

Answers to the Four Questions: The Rev. Canon Britt Olson

Question 1: In the diocese we have a wide range of church communities that are small, medium, large; suburban, urban, rural. Our churches also have a wide range of socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. Please tell us how you have entered into and joined differing communities and found a place of shared delight that enabled you and them to work together.

I wasn't raised as a Christian. My first real sense of Christian community came through the example of fellow high-school students who loved God and as a result reached out with love and care to me. Through them I became curious about Jesus and was transformed "out of death into life" in a way that radically re-oriented my life. I was 17 years old and a high school senior.

Over the next decade I took delight in experiencing God in a wide variety of Christian communities. I was baptized in a Baptist church with full immersion and the sharing of my spiritual testimony. Fellow Christian college students invited me to Bible study and non-denominational worship on campus. I attended church anywhere I was invited and worshipped with Pentecostals, Roman Catholics, Presbyterians, Lutherans, and many others. As a campus minister, I led students in partnership with predominately African American churches in Tacoma and Portland to engage in ministry with those affected by poverty and prejudice in very urban environments. We lived in intentional Christian community with the people we served. I was a committed follower of Christ but not a committed member of any one church. I was a "church dater!"

At last I was invited to my first Episcopal Church for the Great Vigil of Easter at St. Timothy's in Salem, Oregon. It was a joyful surprise to discover that everything I treasure and am nourished by was present. There was great beauty, drama, Scripture, ancient chant, immersion baptism, the sacraments, history, lively singing, faithful people and afterwards a tremendous feast with wine, food and dancing. My heart and head were full. I was home.

Since that time I have had the privilege of being a part of a wide variety of congregations over four dioceses and one foreign country. In nearly every case it was the combination of opportunity and personal invitation that helped me to discern which church community to engage with and allowed me to enter into relationship with them. This is why the spiritual practices of invitation, welcome and hospitality are so essential to my ministry and my leadership with congregations.

As I made a formal commitment to the Episcopal Church first as a member, then as a lay staff associate and finally as a postulant, I had the joy of being part of St. Michael and All Angels Church in Portland, Oregon. They nurtured me and my gifts and gave me the opportunity to contribute to strengthening their ministries to children and youth as well as in the areas of adult formation, worship and preaching.

During seminary I chose two very small congregations for field education since I wanted to experience family-sized church ministry. One was the quirky and gifted church of Good Shepherd, Berkeley and the other was a rural parish near Oxford, England. In the first I learned more about liturgy and experienced some of the best preaching ever. In the second I focused on care for the dying and funeral liturgies.

Since ordination I've served a large, highly-resourced, suburban church in Lake Oswego as well as a working-class congregation in Sparks, Nevada. In my diocesan work I've celebrated Easter in tiny rural missions, multi-ethnic urban churches, cathedrals and in the park in the pouring rain with a Filipino congregation. I've cleared a rattlesnake off the front steps before being able to enter the church, preached at outdoor chapels with dogs and a tame porcupine, had my sermons translated into Spanish and Swahili, genuflected in alb, chasuble and cope in historic churches without air-conditioning and enjoyed every minute of these diverse and delightful experiences.

Question 2: Please describe an experience of leading or supporting a group of people to innovate a new ministry. Describe how the idea arose; the nature of the innovation, how the team came to consensus, implemented their plans and what the outcome was.

When I arrived as Rector of a congregation that had been served for the past 32 years by the same faithful priest I found a small but committed group of people ready for change. For many years their building had remained closed and locked during most of the week so that it wouldn't be damaged. The church is located in an area with a great deal of poverty. Over 80% of the children at the local school qualify for the free lunch program. There is no place for the kids to play, no local recreation programs or Boys and Girls Club within walking distance and the school building is too old to accommodate an after-school program. The closed and abandoned-looking church building had become a target for vandalism.

