

Rector's Corner

Worship, Evangelism, and Authenticity

These three concepts are intimately connected. While every priest has liturgical preferences, my goal for Advent has been to restore the fullness of our worship traditions, rather than to remake the parish in my own image. So, for example, while I believe in principle that paid singers are a delightful and compelling addition to worship, the reason why one of the first things I restored here was the use of paid singers was not my belief in their value, but the fact that they are part of Advent's pre-Covid liturgical practices that many parishioners wanted restored as soon as possible. By the same token, one person who was upset about the use of Sanctus bells claimed that Advent had "never" used them; I pointed out that the church had two sets of them, both acquired before I got here. Another parishioner was disappointed that we didn't use incense at the Christmas services last year, so I decided to use it at 8 PM on Christmas Eve, but not at 5 PM, so people can choose the experience they want.

Occasionally, people have suggested that Advent make a radical change in its worship practices of one sort or another, because they have seen or heard of churches with radically different worship practices that have higher attendance than Advent. While I share their desire to grow our membership, I am not willing to do so at the cost of alienating current members. For one thing, from what I've seen and heard of, radical changes of practice are much more likely to cause attendance to drop than to rise. For another, if another church in town is succeeding with a different style of worship, it seems unlikely that people would be drawn away from there to a church that is attempting to imitate them.

The best reason for us to tread lightly with change is that Advent is attracting new members right now. We have welcomed several new families and individuals during my brief tenure, and we are getting signs of interest for even more. For a church with as many traumas in its recent history as ours, we're doing about as well as we could hope for. It seems that our new families are attracted to Advent's warm and friendly welcome, and our worship which is accessible but nevertheless offers a taste of the ritual and tradition of historic Anglicanism.

According to Fr. Eric Kahl, who has longstanding ties to Advent and recently facilitated our Mutual Ministry Review, someone considering joining any group or organization has three basic questions: What is this group all about? Do I want to join? How do I join, i.e., what is the cost/time commitment/expectations of members? A Lenten study of the Episcopal Church's Catechism should give a good answer to the third question. To give a satisfying answer to the first question – and we should remember that the answer is not obvious to a newcomer – we must be our authentic selves, both individually and collectively. Inauthentic churches are as off-putting to newcomers as a fake smile. Fortunately, our authenticity in corporate worship,

ministries, and personal conversations is helping satisfy the world's deep hunger for a relationship with God, and that should give all of us joy, hope, and satisfaction.

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