

Newsletter Article
St. John's Episcopal Church
Charleston, West Virginia

Wrestling with the Big Questions

Recently I traveled to Indianapolis with two other representatives from our Church Commission for Children. We had the opportunity to participate in an intentional process called a consultation. Our task was "to help inform and prepare for the future of Christian Formation in the Episcopal Church." Nearly 400 of us gathered, representing every diocese in The Episcopal Church, USA. We came from seminaries, the House of Bishops, Provincial Christian Education networks and congregations. Imagine that many Episcopalians collaborating toward a single goal! As the welcome letter we received from the church Mission Program Office stated, "It suggests that we are moving forward in the life and learning of the Episcopal Church and that as we move forward, God is transforming us."

The process had begun with an earlier assessment of the 'big questions.' Most of us have at least one that seems to well up from our very soul. You know, that one thing you'd ask if you and God were in the same room. For example, "OK God, what exactly do you want me to do?" Episcopalians participating in the first phase had revealed the one question they would like to ask God. In Indianapolis, our phase was titled "Wrestling with the Big Questions." We were seeking new, fruitful ways to engage others and ourselves in struggling, as the poet Rilke suggests, to live the questions now.

Writer, teacher and activist, Dr. Parker J. Palmer was the keynote speaker. (Dare I call him our wrestling coach?) He emphasizes the importance of being rooted and connected with our souls, despite living in a culture that makes it quite difficult. Dr. Palmer's background as a Quaker informs his writing and his latest book; *A Hidden Wholeness: the Journey Toward an Undivided Life* was the foundation for our meeting. It describes how we can support one another toward living in congruence with our souls, a vital part of Christian formation. Dr. Palmer has written, *Spiritual formation in a broken world* (means) the creation of bounded, safe and trustworthy communal spaces where the soul is welcomed and invited to show up, to speak its truth and to make its claim on the living of our lives. In Indianapolis we gained experience in facilitating the space he described, where 'that of God' in every person is honored.

All of us would gather to hear Dr. Palmer. Then we went to small groups of about eight to practice his methods and reflect on questions and share stories. The information from our small groups was sent back to Dr. Palmer and the event's organizers to be woven into our next gathering. This continued through about five rounds. Our small groups considered the role of hospitality in faith formation, what it means to live in faith, how it feels to hold that safe space for another as their soul speaks, how healing it is to use that space to deepen our own connection to soul.

You may wonder how my experience could have any immediate implications for St. John's. I'd say Dr. Palmer's ideas could help all of our committees and classes. Any of our parish interactions could benefit. I hope you will get the book from the library or Common Prayer Bookstore and read it. Perhaps, people may even want to form a book study group.

The process begun by our national church will go on. Some Indianapolis participants were uncomfortable with the idea that we were only part of the process, different people decided the questions, and still others will carry the process forward. At the opening devotion for the

gathering, we heard part of a prayer by Archbishop Oscar Romero. We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work...[I]t may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for God's grace to enter and to do the rest. I found it exciting just to be a small part of the process.

Please contact me if you'd like to read the list of Big Questions and see the recommendations that came from Indianapolis. I hope, in years to come, we will enjoy a stronger Episcopal community because of this ongoing work.

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