The congregation's budget generously supported other ministries by writing checks that totaled nearly 20% of all their income. But some wanted to do more. They wanted to actually get involved in the lives of the people they might be able to assist. I called everyone together who wanted to explore the possibilities. I also invited some people from community agencies who knew the neighborhood and the needs of the people. Twenty-five people showed up.

As we began to brainstorm there was an initial excitement but then people began to raise objections. We didn't have the budget to support this. We didn't have enough people who would be willing and able to volunteer. It might conflict with our own programs. I asked everyone to take fifteen minutes of silence and to ask God, "What would you have us do?" Afterwards, one by one, each person shared their conviction that we were being called to provide a free meal to children after school had ended.

We formed teams to recruit volunteers, prepare the kitchen and promote the program. I wrote grants and raised money. The first day Kid's Klub opened we had a news crew, 20 volunteers and 2 children! I preached on the connection between the food we receive at the altar and the food we shared in our parish hall. A few more children arrived. We listened to them, we met their parents and we shared their lives. We realized they needed more than food. So we started a tutoring program. I started making more connections. One of our 75 year-old parishioners turned out to be amazing at arts and crafts. The local librarians did story-telling and I got a grant from the Church Periodical Club to purchase books. The word got out on the street and more children came.

We started getting tired. We couldn't keep the building clean from all the use it was getting. The same volunteers had been carrying much of the load. I was putting a lot of time into trouble-shooting and discipline. We needed more structure. I began to recruit a board made up of parishioners, parents and community leaders. We stepped up our fund-raising by hosting

an annual taco fiesta where the parents of our original two children cooked all the food. Their daughter had by now learned enough English from Kid's Klub to be able to function independently at school. We wrote more grants, we hired first a director, and then her assistant. We helped Kid's Klub become a separate 501C3 organization.

Now the children who originally participated in the program come back as volunteers. Thousands of meals have been served. The vandalism ended. The building is still standing but it is no longer silent and shuttered. The happy sounds of children eating, learning, growing and being loved have hallowed the halls and transformed not only their lives, but the life of the church and the community.

Question 3: As you reflect on your life, what do you deeply love to do and brings you great joy? Tell us what fuels your fire. Please share a story of a time when you felt deeply satisfied doing what you love to do? How does that inform and inspire your ministry?

My spiritual life as a Christian began and has been shaped at the intersection between land and water. It is in such "thin places" that I most powerfully encounter the Holy One and receive strength and inspiration for the ministry I have been called to. I grew up in wild and western places and find my soul's rest while hiking, sailing, skiing and snowshoeing in the mountains or at the ocean. My weekly Sabbath encounters with God at the beach, by the lakeside or along the river are essential for my spiritual, emotional and physical well being.

Life lived at these borderlands is edgy. It can be exciting, challenging and unnerving. Life at the borders is often fecund and productive, fresh and changeable, risky and insecure. There are the natural borders between earth and sky, water and land, mountain and desert. There are cultural borders between people of "every tribe and language and nation." And there are the spiritual borders where divine meets human, flesh touches spirit and that which is immanent becomes transcendent.

I became a Christian while on a youth retreat at the Oregon coast. My family members are atheists and my exposure to the Christian story was minimal. That encounter with divine love and presence has shaped my life and ministry. It has made me powerfully aware of the outsider who by culture, background or any form of "otherness" feels excluded or ignored by the faith community. My ministry is to be a bridge builder; to provide an opportunity for the encounter between the human and the divine to take place and to develop the connection between individuals in Christian community.

I am particularly energized by deep spiritual encounters with young adults and those who are not part of the church. From the time I was a campus minister until today, my home has been a place that young adults congregate, are fed and explore their journeys of faith. Two years ago my husband and I were married after having each been single all of our lives. We share a commitment to hospitality and faith formation and are delighted to host 12 young adults in our home every week. As an extrovert, I enjoy engaging in conversations that probe the deeper spiritual experiences of people. Those wonderful encounters have helped me to shape and lead many workshops on evangelism that are primarily about listening and relationship rather than program or methodology.

