

The Way of Love: Making Disciples

It was eight o'clock in the morning. The first day—the very first class—of my college career. The course was Intro to Logic.

The early start time left some of my fellow students looking a bit dazed. Others, though reasonably alert, grew bored or befuddled by the subject matter. I was mesmerized.

Dr. Kent Linville was the coolest guy I had ever met. Laid back and approachable, he had a kind but dry wit. Some people's intelligence announces itself with flashy condescension. His suggested a sort of compassionate depth. I immediately wanted to be like him when I grew up.

As it turns out I took every philosophy course he offered, spent hours talking with him in his office, served as his teaching assistant, and eventually became a philosophy professor myself. I absorbed his vocabulary, copied his teacherly mannerisms, stole more than a few of his illustrations, and inherited his love for seeing the “aha” in my students' eyes.

In short, my style as a professor—and in some important respects my style as a human being—emerged as a result of following Kent Linville. I didn't mimic him or try to be a mini-Kent. Instead, my own true self emerged due in part to his abiding influence. He showed me how to love wisdom and how to nurture that love in others. He exemplified patterns of living that I received and then made my own.

In academic circles you would say that Dr. Linville mentored me. In the Church we call it discipling.

Jesus spent most of his earthly ministry making disciples. He taught, he preached, he healed. Above all he loved and taught his followers how to love. After all, Jesus is the embodiment of the life-giving, liberating love of God.

So, when Jesus said, “I am the Way,” he was saying that his way of navigating this planet makes God's love a reality in the everyday lives of ordinary people. Jesus came to show us how to walk the Way of Love.

After his resurrection and before his ascension, Jesus commanded his followers to make disciples in every generation. Jesus commissioned us to teach each new generation how to walk the Way of Love.

As the phrase suggests, the Way of Love is not just a list of propositions you have to believe to get into heaven. The Way of Love refers to those practices that distinguish us as followers of Jesus.

I imagine you remember the old question: If you were put on trial for being a Christian, could you be convicted? If you're walking the Way of Love, it would be an open and shut case. Without having ever said a word, you would be found guilty of Christ-following by how you

have loved your neighbor. As the old song put it: They will know we are Christians by our love. Our habitual actions will give us away to even casual observers.

For seven years now I have been reminding us that God has a mission. In Jesus, God is healing and restoring the creation with God's love. We are Jesus's hands and feet now, and Jesus sends us into the world to engage God's mission. That's what disciples do. But we have to form disciples to continue to do the work that Jesus has given us to do.

In this season of the life of this Diocese, I am calling us to focus with energy and perseverance on making disciples and sending them into the world. Our goal is to make the world more closely resemble the Kingdom of God than it presently does.

But all of us need to learn and to refine the practices that make disciples, well, disciples. We all need ongoing formation. Formation is not just for children and youth. Formation is lifelong. For every life-stage from nursery to nursing home.

And Formation is not merely education for the mind, a download of Bible facts or liturgical dos and don'ts. Formation is life-wide. We must learn practices for every aspect of life, for every context within which we operate.

This is why I have instituted the Way of Love process. For the first season of my episcopate Canon Bill Bryant ably focused on congregational development with the Congregational Vitality Institute. Now, I have charged Canon John Bedingfield and Ms. Joy Owensby with offering a series of learning events that we are calling the Way of Love. The aim is to teach congregational leaders the traditional practices of Christian life and, crucially, how to teach them in the local congregation.

You will hear more about these practices over time and at our next Diocesan Convention. Among them are service, prayer, study, conversion of life, worship, evangelism, and stewardship. Today, I will say just a brief word about evangelism.

At some point during most of my visitations, I hear something like this. "We need more people." Frequently, I hear that you need more young families with children. And yet, when I ask congregational leaders what their goals and strategies are for growing, I discover that none exist. You need Formation.

Clearly, the Way of Love is intended to address this need. But let me share what I've said repeatedly to congregational leaders. You are the evangelists. Each of us has promised to be evangelists in the Baptismal Covenant. And you can start—you should start—right now.

Start by getting to know people you don't know. It's going to be easiest if you show interest in people you know only in passing. Ask them about themselves. Care about their story. Their present situation. Listen. Your ears and your compassionate heart are your primary evangelism tools. Once you get some confidence, make new friends and do the same with them.

And here's the key. Remember that the goal of evangelism is helping people encounter God in Christ. That doesn't mean you should shove a bunch of concepts at somebody. You should show them the respect and compassion that Jesus has for them. Use words if necessary. As I said in one of my books, people are looking for Jesus. All they're going to get is you. And that's by Jesus's own design.

So go! Start making disciples. The Way of Love process will help make you better and better at doing it. But go ahead and get started. We're all amateurs.

There are some other initiatives and programs I want to highlight for you. And let's begin with some ways that the Diocese is helping congregations financially.

