think I know what I want, but I have doubts. What do I do now?
Dimensioning	How do I look at the situation from all sides?
The Five Units	How do I move through the challenge of being pulled in different directions? Is there a map?
1) Curiosity	I am interested; drawn in; there might be something for me here.
2) Anxiety	I’m scared; will I make a good decision; what might it cost me?
3) Hope	I think I see some solid ground.

4) Despair	Who pulled the ground away? I'm lost and alone; only I can do the work.
5) Anticipation	I can go on with integrity; I am supported.
Categories	Things it would help us all to know.

Fifth, our communication and outreach to prospective participants in the CE program and offerings should include a link to the Christian tradition. Newcomers are asking: **“Does the Christian tradition have anything to offer me in my search / journey?”** What we want to say to newcomers and to anyone who has not taken a class is: **“YES! You are welcome to search here with us!”**