

Hidden Treasures

One of the joys of having accompanied my husband on his Intentional Interim Ministry in the Episcopal Church was the surprise that awaited us at each new place. Some of course, were less than joyful – but one that was particularly delightful was the discovery of the remnants of a late 19th – early 20th century Sunday School Teachers Library. During the early 1800's many Episcopal Churches had been established, first through the Sunday School Movement, and only years later would become a full-fledged worshipping congregation. Such was this particular parish which formally began in 1819 as a Sunday School; and it was interesting to see how it had continued to hold a high priority on Christian Education as the years unfolded. It seemed fitting for a parish in an academic community.

When the sexton, in a half-earthen tunnel portion of the basement, had discovered these hidden treasures, it was thought that this would make a nice Sunday evening project for the youth. After the dust has been blown away and the boxes unloaded, the youth worker had the foresight to have this jumble of books arranged in stacks, not by content - but by publication date, as she became aware that the books ranged from about 1870-1970.

While the earlier books tended to be slanted towards theory, a picture later began to emerge of a real "Sunday School Story" as actual curriculum began to appear. Each decade seemed to have its own theme reflecting the story in the larger church and society. What fun I had playing with these themes as I had been asked to help them organize their voluminous library materials, while I was on leave of absence from our own Diocesan Library back home.

Following the publication of the *New Hymnal of 1916* it appeared to sing its way into Sunday Schools across the nation to the tune of "Onward Christian Soldiers," while World War I raged abroad. At home, children marched from their "one room school house" with a male master teacher, and transitioned into their highly structured and regimented classrooms during the Twenties. Teacher certification, strictly graded levels, superintendents, and attendance awards all became the melody of the day.

The *1928 Prayer Book*, like most new innovations in the Church, took a while to be accepted, but eventual came to be embraced - and marked a definite shift towards worship in the content of Sunday School curriculum, which had previously been Bible oriented. An early edition of the prayer book, found among this collection, fell open at Morning Prayer, giving a message fairly typical for this decade of the Thirties. Prayer and devotion seemed to be the focus of a Church with a new book and a nation with an empty breadbasket.

Once again a new hymnal – the *Hymnal 1940* gave a new theme from an all time favorite: "I sing a Song of the Saints of God – and I mean to be one too!" At last the "age of the child" had begun to emerge. A previous generation had considered them to be "vipers" to be converted to humanity – now they can rank among the everyday saints. It was the decade of the Forties struggling to bring to fruition the prophetic statement of Horace Bushnell some hundred years earlier: "a child should grow up a Christian and never know himself as being otherwise." The shift from content centered to child-centered curriculum had begun.

In the banner years of the Fifties – the aftermath of World War II – babies were booming, church pews were crowded and indeed “all things did seem bright and beautiful” as we all loved to sing. No new prayer book, or hymnal to draft for another decade and thoughts and energies went into the full development of an official Church School Curriculum. “Seabury” began to ring as the official word that would chime well into the next decade. With it came the unofficial word “encounter,” which was received with mixed emotions to say the least. The Seabury Series was viewed by many in the field of Christian Education of all denominations, as a visionary example – far ahead of its time. A critical component was trained leadership, making adult education of primary importance and held the key to the real education of our children and youth.

The word “engagement” surfaces often in writings of this period, encouraging a personal engagement with Creation and Creator. It seems also to have been a description of a curriculum that engaged the Church in commitment for an in depth relationship. However, the late Sixties and early Seventies brought a raging storm with a cultural crisis far more real than academic, prompting the Church to act out what she had learned. Ironically the Church’s engagement in society, and the resulting financial toll, became the very issue that prevented the continuation of a curriculum that had taught its people well what to do.

And now forty some years later, the Episcopal Church is at another turning point of change, ready to join the chorus to “*Sing a New Church Into Being.*” How best can our current Lifelong Christian Formation process help us to do this? Where does our present day *treasure* lie? What about our children - so often *hidden* away in the basement of our churches? Could it be that they are already humming a faint tune that we have failed to hear? Be still, and listen up, now. Maybe they are inviting us to sing in harmony with them. After all, they are the ones who will be this New Church, long after we are strumming our harps in the Church Triumph.

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