

TMC TIMES

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Start Up! Start Over! Conference at Kanuga filled TMC participants with ideas, energy and enthusiasm

By Nancy Stinson

Imagine yourself as a first-time visitor to your church. What do you see as you walk up to the front door? What do you notice when you enter the building? Does anyone acknowledge you? What is the feel of the place? Use all your senses. What colors do you see? Are there any smells that are memorable? What is the experience of the service, from beginning to end? Do you feel a sense of joy?

With this exercise, the **Rev. Bob Honeychurch** set the theme for participants in Start Up! Start Over! at Kanuga Conference Center near Hendersonville, N.C. in September. Program Officer for Congregational Vitality at the Episcopal Church Center in Los Angeles, Honeychurch uses his 24 years of experience



Trinity Memorial Church

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Tel: 215-732-2515

Fax: 215-732-2512

TMC Office Hours:

Tuesday-Friday: 10:00-6:00

TMC Services:

Sunday Eucharist 10:30
(with nursery care and
Sunday School)

TMC Web Site:

www.trinityphiladelphia.org

TMC E-mail:

TMCadministrator@verizon.net

Newsletter editor/ designer:

Katharine Kriebel
krkriebel@verizon.net

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as a parish priest in a variety of settings to guide others in “building and maintaining healthy, life-giving models of congregational life.”

For five days, Sallie van Merkensteijn, Sharon Dooley, Nancy Stinson, Father Ted Rice and 56 other conference participants were treated to a lineup of engaging, humorous and highly credible speakers, sharing their expertise in different aspects of church revitalization. I’d like to share some of things that were highlights for me.

Dr. C. Kirk Hadaway, director of research for the Episcopal Church Center in New York, laid out the social and demographic context of the Episcopal Church today: older, 87 percent non-Hispanic white, better educated and more affluent than the average churchgoer, mostly female and in decline.

He identified social trends that work against church growth, such as a general drift away from joining organizations and the view that attending church services takes away from family time, especially for women, who now comprise half the work force. Data show there are proportionately fewer white families, the historic pool from which Episcopalians are drawn, and those families have fewer children. Hadaway noted that while 86 percent of Americans claim a religious affiliation, and 42 percent say they attend church regularly, only 21 percent actually do attend worship during an average week.

The data also show that in churches with declining membership there often is serious conflict within the congregation, an absence of children participating in services, and too much predictability in the service. Moreover, he believes the impact of the strife resulting from the general convention in 2003 should not be underestimated as a factor in the overall decline of the church nationally.

On the other hand, Hadaway’s good news was that some Episcopal congregations are growing. Research shows that such churches are most likely to be younger congregations in newer suburbs or city centers. In surveys, their members say their church is:

- spiritually vital and alive,
- guided by a clear mission,
- willing to change to meet new challenges
- a positive force for change in its community, and
- actively recruiting new members.

Growing churches also tend to be multi-racial. They maintain a web site and offer parenting or marriage enrichment programs. Their clergy generate enthusiasm, know how to get people to work together and spend time in evangelism and the recruitment and training of lay leaders. Interestingly, the use of drums and other percussion instruments during the service is a growth signifier, according to Hadaway.

Not surprisingly, congregations that use several methods of following up with visitors and newcomers tend to grow more. And, while wishing doesn’t make it so, a congregation that is clear about wanting new members is more likely to attract them, he said. Churches with more than one service grow, and the more different the services, the greater the growth.



Building on the “reality check” provided by Hadaway’s research, subsequent speakers discussed a fascinating array of tactics employed by congregations of various denominations to increase their membership. **The Rev. Dr. Eric**

Elnes, senior pastor of the Countryside Community Church of Christ in Omaha, Nebraska has developed what he called “incarnational worship,” an experiential form of worship that brings together “the best of emerging Christian worship and artistic sensibilities with mainline theological commitments and practice.”

