

August 15, 2020

In the podcast yesterday, Bishop Curry spoke about the “church” emerging from the ashes of the virus.

One of the things that Bishop Curry talked about is the way the church will be called upon to lead and heal the community – to make an impact on the lives of the people who live in our community in Jesus’ name.

It reminded me of a story told to me by the then rector of St. Alban’s church in Waco, Jeff Fisher. He is now a Bishop in the Diocese of Texas. He told me about his arrival in Waco and finding a once-proud church facing many struggles. The “sacred cow” – its school – was no longer viable. The Church’s location was no longer the most desirable. The mood of the congregation was to cling to the past at all costs.

Meeting after meeting he was told that he could do whatever he wanted except closing the school. Built in 1946, St. Alban's Memorial School was the first parochial school in Waco. But 60 years later, as more parochial schools moved into the area and enrollment declined, it became obvious that the school could not survive. Finally, he met with the senior warden who reluctantly agreed with Fisher to close the school.

A final school chapel service was held as local television stations filmed, and St. Alban's Church was left with an empty building. For months, parishioners thought about potential new uses for the building. They formed a community outreach council to seek discernment, and in the meantime, they moved parish activities like vestry meetings into the old school building.

Eventually, the church figured out what they were good at worship, music, and the arts. They converted the school to an Outreach Center with the focus on worship, music, and the arts. Then the old school building received its first new inhabitant: the Central Texas String Academy (students have provided full orchestras on occasion for worship services). Soon after, the Waco Children's Theater asked to move into the building and use the classrooms to teach children drama and dance (the children even acted out the scripture at St. Alban's Easter Vigil). Today, the outreach center also houses the local branch of Camp Fire USA in addition to Avance Waco, an organization that teaches poor predominately Latino parents how to be teachers and role models for their children. Daily, the Outreach Center enriches the cultural life of Waco, strengthens families, encourages youth, fosters artistic development, and offers real help and support to people in the community.

The Church recognized that things were changing but also held onto their core mission. Although the loss of St. Alban's Memorial School was traumatic for teachers, students and the parish family, the growth of the Outreach Center brought new life. Four times as many people in the community are served through the outreach center than were served by the school and Sunday attendance has doubled.

I'm telling you this story not because changes are coming to Saint Barnabas. I'm telling this story to stress that change is not always bad – in the church or our own lives.

With God's help and guidance change makes the old things new and transforms us all to do incredible things.

It seems that whenever we throw our hands up in despair, God is always there to say "Come and Follow Me", I'll show you the way. The world is going to emerge from this virus and faith will be crucial to our recovery. There will be a huge need for compassion and fellowship. God will be calling on us to serve in ways that we may never have imagined.