

## **Creating Sustainable Change through Incarnational Leadership**

*Posted: May 4, 2012 by Rob Voyle*

I often hear clergy discussing when to make changes, immediately upon arriving in the congregation or waiting for a year before making changes. I don't think the timing matters what really matters is HOW not WHEN you lead change.

For the last couple of days I have been at our Oregon diocesan clergy conference. The presenter was the Rev. Melissa Skelton from St. Paul's in urban Seattle and the topic was "Worship Matters: Enticing others into the Reign of God."

When Melissa arrive at St. Paul's 7 years ago the church was a small declining Episcopal congregation with very traditional Anglo-Catholic worship. For Protestant readers think smells, bells, vestments, statues, and all things that probably make you cringe.

In her 7 years as rector Melissa has lead the congregation through a major transformation of their worship and congregational life which has grown the congregation from an AWA of 89 to 250.

What impressed me about Melissa's story was not the outcome she achieved but HOW she lead the people through the changes. Her story is a story of incarnational leadership.

### **Incarnational Leadership**

1. It begins with delight in what already is and not in what might be.

In the search process Melissa found a place of delight in the people. Yes she also saw a lot that needed to be done but she clearly identified a place of delight within herself for the people she would be ministering with.

The opposite of delight is contempt. Too often I see clergy seeing what needs to be done but without a foundation of delight the impetus for change is perceived as judgmental and despite any good intention, the leader is likely to call forth a contemptible congregation.

If you are in a search process and can't find a place of delight in the people, LEAVE, it is not your place to minister.

2. From a place of delight the next step is to join.

All sustainable change is an inside job. If you don't join the congregation you will be doing TO the people not doing WITH the people. Change agents who bring change TO people will be perceived as arrogant and the change will be resisted.

The place to join is in place of shared values. You can not join people by focusing on what is wrong. You have to join at a place of shared values, and from that place of shared values work together to create more of what is good rather than less of what is wrong.

What Melissa did was create a relationship of trust by discovering and honoring shared values. Trust is the ability to make vulnerable to someone else's actions what you value, knowing that what you value will be kept safe.

When the people knew that Melissa knew what they valued and that she shared that value they trusted her and were then willing to follow her lead in experimenting and making changes.

If you want people to trust you there are two things you must do: discover and then honor what people value. If you can't value what they value, become curious and dig deeper into what they value to find a place of shared value.

Remember Jesus didn't come and inflict salvation on us he came and lived as one of us

3. When you make changes ensure the change grows the shared life-giving value.

We live and make changes in a temporal world. Within this temporal experience are timeless or eternal values. Idolatry occurs when people cling to a temporal vehicle by which some eternal quality has been experienced.

Once Melissa had joined the congregation she helped the people discover and identify the deeper eternal values in all the temporal ritual of the congregation's traditional worship. She was then able to lead changes in the temporal rituals by opening these rituals to the deeper shared life-giving reality.

We can live without a foot but we can not live without a heart. When you make changes make sure you are not amputating the heart, or the people's access to the heart of the congregation.

4. Creating an Intentional Culture of Excellence

As pastors it is very easy to get distracted and held hostage by the tyranny of the urgent and in the midst of that lose sight of the core things we need to do, and do well, such as community worship. Crummy worship happens when all the worship gets is the crumbs left over from the daily grind.

Melissa's story is also the story of the people of St. Paul's and their response to being called into that deeper place of shared value. In many ways they hold it very important and give it an important place in their lives.

They spent time learning and training to be participants and leaders in the worship. They were very intentional and spent time in community dialog to discover what was working and what was not. They are intentional and have created a culture of excellence, but they are not slaves of that culture they are the free children of the God they intentionally seek.

I am continually amazed at how our young people spend hours practicing their sport or band or cheer leading and we require next to nothing of them when they lead worship as acolytes. Or I think of the NFL and the time and effort they spend to deliver 3 hours of amusement on Sunday and how little effort the church spends on its 3 hours on Sunday morning.

My own experience as a pastor tells me that people will be enormously grateful when we are intentional about the things people value. In Melissa's story that gratitude is expressed, in part, by their practical intentionality toward the thing they value.

If you want to learn more about Melissa's and the people of St. Paul's story you can find it in *The Hospitality of God: Emerging Worship for a Missional Church* by Mary Gray-Reeves and Michael Perham. The book is primarily about emerging worship and has stories from 14 churches in the Episcopal/Anglican tradition that the authors studied. Here is what the authors say about St. Paul's:

"St Paul's Church in Seattle regards itself as a 'progressive Anglo-Catholic church', and though it has its own alternative worship the service we attended was in no way alternative, but a deeply spiritual eucharistic celebration of the inherited church. We have included it in order to have a good model of mainstream liturgical life to set alongside what is developing in the emerging churches."

One Note of Caution. As you read the stories in the book don't find a model of worship, such as St. Paul's, that you like and try to do that in your congregation. Remodeling your church to fit the model in your head is the antithesis of the incarnation and will likely get you fired. Instead pay attention to the dynamics of what the leaders did to achieve their outcome and do the same leadership behaviors in your congregation to co-create with your parishioners a way of enticing people into the presence of God.

Rob Voyle