

Welcoming the ‘Questers’
An ‘Emerging Spirit’ Sermon on John 3:1
Sunday March 4, 2007
Trinity United, Ottawa
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“Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews, came to Jesus by night.”

Did you ever wonder why Nicodemus came **at night**, to ask Jesus his questions? Do you think he was like so many spiritual seekers today, who aren’t sure if they want to be seen at church? Maybe he didn’t want to be publicly associated with Jesus? Or maybe he was embarrassed about asking his questions? Did he think he was supposed to know?...supposed to ‘believe’ Jesus strange teachings about being ‘born again of water and the Spirit’, when it didn’t really make sense to him? Did he worry that Jesus might not welcome him, given the ill will some other Pharisee teachers had publicly demonstrated toward this radical Jew?

Nicodemus was drawn to Jesus by the evidence, the ‘signs’ of Jesus’ healings. But Jesus’ language of redemption wasn’t according to the law that this learned Pharisee was used to. So Nicodemus came to Jesus questing for God, but he came tentatively, with reservations and lots of questions...like many of us today. And you’ll note that Jesus did receive Nicodemus. He gave him time and engaged with his questions.

Like Nicodemus, many of the spiritual seekers who come through our church doors these days are educated people full of questions. They come from other ‘sects’ or no religion at all. They’re unsure of what they believe, but certain of their values, and so they are reluctant to buy into ‘organized religion’ unless it makes personal sense to them.

Two weeks ago, Graeme and I, Ian MacKay and Liz Tyrwhitt attended a weekend workshop offered by the United Church’s ‘Emerging Spirit’ Team. It was about “Living The Welcome”. For any who don’t yet know, our church has used part of a

big legacy that was specifically dedicated to funding church promotion, for a two year campaign reaching out to Canadians. It targeted research on the 30-45-year olds who don't go to church - or belong to any other religion. Thanks to Emerging Spirit, now www.WonderCafe.ca appeals online to this computer-oriented generation. And Living The Welcome workshops help congregations like ours to open our doors wider, to new seekers who get engaged by those controversial Emerging Spirit magazine ads or the discussions on the website.

At the workshop, we learned quite a bit about 'the Potentials', 77% of the target age group whose interests match with what United Churches offer. Have a look at what they are looking for: [graph onscreen, scanned from p. 220 Living The Welcome Journal] They would be interested in a church that: Encourages questioning, Respects personal freedom and choice, Builds relationships with other traditions, Celebrates all, including gays, and is Open to change.] But they don't think there is any such church!

Emerging Spirit advertising is now letting spiritually interested people know that there actually *are* churches - specifically United Churches - who value what they value. We in the United Church are the real good news church for generations who thought there was no such church. I thank God for Emerging Spirit, because finally, our wonderful big secret about today's United Church is getting out!

I think all of our team found that Living The Welcome was especially good news for us at Trinity. The more we listened to what the Emerging Spirit generation would come to church for, and compared it with what Trinity offers, the more confidently we identified Trinity as an "Emerging Spirit" church - already! We just need to keep on doing more of what we already do well: hone our skills for welcoming the questioners and making younger questers feel at ease among us.

Trinity has been a "thinking peoples' church" where questioning is welcomed, for decades at least. In the mid-80s you were already doing 'radical' Spong book

studies: remember 'Rescuing The Bible from Fundamentalism'? I'd wager that a majority here could have reassured Nicodemus: You don't need to climb back into your mother's womb to be 'reborn' Nic! It isn't meant literally - it's a metaphor! The wind is the Spirit and the water is Baptism...you just gotta choose to let God's Spirit move you and change you and... you'll get to the Kingdom place in life!

I think that Trinity's church culture has understood the good news from the Doubting Thomas story, that our questions and doubts are signposts on our spiritual journey, leading us closer to the light of Christ. Most of us would rather explore questions together rather than dictate answers to others. We don't use creeds or law to draw lines in the sand that exclude anyone from belonging to our church or coming to Communion. You only have to be looking for the Spirit to belong here. We're actually a little nervous about people who think they have already 'found' God!

I got an e-mail not long ago from a newcomer who exemplifies today's quester. He wrote: I would like to discuss my own spirituality. I have some questions about faith and whether or not it can exist if one does not believe in all things biblical. I feel hypocritical in some sense, occupying a space in a pew when I am there on my own terms. A friend suggested that I might be working backwards - trying to find my faith before attending church...So, see you Sunday!

I was happy to reply that he needn't feel at all an imposter in the pews, because he was just like most of the rest of us here...at some stage on our journey. We come here to get to know God, and a lot of folks need to start toward God by asking 'Who Are You to me?' or more often even: 'Are You for real?'

Trinity welcomes questioners explicitly by calling our newcomers group "What in the World Do We Believe?" and discussing "Living The Questions" these days. We even let folks question the traditional cultural packaging of Christianity, by offering an alternative cultural package for our biblical good news, downstairs at Trinity @9. And for years we have been out there on the web, letting people know that we are connected to the 'real world' - well, O.K., the 'virtual world' - that younger

generations live in!

As for the actual welcoming part of Living The Welcome, well I hear so often from newcomers that they felt warmly received at Trinity. Happily, in six years at Trinity I have only once heard from a newcomer that they were put off by someone claiming exclusive ownership of their pew!

Did you know that research shows people make a decision about a church within the first six minutes of coming through the door? That makes me give thanks for our parking lot greeters and Ross Armstrong's smile! And that information also gives me to pause, as I'm sure you will now too, to consider how we can brighten newcomers' first impressions of Trinity.

You see, if we are to live Jesus' key message of inclusiveness of all, the onus is on us to keep finding ways to help those tentative, church-suspicious questers to feel at home here. Emerging Spirit research points out that Christianity has had public image problems for decades (thanks to oppressive old-style Catholicism, judgmental Protestantism, the rise of Christian fundamentalism and the American religious right, etc.), so it is indeed a miracle each time a new young seeker walks in a church door. We can only multiply those miracles, if we can make them feel welcome enough to stay!

At Trinity, we are an Emerging Spirit church because our message is not: "You have arrived! We have the answers," but rather "Join us on our questioning journey to get to know God in our lives." Whoever it is who comes to our door, we can each say, in our own personal way: "The Spirit in me, greets the Spirit in you." Then that questioning newcomer will likely come again - by day!

In this hope then, let us be Trinity united, singing #591 Jesus, United By Your Grace