
Living the Abbey Way: An Experiment in Spiritual Formation and the New Monasticism

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Abstract

A three-year-old church plant in Minneapolis, MN, associated with the Evangelical Covenant Church, Abbey Way attempts to be purposely intergenerational and to center in shared spiritual practices and corporate rhythms versus programs or events. The community has adopted a number of practices and values that have characterized Benedictine monastic life. The key principles of commitment, stability, transformation, and obedience as lived out in this community are described.

Birthed in Enlightenment ideals, evangelical Christianity has focused on the personal power of choice. Reacting to lack of religious fervor found in the culture and church communities of the 1800s, the evangelical movement emphasized the individual's life in God over and above the corporate life of the faith community. As a call to personal commitment to Christ was a needed counter to the spiritual lethargy of the day, the movement, by its individualistic nature, failed to hold the intrinsic and necessary good found in Christ's gathered community. Today many evangelicals shun traditional forms of church, citing failure to find suitable communities of worship to support and nurture their spiritual life. They carry on this legacy of individualism in the lack of regular commitment and connection to their spiritual birth family.

As sociologist Alan Jamieson (Jamieson 2002) has noted a growing disenchantment with today's organizational church structures, there is also a counter surge of interest in the reformation of the church as highlighted by others such as church leader Alan Hirsch (Hirsch 2006). Google the phrases "intentional community" or "missional church" and you will find a myriad of resources and expressions in many

forms and styles. These are hopeful signs that the church is beginning to reclaim its understanding what it means to be the Body of Christ as a gathered community of faith.

One of the places of intersection with the old and new comes in what is called the new monastic movement. Rooted in ancient expressions of Christian community, born out of the church's early impulse for renewal and revival, the longevity of this deep seated longing has been tested by time. Men and women of various cultural backgrounds have found ways to create cloisters of learning and formation where Christian life and its principles could flourish. Traditionally, monasteries were places of prayer, learning, work, and service. With the revitalized interest in "being church" not just "doing" or "attending" church, new monasticism has created an outlet to rediscover the importance and meaning of Christian community.

Foundation

Abbey Way Covenant Church, a three-year-old church plant in Minneapolis, Minnesota, has adopted the practices and principles of the ancient monastic tradition. To create a container from which the life of God may grow, we have adapted the 1500-year-old Rule of Benedict as the foundational structure for our church community. Benedict's Rule describes "more a way of life and attitude of mind" (Chittister 1992, 15) that is grounded in biblical norms, finding expression in the company of others, than a detailed list of rules for the holy life. The Prologue to Benedict's Rule exhorts:

Let us get up . . . at long last, for the Scriptures rouse us when they say, "It is high time for us to arise from sleep (Rom. 13:11)." Let us open our eyes to the light that comes from God, and our ears to the voice from heavens that every day calls out its charge: "If you hear God's voice today, do not harden your hearts (Ps 95:8)" (Chittister 1992, 22).

Abbey Way finds its desire to follow Jesus' teachings deeply connected to the story of faithful God seekers through the centuries. We choose to align ourselves

alongside those who have live out their lives in commitment to a shared life like the monastics of old.

Practices

Abbey Way's model of faith community centers in shared spiritual practices and corporate rhythms versus programs or events. Like the monastery, we recognize our common disciplines are essential for the formation of our souls in Christ. With less energy put into developing and maintaining a wide range of ministry opportunities, more time is freed up to be together as a community of faith, sharing meals, prayer, study, and play, while releasing people in mission within the context of their neighborhoods and workplaces. We desire to create a way of living the Gospel life together that will sustain and nurture everyone regardless of age or spiritual development. We value the simplicity of common spiritual practices and strive to grow in them as a community.

A few months ago, my husband and I were visiting another Abbey Way family. While we were there, another family stopped by to bring a birthday gift to the young father of the household. It was late. The children needed to get to bed for school the next morning, but with the excitement of birthday wishes given a new energy emerged. We had not done our evening prayer for the night so we turned toward each other in that hour to pray. It might have been the spontaneity of coming together that marks this interaction so deeply in my mind. Yet I think it was the joy of our shared discipline bearing its ripest fruit that has was the evening's greatest gift. It was when we prayed, with young and old voices combining in a familiar prayer form, that God was so very present to all of us.

