

Press Release

Wrestling with the Big Questions . . .

If you could ask God three big questions, what questions would you ask? How does your faith, church or the Bible help you with these questions? How do you wish they helped you more?

For some, the Bible is the “Big Answer Book” for questions about God and life. However, if we were to open the Bible with new eyes, we might discover that it can also be a “Big Question Book.” Big questions keep us thinking, talking and listening from our heart and deepest yearnings. Jesus was fond of big questions, asking them often and referencing those that were asked by others. A random sampling could include:

- “Which of you by being anxious about your life can add one cubit to his span of life?” (Matthew 6:27)
- “If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you?” (Luke 6:32)
- “Who do you say that I am?” (Luke 9:18)
- “Who among you, if his child asks for bread will give him a stone?” (Matthew 7:11)
- “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Mark 15:33)
- “What is truth?” (John 18:38)
- “Am I my brother’s keeper?” (Genesis 4:9)
- “If God is for us, who can be against us?” (Romans 8:31)

From January 13-16, 2006 over 300 Episcopalians gathered in Indianapolis to begin addressing the “big questions” about the 21st century vocation of theological education in the Episcopal Church. This consultation brought together various stakeholders in our Church who have a passion for Christian education and formation for all ages: bishops, seminary deans and faculty, diocesan Christian educators, parish Church School teachers, clergy, youth and young adult leaders and staff from various ministry areas at the Episcopal Church Center.

Dr. Parker Palmer facilitated conversations across these varied disciplines, forging new relationships and collaborations for strengthening theological education for all ages in the church and the world. The big question before those gathered will be, “How are congregations, clergy, Christian educators, seminaries and others involved in theological education called to help people in our congregations and communities engage in the big questions of their lives?” The Rev. Juanita Palmerhall from the Diocese of Minnesota served as the “Weaver” blending stories of how Christian formation at its best is lived out in community and faithfulness.

Prior to this event, various “pre-consultations” were held throughout the Episcopal Church, seeking to learn the “big questions” that pull at the hearts of people as they seek answers from the faith community – or not. The data collected in these conversations were shared with Dr. Palmer. Many of these questions were posted in the plenary gathering room of the consultation. Questions raised by children tended to focus on

concerns for their immediate surroundings: Why doesn't God help my Mommy get better? Why are there bullies at school? What is heaven like? Why am I lonely? Why do I do wrong things? Who made you? Children were more open to asking questions following a story, in simple conversation and expressing their thoughts through art responses.

For adults throughout the country, themes were very similar: What is the purpose of life in this world and the next? What is my reason for being? Does God really exist and listen to each of us? Why is there evil, violence, personal suffering and worldwide discord? Why did you create such imperfect human beings? While adults are comfortable going to others for help and sharing many things with friends and family, they are longing for ongoing spiritual relationships and communities where they can explore their faith and questions. Adults who had participated in EFM (Education for Ministry) were most likely to have engaged in such conversations and have found a safe environment for doing so. The church and clergy were not generally perceived to be the source of primary nourishment for most adults, whether they were active members of a faith community or not.

Following this gathering and consultation of education and formation leaders in January, reports will be prepared for General Convention 2006 as well as a national body, "Proclaiming Education for All" (PEALL), charged with studying theological education in the church and making recommendations in 2009.

The ultimate goal will be to equip our church on the national, diocesan and local level to fully attend to the formational needs of those who come to the Episcopal Church seeking God and a fuller knowledge of our call to live out our lives as God desires. As we "wrestle with the big questions" we desire to "love God with our mind as well as our heart and soul."

Sharon Ely Pearson
Children's Ministries & Christian Education Coordinator
Episcopal Diocese of Connecticut
spearson@ctdiocese.org