

FAITH FORMATION - This Moment of Change and Reformation

There's a story floating around town, and by town, I mean the United States and Europe, and it's not nearly as cool as the story we just heard about the magi visiting Jesus. Not nearly as mysterious, as mystical, as invitational. Of course, I'm talking about the story of church decline, of falling membership and pledge numbers. And part of this story is true – the UCC and the Pew Forum and other groups have plenty of data about the drop off in membership numbers and dollars pledged. Sometimes, though, we also try to draw qualitative information from this quantitative data and our research methods often aren't very good. Driven by fear, we interpret lower membership to suggest that the church universal is dying, or that right wing fundamentalists have won the day, that something is wrong with the church or that we, as progressive Christians, have somehow failed to woo the right people into our pews because we don't have lasers or a rock band or a petting zoo. We allow these numbers to make us feel fear and shame.

And now I'm going to tell you something super wild. I didn't know this story growing up. I didn't know anything about this mythic past when pews were full and soccer games were never scheduled on Sundays. My parents were part of the mass exodus from the church that happened in the 1960's and 70's, going to Sunday School when they were young, never wearing jeans to church, behaving painfully well on the Sundays they were dragged there, and peacing out as soon as they'd received their respective Methodist and Congregational confirmations. They were married by a judge, never once thought for a second about having my brother and I baptized, and proceeded to teach us that some people had this weird religion habit and that we should try to be respectful of it because that's how democracy works. When I began to go to church on my own in middle school, the church I attended was almost entirely comprised of former Catholics and evangelicals, and zealously committed to spreading God's welcome to LGBTQIA+ people, to mixed faith families, to everyone who had felt unwelcome elsewhere. They were so caught up in amplifying the inclusive and loving voice of Christianity that they didn't have much time for the narrative of church decline, even though their membership wasn't particularly large and their pledge numbers weren't particularly grand.

All this to say that I was spared much of the trauma of the church decline narrative. My understanding of it was largely intellectual and something I picked up at seminary, which helped me think of our quantitative data about pledging and attendance a little more broadly. It helped me think about the social trends that created these numbers, trends that affected my family. I understood that, when my parents were children, families had to go to church because it was a way to accumulate social capital – church was where you found clients for your medical practice, demonstrated to the public that you were a trustworthy person so your law practice would flourish, where you found a spouse. Some people had morals clauses in their employment contracts that required them to be church members. By the time my parents grew up, this was no longer the case. There was little financial or social motive for them to attend church and my dad managed to run a successful small business with the networks he created at the golf course. The only motive was spiritual, and, for my parents, their spiritual needs were met elsewhere. To this day in fact, when asked his religious affiliation my father replies “On Sunday mornings, I worship at Timber Ridge Golf Course.”

I've settled on two key takeaways from thinking about these trends.

First, the full churches of the 1950's seem to have been, at least in some cases, a result of social pressure and social norms, rather than some great national spiritual hunger. And, while this may have been healthy for the quantitative data of attendance and giving numbers, I suspect that it was not spiritually healthy, a suspicion that is confirmed when I think about how many American churches of this period, particularly powerful white churches, colluded with the KKK, actively prevented women from leaving abusive relationships, and formed one of the loudest voices in opposition to the burgeoning gay rights movement.

Second, our church will never be like that again. Progressive Christians no longer rely on people coming to church because it's what people do, or out of habit, or even out a sense of obligation. We have to come up with something different, something better, than counting numbers, counting dollars and pretending that

quantitative data can give us information about spiritual health. We are at a moment of change, a moment of reformation. A moment when we are forced renounce the church as an institution of power that lives at the center of social norms and to embrace it as an institution of transformation. We are at a moment of crisis and a moment of opportunity. How lucky we are to be alive right now!

And if I don't really have a lot of strong feelings about this church decline narrative, I do have a lot of feelings about this moment of change and reformation. Even right now, I'm having, as my college kids used to say, all the feels and I'm trying to keep it together because I'm up here in front of you. I feel so much the power of God's presence knowing that we are the generations called to create a church that runs on inclusion, rather than social pressure. I feel so overjoyed that we have the precious responsibility of reshaping a church to bring spiritual health to the world, rather than money and prestige to our own name. I feel exhilarated by the possibilities and promise of the future of the church. I hope that, even in the midst of some of this congregation's healthy and holy grief about the changing church, you can feel some of that exhilaration too.

