

CHAPTER ONE

It's broke, but how do we fix it?

Thursday, January 17th, 2008

(Sunday, January 20th was the scheduled annual meeting)



I am lying in my bed in the fetal position with the comforter pulled over my head. I am sobbing, with streams of tears running from my eyes and snot running from my nose. What do I do? What do I say? The annual meeting is three days away, and I need to stand up in front of the congregation...and say what? That I've failed? That they should just go ahead and fire me? That I have a core of volunteer Sunday school teachers that are totally demoralized because no one is showing up for them to teach? Or do I not focus on the past year and instead, talk up whatever it is that I'm going to do next year? And what exactly, is that?

I don't come up with any answers. Sunday comes. I am leaning toward being positive. Then God steps in. Or at least global climate change. The trend toward record snow fall continues on this Sunday, and the priest decides that we won't be able to make quorum and postpones the annual meeting until the next Sunday. At first, I am extremely annoyed. I have planned, set-up for, and prepared the activities for the children to do during the annual meeting. Postponing until next week means more work for me. And, what if the nursery teacher and assistant aren't available to work next Sunday afternoon?

But then, as often happens in my communication with God, He hits me upside the head and reminds me that I wasn't prepared for the annual meeting anyway. I've been given another week. I apologize for not focusing on that and thank God for the reprieve.

A few days later, God and I are back in bed under the comforter. I have the same questions, but seem to be more open to let God answer instead of me. What, you ask, is the amazing answer from God on high? "Let it fail." Sunday school isn't working. Neither is Adult Forum, which is basically Sunday school for grown-ups. So, drop it. After the end of this scheduled program year in May, Sunday school and Adult forum will no longer exist at my church. Well, okay. But as the paid Christian Formation Director, what do I—I mean, we—do instead? "Ah, that is yet to be seen. Remember what you've been hearing from parishioners the last few years. Ask questions. Be open."

The next Sunday comes. The annual meeting happens. The children's activities are up and running, with supervision. As I approach the lectern, my heart is light. "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well." as Julian of Norwich said. I give a brief explanation of what has happened with Christian formation in 2006, and then I launch into 2007. Our lenten program this year will focus on Spiritual Gifts. Confirmation classes start today. AND... we're going to change our model used for Christian formation. "Right now, the Sunday school model isn't sustainable. I've heard people say they would like activities that are intergenerational, include mentors, or include Bible study. So, we're starting to study different models to find a better fit for us. In other words, I have no idea what we're going to do come fall, but it won't be Sunday school."

After the annual meeting, I await the torrent of criticism that I've been expecting. But it doesn't come. I field several questions about whether that means Sunday school continues until May or is done right

now. I have a few offers of help to do whatever it is I need done, which of course, I have no idea what needs to be done. And then I run across the hall to teach the first Confirmation class of the season.

At this point, I'd like to say that I then knew exactly what to do and went about it with gusto. Instead, I put future plans on the back burner and concentrate on making it through the spring. In fact, the only thing I do in the next month is schedule a meeting with the Christian formation steering committee for March 19, 2007. On March 18th, I research intergenerational curriculum, because one parent had expressed several times that she would like to do more with her son at church. I also figured that if critical mass was our main problem, let's create critical mass, even if it is artificial. On March 19th, I report my findings, which are that almost all intergenerational curricula are based on specific seasons of the year. The only one I found that had weekly lessons also cost \$1000 a year.

I am thinking at about the same rate I am talking, which mainly means that most of my ideas are being created on the spot. Thank God that we opened the meeting with prayer! We all agree that \$1000 is more money than we have to spend, especially if we plan on doing any other Christian formation activities or events in the next year. I point out that no matter which curriculum we decide upon, we will have to modify it in some way to meet our individual circumstances. We all come to the same conclusion, at about the same time, that it would be more cost effective and maybe even more efficient to create our own program from scratch.

At which point, the Holy Spirit starts flying around and people throw wonderful ideas onto the table. Let's have it be lectionary-based. We really liked the program that was done several years ago that included African Bible Study and telling our faith stories. Whatever we offer should be different from what children get in school. We need a clear way to train leaders, teachers, and volunteers. And the idea that obviously did not come from me in any way: let's incorporate theater, drama, or role playing.

The critics at the table remind us that because this will be a pilot year that it can't be too draining of energy for the lead team or the participants. There needs to be lots and lots of communication. We need buy-in from the congregation: get individual parents, children, and adults to commit to the program. The group needs to be seen as having strong relationships with each other like a spiritual family.

How do we overcome the excuses for not participating? "Not enough critical mass" is nullified by combining all the classes into one, intergenerational class. But what about the folks at the 7:30am service who never stick around? And what about the parents who say they can't be ready in time on a Sunday morning early enough to attend (and by the way, refuse to stay after church either)? Let's have the formation time bridge the gap in time between the two services. It'll start immediately following the early service and end just in time for folks to go to the later service. And let's serve food! We love to eat around here, and that way families don't have to worry about fitting in breakfast. Shall we do another coffee hour following the early service? No, says someone at the table. Why would people come here to eat if we are serving the same thing they could get at a bagel shop or drive-thru? We need to feed these busy families the homemade meals that they are missing. We will cook hot, nutritious, hospitable meals every Sunday.

At this point the evening is drawing to a close. It is late, and we haven't even talked about the rest of the agenda! But as we end in prayer and go forth into the world, we are all energized with the possibilities. Now it is time for me to roll up my sleeves and get into the details and logistics.