

Advent Lutheran Church
Doing Life Together
September 29, 2024
Acts 2:42-47

I grew up in the church. More specifically, I was raised in the Presbyterian Church. As a child, I knew that there was one big hurdle between me and the world my parents and other adults inhabited: confirmation.

In order to become a member, I had to complete a lengthy educational experience led by a rather intimidating woman: The Rev. Dr. Elizabeth Johnson Pense – who just happened to be one of the first women ordained in that denomination. It didn't seem fair to me that she taught religion to university students during the week before teaching junior high students about whatever it was one needed to know to get confirmed on weekends. At twelve years of age, I did not feel ready for any class led by a college professor – especially not one that met in the church library and included lectures on Christian history and Presbyterian polity.

While the class was challenging, it was also interesting. I can't recall everything I learned, but I do remember a few things from the experience:

- my teacher wasn't as terrifying as I expected;
- Christianity was a far more interesting and much more diverse religion than I ever imagined; and
- Presbyterians pay close attention to three books: the Bible, the Book of Order, and the Book of Confessions.

Skipping ahead in my life story . . . my next experience of confirmation came while I was in seminary. I was invited to lead confirmation in, of all places, a Presbyterian church.

Since that initial leadership experience as a seminarian, I have helped shape confirmation programs in congregations affiliated with multiple denominations, including the ELCA. They have differed rather dramatically in format and learning objectives.

While the shortest such experience took only eight weeks, the longest required a three-year commitment - as we do here at Advent. Despite these differences, the journey was meaningful to the participants and prepared them to claim the Christian faith as their own.

Once confirmed, these young people are every bit as much a member as their parents, grandparents, or even their great grandparents.

While one doesn't really graduate from confirmation, it often serves in a similar way to predict future behavior. In many congregations the number of teenagers actively involved in Christian education declines dramatically following confirmation.

Since confirmation should be the start not the end, this is disheartening. As I look around the sanctuary, I doubt that any of you would suggest that your child or grandchild drop out of school in 7th or 8th grade to enter the workforce. In like manner, I hope none of you will believe anyone is fully spiritually formed for a lifetime at their confirmation.

Lifelong learning has become a popular term in our culture over the last few decades. We are never too old to learn something new. And, as followers of the Way of Jesus, we must be intentional in seeking out lifelong spiritual learning opportunities.

Intentional faith development is one of the five key practices of fruitful congregations. Robert Schnase, the United Methodist Bishop who wrote a book on the topic explains the practice in this way:

Intentional Faith Development describes the practice of congregations that view the ministries of Christian education, small-group work, faith-forming relationships, and Bible study as absolutely critical . . . They offer opportunities for people to engage in faith development at the church (Come and See), but also look for ways to offer

opportunities for people who may never enter the church or become part of the congregation (Go and Do) ¹

As I read that definition, I suspect many of you who are quite involved in this congregation were trying to determine how we measure up. A few days ago, a number of folks gathered for our final roundtable discussion. They shared some of the ways Advent has provided opportunities in the past and some of what we offer now, including rather traditional churchy options like

- Bible studies
- Sunday school classes
- VBS
- Book clubs
- And small groups

They also shared some wonderfully enriching experiences from other congregations alongside some hopes for what we might do together here in the future.

Whether you have been here faithfully for many years or are a newcomer, let me assure you that wherever you are on the journey of faith you are most welcome to participate in any and all of our congregation's enrichment opportunities.

Some time ago, I developed and taught a course called "The Journey of Faith." The title was intended to suggest to prospective participants that no matter when or where they may have started, they have now become part of a journey that will continue for the rest of their lives. And, this concept of journeying is one that is present all across the pages of Scripture.

I am glad to have you as my traveling companions at this stage of my journey. And, while we each have our own journey, I thank God that we never travel alone.

Which leads me to reflect on some of the ways I've been blessed to do life together in Christian community.

¹ Robert Schnase. *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations, Revised* (Abingdon Press, 2018), p.84.

In the first ELCA congregation I served, we prioritized connecting members to groups. The congregation provided around 30 ongoing small groups – some meeting in homes and others on the church campus or other public spaces. They also offered a smaller number of much larger life-stage specific social groups that gathered for social events and provided safe spaces for people to make meaningful connections. Imagine, for example, a group for young families or one for active seniors. Amazingly, all these years later, many of the relationships developed in those groups continue to impact people’s faith journeys and many friendships now span decades.

More recently, I’ve been a part of the small groups program at my home church – Cathedral of Hope United Church of Christ. Since it is a large church that attracts people from all across the DFW area, people living at some distance are unlikely to travel to the campus often. About 3 years ago I said “yes” when asked to host and facilitate a small group in my home for people living in Tarrant County. As the group has grown, it has brought people together who otherwise would have never met much less developed deep friendships. Our time together each Thursday night is life-giving. In addition to learning together, we are there for one another to celebrate when life goes exceedingly well or to provide support when challenges arise. Interestingly enough, the church recently decided to change the names of these groups from small groups to life groups. How wonderful!

Maybe it would be easier if we all just dropped out after confirmation. I imagine that in recent years at least a few of my confirmation students have looked at me in the same way I once saw my teacher all those years ago. After all, I spent nearly a decade as an adjunct college professor teaching religion and I stand before you today wearing a robe I’ve most often worn when leading worship in Presbyterian churches.

I am not here this morning, however, to suggest the simplest path for you or the easiest way forward for Advent Lutheran Church. Instead, I seek to reorient us to the importance of the

practice of intentional faith development here in this congregation.

So what is this intentional faith formation thing really all about?

A contemporary translation of the Bible puts it this way:

“They committed themselves to the teaching of the apostles, the life together, the common meal, and the prayers.”²

I invite you to be intentional about spending your time doing the same.

Amen.

² The Message. Acts 2:42.