

Guest Editorial – The Rev'd Fr. Andrew T.P. Merrow
**“One is ordained to be a proclaimer of the Gospel,
and very quickly, the Church co-ops us into becoming keepers
of the Institution.”**

I would gladly assign credit to whoever penned the above statement if I knew who the author was because it has served as a touchstone for my almost 40 years of ordained ministry. It is true certainly at the parish and diocesan levels, but I suspect it informs every aspect of the Church's life. As the institutional church labors under an increasing weight - financial hardship, upkeep of aging structures, lower church attendance, and indifference from society at large - the wisdom of keeping our mission rather than our buildings squarely in the headlamps seems essential.

The truth, of course, is that it is not a binary question. We have to maintain buildings and pay salaries as part of our faithful stewardship - everything that we do after saying “I believe.” Though all of us at some level long for the certainty and simplicity of answers that are either right or wrong, orthodox or heretical, in or out, we as Anglican Christians are acutely aware of the downside of such an approach. A wise rabbi once told me that the Episcopal Church would always be small in number because the American culture (the context from which I write) is so anxious that people will be drawn not to inquiry and nuance but certitude and reinforcement of deeply held beliefs.

What if instead of there only being one right answer that accompanies the win/lose mindset of Western thinking, we opened our hearts to the wisdom and witness of the faithful saints of God throughout the ages. After all this is not the first time in the history of the Church that things have looked rather bleak. One might be well served to remember the words of the Psalmist: “Mercy and truth have met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other.” (Psalm 85:10) I sometimes lament that we in the Church are not much different from the world by insisting on righteousness only as I understand it. It seems that we aren't as interested in maintaining peace with those with whom we differ. And can we really call it truth from the Christian understanding if there is little or no room for mercy?

The open expanse of the Anglican approach to being God's people in the world affords lots of space for us to maneuver in meeting one another, particularly the dreaded “other”. Would it be too much of a stretch to think that we actually might create within the Church, space to play with one

another? After all Jesus clearly states that one enters the Kingdom of God only as a little child. What is the “work” of children? Is it not to play in relationship with one another including the new kid who just moved in down the street. We don’t get to choose who is in the Church any more than we get to choose the kids in our neighborhood. C. S. Lewis once wrote that he thought the work of Heaven is to play, meaning the joyful reality of being totally present to God, to oneself, and to one another.

This still begs the question, however, of who is going to pay to keep the lights on. The theologian, Howard Thurman, might be of help here. He is credited with this provocative insight: “Don’t ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive and go do it, because what the world needs is people who have come alive.” When we come alive in the liberating power of the Gospel then the institutional church with our feet of clay is embraced as the raw material that both we and God have to work with. The distinction between Church as the people of God and church as a building begins to blend into this dawning awareness that paying the bills is simply another manifestation of giving a cup of water in Christ’s name.

The very real and troubling problems that we and the world face are not going to change. So if they are not going to change, I guess we will have to.

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