One way these passions came together was on a sabbatical that took me along the entire Pacific coast and to New Zealand. Along the way I met people experiencing dynamic Christian

worship and congregational vitality in both the Episcopal Church as well as in emerging churches that meet in nightclubs and tattoo parlors. I lived and worshiped with the Maori people and was immensely privileged to be part of a three day gathering at their national, communal home for the election of their Archbishop. Everywhere I went I hiked and explored the beauty of both countries and ended my time by sailing in the eastern Caribbean. I returned in order to experience Holy Week and Easter with a congregation that over 7 years had developed into a healthy group of ministers able to coordinate a glorious series of liturgies culminating in the Great Vigil.

The experiences of this Sabbatical brought me deep joy, refreshment and renewal. I continue to wear the Maori greenstone carved in the shape of the unfurling fern tendril, the *koru* that symbolizes new life and new beginnings – the power of the resurrection for me and for all people.

Question 4: What aspects of the Episcopal Church do you value and find life-giving? How do the Episcopal Church, its structure and practice, and our Anglican heritage call you deeper into your relationship with God?

My spiritual life has been given room to grow and has flourished because I have made a commitment to be part of the Episcopal Church. After many years of church dating followed by the discovery of the beauty and power of the liturgy during my first Easter Vigil, I made the decision to join this particular communion of God's people. Long-term, faithful, committed relationships provide a "school for love" that develops spiritual maturity. Much of what I have learned about following Christ has been through my relationships with the great diversity of people I have lived with and loved (although not always liked!) as part of this Church.

I appreciate the richness of our history and tradition and the grounding that has provided me. It is a corrective to charismatic, personality-driven movements that lack depth and continuity. At the same time I delight in the openness to the Spirit which moves me out of my comfort zone. When I was in seminary in both England and the United States, I characterized my experience as having one foot deeply rooted in the soil of our past and the other stretched out over the ocean ready to explore new and exciting territory.

This Church has given me room for intellectual curiosity. I have been encouraged to ask questions and have been given access to a wide variety of scholarship that has broadened my mind and expanded my horizons. There is room for independence of thought within the framework of a communal relationship. I have been able to act and think with honesty and integrity and have that reciprocated at every level of our Church.

Being part of a larger Communion has been a tremendous blessing. With fellow Anglicans in Kenya the church in Nevada built a medical clinic through an on-going partnership. I have relationships that stretch across the world to Central America, Europe and New Zealand. I know myself to be part of a much larger Body and rejoice in its diversity. Personally I have benefitted from our ecumenical embrace of other denominations and I consider this general Anglican comprehensiveness to be a tremendous gift to the larger Body of Christ.

My vocation has been shaped by a commitment to *mutual* or *shared* ministry based in our Baptismal covenant. Both at the parish and diocesan level I have been part of re-visioning and re-structuring our work together to reflect greater mutuality and common mission. Serving in the leadership of two dioceses while the Standing Committee has been the Ecclesiastical Authority I

have been part of the literal and metaphorical dying process and of the grace-filled resurrection of hope and life that occurred as clergy and laity together offered their individual gifts for the purpose of building up the whole.

Each week in churches big and small; in rural, urban and suburban communities; across a large geographic territory I worship, preach, celebrate and share the sacraments. Sometimes there is a fabulous choir. Other times it's one guy with a guitar or "Synthia" the electronic organist. It may be Rite I with an East-facing orientation or contemporary with power-point and a band. There can be three hundred in church or three. I may be rested, centered and prepared or harried, exhausted and resentful. But God has never failed to show up for me. There has never been a time when I haven't been touched by grace during worship and been encouraged and strengthened to follow Jesus and to do the ministry I have been given to do. It is this weekly pattern of prayer and worship in community that shapes, nurtures and forms me ever more deeply as a beloved child of God and calls me to serve others more faithfully in Christ's name.