And this is where I find myself really identifying with the magi in today's reading. While I'm exhilarated, ready to ride my camel toward that wonderful star, I know that we are on a journey, as the church in America. I know that we have seen the star at its rising, caught a glimpse of what the church might be, and now we have to do the work get there. I know that this trip means giving up some of our sense of comfort and travelling in unfamiliar ways to get to a baby in a manger. I know that the ride will be bumpy and that we will get jostled around. We will get sand in our ears and camel hair on our pants and I am still so ready to go! And while I get excited thinking about this journey for the church universal, here at Second Church, my joy is thinking about this journey in terms of Faith Formation and spiritual growth. We're seeing the ways in which historical models of doing religious education are no longer effective. Sunday School, which has been the norm in American Christianity for the last two hundred years, seems to have run its course in terms of usefulness. Like a secular public school, it required on a certain measure of coercive power to ensure attendance (which, like a secular public school, doesn't mean it's not beneficial), and the church, thanks be to God, no longer has that. And like a secular public school, students graduated and they never came back. I grieve that this was the experience of my parents and of so many people in my life. Similarly, the age and gender segregated model of Sunday School-Youth Fellowship-Marry a Church Person-Men's Bible Study and Women's Auxiliary no longer makes sense. The job market dictates that young professionals, and even entire families, move frequently for work, sometimes across the country. Sports schedules, work schedules, and the holy and righteous needs for sleep and family time mean that Sunday School and church attendance is sporadic for most families and even for many adults with no children. For middle and high school students, pressure to build a compelling college application means that church or youth group attendance carries a high opportunity cost in terms of time spent studying or at a more marketable extracurricular activity. And adults are working more hours than ever for an increasingly less valuable dollar, which means that going to church, once a key personal marketing strategy, now requires a significant sacrifice of that most valuable resource: time.

In recognition of these realities, we are working to redesign Second Church's offerings to move from a historical Christian education model to a model of lifelong faith formation, a program from which one never graduates, a program in which authentic experiences of faith can justify the sacrifice of time. We're adjusting, changing, and implementing new programs for adults and high school students with steps like building a group of young adult mentors to strengthen youth group programs, asking the big questions together at Dinner Church, and looking for new opportunities for faith-based activism. But in all of this, we begin this process of transformation with our ministry to children. In just a few weeks, on January 28, we will begin the exciting experiment of having Second Church children in worship with us regularly. It's no accident that we begin this experiment in Epiphany – this is the time of year when we remember that God's wisdom and mercy is often communicated through the presence of children and when we marvel that the powerful and wise Magi would forsake their palaces (and their libraries!) to seek wisdom from a baby. It's the time when we honor the leadership of children, a key image from the Hebrew Prophets to the Gospels. We'll greet our children with a playground area in the front of the church, with stuffed animal prayer buddies and more robust activity packets,

but we'll also be allowing them to lead us into a new kind of worship that makes more sense for the world today – worship that engages all of our senses, worship that remember the beauty of the human body, worship grounded in experience.

Inviting children into worship is not a consolation prize because Sunday School attendance is low. It's not a stopgap measure until Second Church gets back on its feet. We're not cancelling or discontinuing Sunday School so much as we're experimenting with a new model of engaging children. It's an experiment in a new model of lifelong faith formation, one that recognizes the realities of family life in America today, one that sees faith as a lifelong project rather than a program from which one graduates, one that exposes us to meaningful and compelling worship perhaps even before we have the words to describe it. Of course there will be bumps, sand in our ears and camel hair on our pants and disruptions in worship and things we don't expect, as we journey the star, toward wisdom, as we journey toward religious community that transforms us now and continues to transform us for a lifetime, but I commit to seeing these bumps as part of the road to Bethlehem, their own kind of spiritual discipline on our path the child Christ and the life of transformation he sets before us. So, my fellow magi, what do you say? Shall we head to Bethlehem?