

Conversation, questions, worship, Eucharist, and voices emerging from people on the street

The day was filled with conversation, questions, emerging worship, music and the stories of how an emerging church in Seattle came to be and how it functions in its context: as a friend to the world, as the light of Christ in the world, as a listening, ministering, ancient-future community of the living Jesus in the world.

I was in a mad dash to clean the house before our guests arrived. Our Friday night gathering for Peacemeal, an emerging Episcopal community which has been meeting for the past year in our living room, was about to begin.

The children were happily wrangled by their favorite Peacemeal friends and soup was simmering on the stove, but I had not had a chance to change clothes. When the car pulled up bearing our distinguished guests from Seattle, I straightened the baseball cap I'd thrown on first thing that morning, tugged at my old t-shirt, and hoped I was presentable enough.

It was the eve of the September 15 Emerging Church Learning Party sponsored by the Evangelism Commission of the Diocese of Bethlehem.

Mother Karen Ward arrived, weary after a red-eye flight from Seattle and a day of set up for Saturday's learning party. She, too, was wearing a baseball cap, often the crown of her uniform, her working attire.

Mother Karen has a sweatshirt she calls a *neighbor-hoody* with the numbers 98103, the zip code of the neighborhood of Church of the Apostles (COTA), the emerging Episcopal/Lutheran community of which she is the abbess. She regularly "walks the beat" in the hip and artsy area of Seattle where the COTA gather. She regards the entire increasingly gentrified neighborhood to be her parish. A fan of baseball hats and

gourmet beer, Mother Karen is tough, kind, and deeply, peacefully theological.

Her fellow teachers for the Learning Party were Lacey Brown, Thomas Knoll and Bob Fisher. Lacey is COTA's music minister, She has a gorgeous singing voice and is a genius with music technology. Thomas is a first-year seminarian who lives in Minneapolis and is a member of COTA from a distance, connected through a daily commitment to common prayer. Bob is Assistant to the Bishop for Mission Interpretation and Communications in the Southeast Pennsylvania Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

Peacemeal dined with these wonderful guests who joined us also for our Friday evening worship, glad for the opportunity to see another emerging community's way of being together.

On Saturday morning, more than fifty registrants – some from our diocese, some from other denominations – gathered at St. Stephen's Pro-Cathedral in Wilkes-Barre (gracious hosts to the learning party) to immerse ourselves in the diverse and rich world of the emerging church, as expressed in the story of COTA.

The day was filled with conversation, questions, emerging worship, music and the stories of how COTA came to be and how it functions in its context: as a friend to the world, as the light of Christ in the world, as a listening, ministering, ancient-future community of the living Jesus in the world.



Mother Karen Ward

We learned that COTA began in Karen's living room and has grown now into a community active enough to need a church building. A handful of young men live a monastic life together at their church, the Fremont Abbey, observing the cycle of daily prayer and working to keep up the building and assist with the activities of the community.

Before COTA gained use of the church building, they made history in their diocese by being the first parish group ever to apply for a business loan from the diocese. They used the loan money to open up a tea shop in a storefront (they couldn't afford to buy coffee and figured tea was more of a novelty in the city where there is a Starbucks on every corner). Mother Karen worked behind the counter at

the tea shop by day and presided over the liturgy there by night, when passersby could look in and see the combination of Christian worship and colorful art and hear music with a beat. COTA is also constructing an art center in their new building where local artists can hold exhibitions and offer lessons. To ensure that the center remains relevant to the needs of the local community, it will be run by a council made up of secular people from the neighborhood.

Local artists were invited to participate in COTA's Easter Vigil last year. They called it *RISE: an Easter Party*. The artists, some of whom had never even heard of the Paschal Triduum, were given a passage of scripture from the Easter Vigil service and asked to create a piece of art interpreting that passage. Invitations were plastered all over town. Local bands played. Party food was served. At the Easter Party, people were invited to visit stations that included art and scripture: one for confession, one for prayer, one for Eucharist. The festivities culminated in the baptism of a new communicant.

Creative and artistic worship is at the center of COTA: they offer a weekly Taize service, and, for the young people in the wider community who enjoy all things gothic, they have a weekly "Goth" Eucharist called "Sanctorum: a dark and lovely mass." They sometimes highlight different musicians or authors in their worship, such as the time they did a Eucharist service using the music of Marvin Gaye or a liturgy of the word based on the book "Oh the Places You'll Go," by Dr. Seuss. The learning party participants got to experience this one first hand.