Elnes advocates taking an objective look at a church’s choice of language and viewpoint in its communication. For example, is insider language or jargon being used? Is the language inwardly focused, such “we offer, we believe, we practice, rather than “this is what you will experience, what you will receive, the difference you will find.” He suggested keeping in mind a basic principle of direct marketing: always write for those you want to reach.

Because objectivity is difficult, one inexpensive way to find out how a church is perceived in the neighborhood is to send vestry or other members out into the community to talk with residents and shopkeepers, Elnes said. Another way is for members to ask un-churched and non-Episcopalian friends to attend a service and provide feedback on their impressions.

Direct marketing, radio and television



advertising, signage, event marketing, public relations, Facebook, Twitter and other social networking technology are all items Elnes advised keeping in an evangelistic tool kit.



So, once a church has captured the interest of an individual, what’s next? **The Rev. Jeunee Cunningham** of Appomattox, Virginia, presented a comprehensive welcome-and-incorporation plan that encourages regular follow-up with newcomers for up to a year. She shared tips such as using a woman’s voice on the church’s outgoing voice mail



message, and making clear to first time visitors that, rather than expecting an offering from them, “today’s service is our gift to you.”

All of the speakers shared a variety of ways in which growing churches are incorporating different cultural practices and multi-media technology into services. Some employ screens to project words to songs not in the hymnal, as well as videos prepared by members and apropos to the liturgy, even scenes from commercial films that convey an important point.

One unexpected yet powerful example of incorporation was not part of the official agenda. **The Rev. Timothy “Poppa T” Holder**, currently on sabbatical, described establishing hip-hop services in Episcopal churches in the Bronx and Atlantic City. In an effort to attract young people of the neighborhood into his church he uses the language and music they relate to.

Six-feet four, rotund, white, bald and openly gay, Holder might have seemed an unlikely proponent of hip-hop ministries. He told the *New York Times* he was inspired to begin celebrating hip-hop masses after sitting for six and a half hours in his Bronx stairwell while police sharpshooters used his apartment during a

standoff. That night he asked his bishop if his current work with his 150-member parish was relevant in a neighborhood where seven out of ten men had been incarcerated before their 40th birthdays.



The Rev. Timothy "Poppa T" Holder

Five years later, Holder has fulfilled one of his dreams, creating a hip-hop prayer book, which he shared with conference participants from inner-city parishes who attended his special presentation. Written in the hip-hop style, the prayers are

both reverent and appropriate to a liturgical service, but without the vulgar and misogynistic language often heard in the art form.

More traditional music soothed souls in 15-minute Sing and Pray sessions at the start of each assembly. Lydia Ruffin, a professional singer and songwriter and founder of Art & Soul Café in St. Louis, led the singing of sacred and secular songs in her own unique style in a voice not unlike that of Joan Baez.



"This was a great session, head and shoulders above the many similar conferences I've attended over the years," said Father Ted Rice. "There was just enough theory to establish a larger context. Most presentations were very practical, made by folks working in parishes and accomplishing exactly what we hoped to learn: what holds congregations back from

reaching their potential in serving God and their neighbors; how does a parish learn about and address the spiritual yearnings of their neighbors; how does a congregation welcome new members and address their needs, rather than requiring newcomers to fit in to our patterns and practices.

"We met a lot of wonderful folks facing challenges not unlike our own, who shared their successes and disasters," Father Rice said. "We came home with a treasure trove of ideas and phone numbers to call for advice and help."

Sallie van Merkensteijn also appreciated mixing with others in the same boat as we are. "I didn't know church could be such fun," she said. "The conference opened our eyes to possibilities, and, oh joy, it brought us into community with other churches. We are not alone!"

Said Sharon Dooley, "If I were forced to choose a single word to describe the conference, it would be "energy." Every session was filled with it – energy in prayer, energy in song, energy in worship, energy from presenters and participants. I wish I could have bottled it and brought it home to share with everyone at TMC!"

