

“Inspiring Practices of Mission Today”

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I want to begin by saying what an honor and privilege it is to be with you all in this space of intentional, international engagement around the practices of mission today. What a vitally important topic for the church and even more so for the world.

In the Heartland Conference of the United Church for Christ, USA, which is the context in which I am currently engaging my day-to-day ministry, we have been working together on the vital intersection of how people come to be formed as followers of Jesus in ways that engage the world right where people live. We are aware that there is less and less deep engagement with the church throughout our culture and consequently less engagement with the forming narratives and practices of the Christian faith.

At the same time, there is a God-given hunger that people carry. These days it is often expressed in a malaise about life personally and globally. The question is: “How might the Christian faith meet this hunger in ways that are intentional, healing, life-giving and vocationally forming?”

In recently years, we have been engaging a response to this reality in the Heartland Conference through a Faith Formation Network and an ever-evolving model called, “Learn It, Live It, Share It”. The “It” refers to the sacred texts of the Christian tradition. In some ways, there is nothing new about this model at all.

What is renewing in and for us is the intentionality and the variety of contexts in which this model is being engaged. No longer is the context simply one of educational offerings given on a Sunday morning in a church building which has been the predominate method and time of faith formation in our settings of ministry. Truthfully, the context of this engagement is wherever God’s people are found. While this has always been true, the lived practiced in our setting has not always engaged this truth in practice.

We are also aware that Christian formation is about more than just our ideas about God but vitally must foster openings whereby the alive presence of God’s love is given space to become a lived experience in people’s lives in ways that heal, transform, and ignite a different way of being in the world.

Some important questions arise, “In what ways are we fostering openness to the space of hunger which people so often carry?” “What is the shape and form our listening such that we can decenter ourselves in love and be truly available to the hungers and hurts which others are naming, even if they may not yet understand that the experience of their lives holds a precious opening for which the Gospel of Jesus Christ may offer a life-giving discovery of a God who loves them unconditionally and transformatively?”

It would seem that such questions in a time of COVID might be especially hard to engage, given the limitations which the pandemic has created. Strangely, however, we have been noticing that COVID has increased the “God-hunger” in people’s lives (whether they would call it that or not). Also, it has forced we who are the church out of the safe spaces of our buildings into online engagements not

only with our own members but with people on the search for something that can fill the hunger which this season has intensified.

We have come to recognize that the world is indeed every congregation's parish. In practical terms, we are discovering that people who would never have entered our church buildings are entering the virtual space of online engagement, whether or not they live geographically close to where any particular congregation's building might be located. Indeed, there have been engagements that have been and are international in scope.

I have heard from many settings of ministry that there is more engagement with "church" now than there was before COVID. In this space some are discovering, for the first time, not only the narratives of faith, but also the Spirit which gave birth to those narratives and indeed continues to give birth to the church in and through an ongoing Pentecost presence.

The truth is this work of spiritual and vocational formation fostered in the online environment is messy at best. There is much that we do not yet know about how God will use us in this time. What we do know is that God yearns to do something in us and through us as agents of redemptive, healing, love, even in the midst of the brokenness we carry as human beings.

We are clear that there is a story worth knowing not as some dead relic of the past, but as a God-breathed proclamation of the present reality of Loving presence that is worthy of our whole lives, heart, mind, soul, and strength. Even more we are aware that this work is best done in and through community local and global (in person and virtually) through which we are mutually encouraged, challenged, invited into an ever-renewed discovery of our beloved identity, made known to us in Jesus the Christ. It is a strange and gifted time, to be called into this life-giving mission and it is a delight to share in such work with all of you.