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Longing for a new, unbroken church

Jocelyn A. Sideco | Nov. 17, 2011

I just got back from a weekend experience with my church. We sang; we prayed; we were giddy when we got to see old faces and eager when we met new ones. We listened to one another's stories and we supported one another's ministry, work and continued discernment.

We gathered to celebrate Eucharist together. We shared our brokenness only to uncover the wholeness found in "we." We remembered the Jesuit martyrs of El Salvador and elsewhere and we committed ourselves to the same work of justice through education and ministry that offered lasting peace and freedom.

There were about 1,100 of us that filled the ballroom at the Georgetown University Conference Center this year for the 14th annual Ignatian Family Teach-In for Justice, hosted by the Ignatian Solidarity Network [1], a collaborative lay-led nonprofit whose mission is to empower leaders for a just church and world.

Our generation, like those before us, continues to be touched by tragedy. Our tragedies may not be civil rights or the Vietnam war, but they are personal. We have become witnesses to a world broken by war and violence; poverty and an unequal distribution of resources; prejudice and institutional oppression; religious persecution and judgment; and abuse of people, relationships, the church and the environment.

We affirm the mission of the church to go out to all the nations and proclaim the good news. Our good news is Christ's light in all of us as experienced differently by culture, region, history and personal social location. We honor people of faith and people who do not experience faith as we do. We make friends with many others and stand in solidarity with the least of these. The church of today finds nourishment in the sharing of a common experience and we recognize the struggle of our ancestors to even get us to this point.

Our experience of church is mixed to say the least. We want to be a part of a community that is relevant. We want to share our brokenness and hopefulness with those those we break bread with. We want to sing songs that touch us deeply and inspire us to come back. We want our experience of others to be affirmed. We want to be given opportunities to share our knowledge, our advice, our perspectives with those making decisions.

But the buildings and structures of older generations can be likened as old wineskins for new wine. Previous organizations, places of worship and models of church cannot endure the necessary adjustments needed to support the fruit of this generation's experience as marked by serious social problems that cause common people to die a martyr's death.

We are longing for new wineskins? maybe even a whole new type of vessel or carafe to channel our energies and to allow the Spirit to pour through. We crave to be seen and trusted as educated, trustworthy, open people willing to put their lives at risk in places in South Africa, Kenya, Uganda, Libya, El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico, Colombia, Russia, Poland, Turkey, Israel, Afghanistan and in the central cities of America just so that all could be treated with dignity and respect.

The tragedy of brokenness brings much sadness in our lives, and we are looking for meaning and authenticity

from ourselves, our friends and family, and our institutions. We are looking for a church that can meet us where we are, affirm our service to those in need of compassion and acts of justice, and can continue to hold up the truth of the wholeness with integrity.

My church gathers annually, affirms me and my ministry, teaches me new ways of being human, nourishes me with friends and hope, and sends me forth to advocate for a better world community to my leaders.

As I looked at the crowd of high school students, college students, administrators, teachers, committed volunteers, parishioners and friends, I looked at the body of Christ, broken, as it were, by truth and unmet needs. When we listened to the Gospel of experience and truth we were able to see one another, trust one another and support one another. As we received from the same plate, same cup, same world, we were able to be grateful for church as we knew it. This place of intimate connection and grace amidst a fractured experience continues to be a space for healing and light.

And to know that our generation stands on the shoulders of great ordinary people who envisioned a more just and humane world, gives me the confidence to take risks and continue to re-form our church now.

[Jocelyn A. Sideco is a founding member of Contemplatives in Action, an urban ministry and retreat experience that began as a response to the needs in post-Katrina New Orleans and now continues as an online ministry offering spirituality resources for those working for justice throughout the world. Visit contemplativesinaction.org [2] for more information.]

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