

Sermon for Pentecost
RCL Lectionary, Year B
Acts 1:15-17, 21-26; Psalm 1; 1 John 5:9-13; John 17:6-19
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The Episcopal Church of Our Saviour
Mill Valley, California

What Does this Mean?
by The Rev. Richard E. Helmer

There has been a lot of talk and a lot of writing in recent years about the “emerging church.”

“What is it and what does this mean?” many of us who like to be in the know have asked. The answer that comes back says it’s something post-denominational, post-evangelical, post-Christian Right, post-institutional, post-Mainline, post-liberal, post-modern and just about post-everything. It’s marked by people who have grown tired of old theological, social, and political battles and want to gather and serve in a renewed, authentic way around Christ. It is “emerging” because it is new and largely undefined, it is not led by traditional church leadership, and it lacks coherent structure. It is not bound by the walls of buildings or the traditional geographical and demographic consistencies of parishes and congregations. It is much more diverse than the church has been in recent times, and much harder to pin down on the map than our usual steeple and sanctuary or figure out based on the old denominational labels.

In our Episcopal Diocese here in the Bay Area, we’re being led in fits and starts towards something resonant with this emerging church movement. . . something called “area ministry.”

“What does this mean?” many of us who like to be in the know have asked. No one seems to have an exactly straight or clear answer. But it has something to do with traditionally Episcopal congregations working together with other church congregations, local community organizations, and individuals wanting to make a difference in the world. It has no absolutely set structure or clear agenda, except to further the work of the Gospel of Christ Jesus given us by the Spirit. And it is taking root first amongst those congregations of the Diocese that are having a hard time making it on their own anymore and where the older way of being church congregations in isolation, insulated in many ways from their most immediate neighborhoods, is no longer possible. Area ministry is promised to make us all more diverse than the Episcopal Church has been in the Bay Area in recent times, and much harder to pin down on the map than our usual parishes and missions, and the steeple and sanctuary based on our old notions of being “church.”

Much closer to home, here at Church of Our Saviour, those of us paid to track the numbers along with those of us who have been part of this parish for many years have noticed over the past few years a huge influx of children. Some Sundays, they’ve amounted to over one third of our worshipping congregation. Others of us have noticed increasing public engagement of members of this parish community with the community of Mill Valley and beyond, from starting a coalition to address the ongoing challenges of our communities’ youth to hosting a “Get Ready” workshop here tonight. . . to at long last getting into the messiness of the fact that our members are involved in the work of the Church and the Gospel in so many ways – many of them previously unarticulated – outside of the limited times and places this parish regularly meets.

So is that just being Episcopalian? Is it simply our living more deeply into the usual feisty Church of Our Saviour with a flavor of living in iconoclastic, irreverent Marin? Or is it the beginnings of becoming part of the emerging church, part of learning to engage in area ministry?

What does this mean? What is meant by all this buzz about emerging church and area ministry? What is meant by all the talk of declining institutional churches, the end of an era and the beginning of a new, undefined one? What exactly is meant by all this new life in our midst and what best to do with it? Is it just a passing fad or something truly new and life giving? Part of me wants to answer: Beats me! Part of me wants to laugh with joy and call it the work of the Spirit. Because, like the first apostles, we are met by a

Spirit who is suddenly stirring up the people and the children, surprising us and bewildering us by throwing open the doors of institutional religion and knocking down the barriers that have divided us from our sisters and brother for so long.

This Holy Spirit, like the Holy Spirit at the first Pentecost, seems to care little about the way we think things ought to be, and is infinitely more interested in bringing together the people and the gifts that make up who we are becoming. This Spirit risks us being called crazy, messy, unorthodox. . . maybe even a little bit drunk. This Spirit who makes our life as a community unpredictable and full of surprises, who breathes new life into old traditions and questions the previously unquestionable. Who wreaks havoc on our best-laid and most careful plans and closely held assumptions about the way things are so that new life in the Gospel may emerge.

This morning we baptize Ian Maxwell Van Kriedt into this life in the Spirit. And as James and Michelle and his godparents and all who love him already know, the Spirit is already working through Ian, making life unpredictable and full of surprises...uncertain and unscheduled, emerging and unpredictable. This is truly a Spiritual challenge children pose the most organized of parents. And you'll probably note with me that the Spirit did not wait for the institution to act through the ritual of baptism to make vivacious life appear in Ian.

The Spirit waits for no person, no church, no institution. The best most of us can do is simply run to try to keep up.

Truth is, the Spirit is the most anti-institutional person of the Trinity. Jesus took on the institution - both political and religious - and all of its evils. The result was the cross. But the Spirit seems to follow the passion and the resurrection as Jesus bid and sweeps the whole institutional lot away. The Spirit of God in Christ overturns the whole thing, wreaking havoc on human arrogance and making our sense of power a laughingstock...so that the entire fabric of human life, the whole of creation, may be made new by the breath of grace.

The Good News, of course, is that this Spirit works as God's Spirit has always done - through people. . . the People of God. . . filling us with new grace and energy for ministry. Building up a new community organically and sometimes spontaneously out of the old. . . an emerging one that defies old institutional limitations with a renewed sense of mission and purpose. . . of grace for a world in need. This is the adventure of grace that began at Pentecost, this day we've come to celebrate as the birthday of the Church.

It's into that grace and that grace we honor in Ian this day through baptism. And it's on that Church - made of the People of God - not merely an institution - but community made of the People of God endowed with the gifts of the Spirit. . . It's on this Church that Ian will have claims on in the years to come.

What happens next? Well a baptism, if I have to lay odds. But what happens to this place and all of us together in an hour or a day or a week or a year? And what will it mean? Beats me! The excitement of not knowing for certain keeps me in this life of the Spirit...

How about you?