Last year I announced my desire to help congregations underwrite the Church Medical Trust costs for clergy. Our Treasurer Gray Easterling and our Missioner for Finance and Administration Kathy Richey were listening and got to work. The initial estimates were staggering. But Gray and Kathy found a way to take a first step.

The proposed 2019 budget includes a line item of \$5000 for each congregation with at least one clergy person enrolled in the Church Medical Trust. The Diocese will not directly pay insurance for clergy. Instead, the Diocese provides a subsidy to those congregations with clergy enrolled in the canonically mandated program. In future budgets we hope to increase that amount.

For some time now the Diocesan budget has offered what we call MAP grants for a total of \$100,000. Half were set aside for missional projects. The other half were dedicated to capital improvements. Your applications have been overwhelmingly for capital improvements, leaving the Diocesan Council to vote whether or not to release the moneys for missional purposes for improvements to facilities. So, in this budget the entire fund is now available for deferred maintenance.

The Finance Committee is studying the idea of ending this grant program in 2020 in order to shift the money to other purposes. Using these funds to increase the level of the Church Medical Trust subsidy is one of the ideas under consideration. As we have done in the past, we will respond to what you tell us about how we can best help you grow the mission and ministry of your congregation.

In the meantime, Diocesan funds have been loaned to congregations for larger and critical facilities maintenance issues. Foundation work, a steeple's structural integrity, and plumbing/sewage systems have been the recipient of loan funds. That fund is, naturally, finite. So funds become available as these loans are repaid.

From time to time everyone needs a reminder about the resource that is your Diocesan staff. The primary role of each staff member is to help congregations thrive.

Kathy Richey serves as resource to lay and ordained leadership in matters of personnel and finances. She helps congregations with matters of health insurance, property insurance, personnel

policies, and parochial reports. For clergy she is the point person for pensions and retirement planning.

Our new Canon to the Ordinary John Bedingfield focuses on congregational vitality, providing help in areas such as vestry policies, evangelism, and stewardship. He is intimately involved in clergy placement. He is available to help work through congregational conflicts before they reach the level of calling in the bishop.

Joy Owensby is our resource for all things Formational. She helps to organize our training events and is available for individual consultations with congregations about Formation for all ages. Her new Formation teammate is Katie Chapman. Katie focuses on youth and young adults.

Holly Davis is the Bishop's Executive Assistant. She controls my calendar. She handles my day-to-day schedule, my visitation schedule, and all my travel arrangements. In addition to telling me where to go and where to get off, Holly manages diocesan communications.

Along with these staff members, I want to highlight three volunteer stewardship resources. Fr. Seth Donald and Mtr. Suzanne Wolfenbarger are available to consult with congregations in establishing a year-round stewardship program. Steve Yancey will help congregations establish a planned giving program with the intention of setting up and maintaining endowment funds. Contact them directly to seek their help. All three, along with our Asst. Treasurer Will Harp, attended the Project Resource Training with me at Camp Allen.

All Diocesan programs and resources are devoted to a clear purpose: helping congregations be what God has called you to be. Helping all of you to make disciples and to send them into the world. It is through Jesus's disciples—Jesus's living hands and feet—that God will heal the world. And you are responsible to Jesus for making more disciples.

Current events remind us relentlessly how desperately the world needs healing. Last week, a white supremacist entered a Kroger not to shop, but to murder African-Americans. Frustrated by his inability to enter a black church, he turned to a supermarket and killed two complete strangers. Confronting a white customer, he reportedly said, "White people don't shoot white people."

And then, another member of the alt right entered Tree of Life Synagogue. He slaughtered eleven worshippers on Shabbat. On an alt right web site he clearly stated his hatred of the Jews and his belief that they are a threat to the white race.

The news is cluttered with shootings at schools and workplaces and public venues. Violence motivated by racial hatred and antisemitism are on the rise. Twenty-two veterans take their own lives every day. Death by opioid overdose numbers 115 a day. There is no record for those who die from other substances.

The world is aching. The poet Warsan Shire puts it this way:

i held an atlas in my lap

ran my fingers across the whole world
and whispered
where does it hurt?

it answered
everywhere
everywhere
everywhere.

—Warsan Shire, “what they did yesterday afternoon”

No wonder so many people today say, “Where is God in a world like this?”

We believe that God’s answer is this. I am there

- Wherever my people resist hate and fight for the dignity of every human being,
- Wherever my people dismiss false equivalencies and denounce the wrongs of white supremacy and every form of racism, classism, and sexism.
- Wherever my people feed the hungry, shelter the homeless, and welcome the stranger no matter their place of origin, their language, their creed, or their skin color.

When Jesus’s disciples walk the Way of Love, God’s love changes this world. So go! Walk the Way of Love! Bring others along with you. That’s the only way they’re going to learn the Way. You’ll shuffle and stumble, you’ll grow tired and sometimes discouraged. But take heart and go! For nothing can stand for ever against the loving will of God.