

David W. Lloyd: Core Learning

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Seekers Church

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Core Learning

The Learners and Teachers Mission Group has been having a series of discussions this spring and summer. We've been looking at ourselves and rededicating ourselves to our mission. We've been looking at the purpose of the School of Christian Living. We've been looking and at other ways we can further Christian education, such as the Wednesday night inward journey group that Marjory Bankson has sponsored this summer. Also, we've been looking at the papers Ron Arms has written as springboards for discussions. At some point we realized our discussions had taken us "back to the basics about Seekers." And we found that so energizing and so important that we decided we wanted to share this with the entire community. So we requested, and the Celebration Circle graciously granted, the opportunity to present four sermons this month. Next week Marjory is going to focus on the inward journey, Ron will follow with a focus on stewardship, and then Ken will discuss why he has chosen to undergo sponsorship to become a member of this community next month.

I want to focus our attention today on "core learning." This phrase has two parts to it. One is about "core", about being at the center, about being fundamental. The other is about "learning." Webster's dictionary defines learning as a change in behavior brought about by experience rather than by conditioning. I think that these are important to remember. Core learnings are those things at the center of my life that I have learned through experience. We can also have core

learnings as a church: those things that are fundamental and that bind us together as a congregation, that guide us in how to act with each other and with the world, and that help us understand who we are as members of this local expression of the Body of Christ.

Since core learnings have come through experience, core learnings for our congregation is a distillation of each of our different experiences. Some of the most important experiences have occurred for us in mission groups. Others of the most important experiences that have shaped us have occurred during worship. Others have been in the School of Christian Living classes or at meals that precede them. Still other important experiences that have helped shape our behavior have occurred at members meetings or congregational meetings, in teaching Sunday school to the children and youth, silent retreats at Dayspring, work parties at Rolling Ridge, or as Kate Amoss reminded us [last week](#), in the making of a quilt. And or some of us, they occurred more than 20 years ago, before this congregation was born, in our experiences in the Church of the Saviour.

What have I learned in my faith journey? One of my core learnings is that the Bible witnesses to my individual identity and to Seekers' corporate identity. I have reveled in the beauty and diversity and mystery of God's creation and named the creative process when I have seen it, I have felt the estrangement from God that is also part of life. I am Adam and Eve. I have known myself as an exile in this culture waiting for God's promise to be fulfilled – I am Abraham and Sarah. I have experienced the joy of liberation, the responsibility of leadership, and the trials of the wilderness – Moses' story is mine. I have had my wounds healed and my spirits fed by Christ and have also denied Him – I am one of the 12 disciples.

I think this normative for Seekers – we are, in the words of the Seekers membership commitment, “an ecumenical body of

Christians who are linked with the people of God throughout the ages." And all this is bound up in the old phrase from the Church of the Saviour—"the Bible is not a model for morality but rather a mirror for identity." I have learned this through the classes of the Old Testament and New Testament in the School of Christian Living, in daily Bible study, meditation and journalling, and on silent retreat. And I have experienced it in skits by the youth and children or by the clowns.

I have learned that Christ's resurrection has redeemed my life by unleashing the gift of my being. When I really am touching my core, I know that love, not death, is the ultimate power in my life, and that I can choose to live fully in freedom and joy and openness in every moment until death comes. My song is the song from the civil rights movement, "You can't kill me, I've already died." Living this way means choosing to be vulnerable to being hurt by my closest friends and family as well as by others, even to suffer hurt shamefully as if I've experienced a 20th century form of crucifixion. I have to will myself to become vulnerable to others, and I have to will myself to respond to others' vulnerability with love. When I do, I learn that I can dare to be vulnerable again and to dare to respond to them again lovingly.

How do I learn how to support others and to open my life to them? In part from the experience of exposing the daily-ness of my life with others in the School of Christian Living – class discussions, conversations in small groups, and sharing our homework, in a mission group. In part in weekly spiritual reports to the spiritual director, in undergoing sponsorship and becoming a member, in financial stewardship, in husbanding and parenting, and in the prayers during worship. We are a Christian community when we know that we are not here to see through one another but rather to see one another through. We are here to help each other share the gift of our lives, the gift of Christ in our lives, our true selves.