Because of their identity as a monastic community and their affection for ancient practices, they joke about

being the most traditional parish in the diocese – how many other parishes can say that they make regular use of the 1642 prayer book?

Another focus of the learning party was the emerging church movement in general, and the persistent beckoning of the Holy Spirit to the church to open our doors and go out into the culture to be among the people as Jesus did. Bob Fisher outlined characteristics of the postmodern culture. These phenomena are often ignored by the church in our planning, preaching, worship and attempts at evangelism. He explained how remaining out of touch serves to accelerate the decline of the mainline church.

Two video clips of an emerging church reporter on the street asking questions moved some to tears. Asked "How could church be better?" some people on the street said that they would be more drawn to a church with more art, or music they recognized. Most answered that they wished that church was not a place of judgment or hypocrisy. Asked "If you could talk to God, what would you say?" People on the street offered these questions: What is the purpose of me? Why aren't you doing anything about suffering? Why did my brother have to die? Where are you? Why don't you come down and talk to people like you used to? What is going to happen to me after I die?

The response of attendees at the learning party varied. Some folks expressed frustration that there was not a curriculum, program or tangible resources to take back to their parishes. Others were intrigued, but wondered if the types of things COTA is doing would ever translate to Northeast Pennsylvania. Questions and frustrations, an important part of the conversation, were fielded gracefully by Karen and her colleagues.

By the end of the day it was clear that the emerging church conversation is just that: an acknowledgement that the Holy Spirit is doing something new across denominations and cultures, and that the creation of emerging communities won't look the same from one region to another. The key is that existing parishes and emerging church communities be willing to get out into their neighborhoods, walk the streets and meet the people, find out what are the passions, questions, interests, hurts and needs of the local community and respond creatively.

Beyond giving to the world around us, the body of Christ must open our hands to receive the gifts which the postmodern culture has to offer. In our weakness and decline, we are compelled to look outside of ourselves once more, to acknowledge that the world outside of the church is replete with God's splendor, with fresh ideas, novel questions, new expressions of longing and hope – all blessings from the "outside" that, when received, can and will bubble up to recreate the church in this new century.

An important question was raised toward the end of the day when someone wondered if it is possible for an existing parish to become an emerging church. Bob Fisher responded by saying that it seems to work best when existing parishes support and allow emerging communities to grow up within or beside them. In fact, COTA recently received a \$90,000 three year grant from Trinity, WallStreet in the Diocese of NY. Fisher was quick to say that existing parishes and emerging churches can and ought to learn from one another, and that there is no need for competition or for an either/or kind of dichotomy. At the same time, he recognized the great difficulty and pain that comes with change in the typical mainline parish.

Though there was not enough time in the day for participants to share their ideas, in the Diocese of Bethlehem existing parishes have shown that it is possible to be relevant to the postmodern shift and to evolve in significant ways; several parishes have implemented emerging-type initiatives in the last years (though they may not have known the term to call it such), making discernments to change or grow in ways that involved a measure of risk and flexibility on the part of their congregations.

Grace Episcopal Church in Allentown, for instance, unbolted their pews in their sanctuary five years ago, such that two groups of pews now face one another. In the tradition of ancient monastic communities, the congregation at Grace wants to see the face of Christ in each other as they worship. They have also extended

themselves deeper into mission to the wider community through the expansion of their Montessori school and other mission initiatives, as well as by forging a connection with the Baum School of Art across the street.

Trinity Episcopal Church, Easton, offers a monthly Sitgreaves Coffeehouse which is an “open to all ages, smoke and alcohol free open-mic for musicians. Everyone is welcome to come and enjoy free Starbucks coffee, snacks, and live music in a relaxed environment. All styles of music welcome.”

Trinity Episcopal Church in Mt. Pocono has entered the world of cyberspace, creating a page on MySpace, where people online have the opportunity to become ‘friends’ with the parish.

There may well be other examples of emerging-like initiatives going on around our diocese. Folks are wel-

come to share those examples and to continue this conversation on the diocesan listserve, Bethlehem of PA. (To join that conversation, send an email note to Bill Lewellis, blewellis@diobeth.org.)

Peacemeal is the first emerging community in the Diocese of Bethlehem, but we hope we won’t be the last. We are happy to share what we have learned thus far, and we invite you to visit us anytime.

You may also visit our website, www.peacemealcommunity.org, or blog, www.peacemealcommunity.blogspot.com, to see what our common life is all about. For more on COTA, visit their website at www.apostleschurch.org.

[The Rev. Demery Bader-Saye, a founding member of Peacemeal, serves as youth missionary for the Diocese of Bethlehem.]