As a person who was part of the Church of the Saviour before the Seekers Church was formed, one of my core learnings has been the Membership Commitment of the Church of the Saviour, which began: "I come today to join a local expression of the Church, which is the body of those on whom the call of God rests to witness to the grace and truth of God." But what does "the call of God" mean?

The Member's Guide to Seekers Church describes it as follows:

Each one of us is called by God to a particular area of service. Young or old; regardless of experience, skills or education; despite our past successes or failures – God issues each of us an individual call. Broadly defined, it is a call to a life of love and service. Concretely, it is a highly individual desire to be about a particular work in the world and in the church. It is a desire placed by God in the heart of each person.

To hear God's call on one's life is to be "seized by the power of a great affection" as Gordon Cosby has said. The understanding of the Church of the Saviour is that "call" is the most significant event in one's life. It is Moses at the burning bush, it is Samuel a boy being called to prophecy, it is Paul leaving his position as persecutor of the Christian communities to become their advocate. In Jesus' words, it is to leave father, mother, all our possessions, and to take up our cross. Mary Cosby used to say that we can always discern authentic call because it is concrete and because it is impossible: free the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, or demand that Israel, including the king, give up the false gods of Canaan and surrounding cultures and return to worship of the God of Israel, or, in my case, end the abuse and neglect of every child in this nation.

To respond to call authentically is to be Church – to be the people of God in Jesus Christ. It is serious business and requires a serious commitment because it is costly

discipleship. In the words of the Church of the Saviour Membership Commitment:

- I unreservedly and with abandon commit my life and destiny to Christ, promising to give Him a practical priority in all the affairs of life. I will seek first the Kingdom of God and his Righteousness.
- I commit myself, regardless of the expenditures of time, energy, and money to becoming an informed, mature Christian.
- I believe that God is the total owner of my life and resources. I give God the throne in relation to the material aspect of my life...
- I will seek to bring every phase of my life under the Lordship of Christ.

Gordon Cosby calls this depth of commitment "integrity of membership." He says, "We are to belong to Jesus in a radical way and to each other in a radical way. Our first belonging is to the community – to the people – the family of faith – exercising our gifts on behalf of the Body."

I think that integrity of membership is fundamentally a commitment to servanthood for the Body of Christ. Membership is not a prize or a trophy; it does not convey authority or leadership as privileges. Rather it is a willingness to humble oneself to carry on the work of the Body. It is servant leadership; it is authentic authority. It is a willingness to be held accountable by others in Seekers. This is one of the most challenging things to experience, but when I do experience it I know I have learned a whole new way of being church. To belong to Seekers means that I stand willing to give an account of my spiritual life, to open myself to God's judgment, which is always merciful, and to the judgment of my fellow Seekers, which may not always be so merciful.

I have learned the "do it yourself" nature of making a commitment to being part of the Body. When I heard God's call,

and responded "yes," I knew I had the freedom to figure out how to live out that call. Whenever one of us in Seekers hears God's call, he or she has the freedom to respond to it in Seekers in a variety of ways. If at least two other members respond to it in the same way, they can receive recognition as a mission group. If at least two other persons respond to it but they're not members, they can form a group and claim responsibility for implementing the issue. If no one else responds, the person who heard the call can implement it on his or her own. Unless there is a mission group, other group, or individual who has already undertaken servant leadership for that issue, one doesn't have to wait for the pastor's permission to start. Similarly, one doesn't have to take instructions or guidance from the pastor. This do it yourself quality makes us unique as a congregation – we are led by the laity. Since I've been part of the Church of the Saviour since 1972, and of Seekers since our founding, I have taken this for granted. But as some newer members of the congregation have noted, this is so different that at first it has been hard for them to figure out how to enter into the life of the congregation. The School of Christian Living, *Soundings*, worship and overnights all provide windows into the congregation but there is no pastor who shows where the doors are.

Finally, I am still learning how inclusive the Gospel is – how much I can receive from those who are left out of the mainstream of society. In Seekers I am still learning about inclusion from gays and lesbians and the transgendered, from our children and youth, from feminists, from those who live with depression, and those with physical disabilities. I learn this from our open pulpit, from helping teach our children and youth, our overnights, our international giving. And in a few moments I will experience inclusion again through our open Communion.

I'm going to close now with an invitation, which we will

extend the next three weeks as well. We have intentionally cut our sermons a bit short to offer the opportunity to you to begin a dialogue. Right now, that dialogue is about core learnings. What are your core learnings?