Evening Prayer is but one of the practices we hold as a community of faith. Some of the other disciplines Abbey Way chooses to incorporate into its rhythm of life include daily Morning and Evening Prayer and meditation (*lectio divina*); weekly gatherings for

worship, communion, meals, study, prayer and building relationships; monthly individual or group spiritual direction and communal discernment; and yearly a community and personal retreat and mission/service projects.

These practices help keep us centered in Christ. They help us to turn and return to our Lord in our daily life whether it be in the morning, evening or at noonday. We choose to follow the beat of this rhythm when we are alone and together, whether we are at a planned or gathering or a spontaneous one. It is in this way we make our selves available to God and others. We believe this sort of intentionality makes it possible for us to live a more meaningful life on both an individual and corporate level. Whether it is at our weekly meal and worship, in a spiritual direction group, with service to our neighbors, or on quiet retreat, we want to hear God and live faithfully in obedience to Him. The shared practices and rhythms help us to become what we desire to be.

Commitment

The participants of Abbey Way commit yearly to God and each other to live out the “abbey way” in their daily lives. Our vow of “I see you and I commit to you” acknowledges the need for both an external and internal consecration of habit and attitude that we believe is necessary to continue to grow in God through every season of our life. Our willingness to create space for deep and meaningful relationships demonstrates our understanding that a close relationship with God and healthy relationships are essential to spiritual growth. Even in our intentional commitment, we recognize that true relationship only happens over time and starts with the courage to be available, willing, and open. This posture leads to a true intimacy that is a foundation for obedience to God and service to others that looks like real Gospel engagement with one’s whole being.

This commitment to each other and its fruit of intimacy can be tangibly seen in times of stress and struggle. One of Abbey Way's faithful recently experienced a medical emergency. Coming home from the hospital meant weeks of rest and recuperation in order for her body to heal. As a busy wife and a home-school mom, her normal days are full of activity and to do lists. All this stopped in a moment of time. Back filling the needed care for her and her four children, the community of Abbey Way moved into action. Those who had time gave; those who did not have time gave. More importantly in the midst of it all, she received the gift of love that others were offering to her. The helping came with no strings attached. Touching deep places inside, she wrote to me:

I am so blown away by Abbey Way in this time of need. Can I tell you how people have given and given? Every day someone -- or two people -- from AW have helped our family. I am amazed! S. came one morning. D. had the kids one afternoon. You came and provided a cake! D. came and went garage sale shopping with Bethany. The S's came with a meal. R. was here tonight with a meal and stayed. C. watched the kids the night of the hospital. J. was there for me to cry out my frustrations and fears to. And many calls and flowers later, I am grateful. Grateful that these loved ones have given me time to rest. Grateful D. has not had to shoulder all of the work. Grateful that I have had some social outlet as to not go crazy. Grateful that the girls have been held. Grateful that God is using this time to show me many things about my struggle with rest and receiving. Grateful. (Dart 2009)

Not only was she deeply touched, others were changed because of their participation. In most settings the end product would be measured by the care for the sick or the injured. Here at Abbey Way we recognize that the whole community is built up, everyone experiences transformation, healing and new levels of intimacy, as they "see and commit" to each other in practical ways. We strive to live this both in our giving and receiving in every time and season of life.

Principles

This kind of shared life is sustained by three core principles that shape the church community of Abbey Way. These are stability, transformation and obedience. Held in tandem, these principles hold us in accountability before God and each other, creating a common way of life shared by all.

Stability: Willing to Be Still

I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ ... (Eph. 3:16-18 TNIV)

Stability creates an environment to grow and mature, rooting us deeply within and without, through endurance and perseverance, with a particular community and location.

It calls us to a committed way of life with a certain group of people for the long haul.

Brad Harper and Paul Louis Metzger use these words to describe the same truth:

Over and against the supposedly American freedom to choose whatever we want, and to be with whomever we want, which is actually bondage, because it does not free us for "the other"—the one who is truly different from us—God chose us in Christ, and chose our brothers and sisters in Christ for us. (Harper and Metzger 2009, 45)

Stability requires an interior stay with-it-ness when external or internal forces toss us about, making us want to flee. It is deeply rooted in God's faithfulness. God promises, "I will never leave you nor forsake you" (Heb. 13:5). It is because of God's abiding presence we are able to commit ourselves to each other in Christ.

Abbey Way claims this principle of stability as its own. Antidotal to non-committal and individualistic forms of church attendance, stability names the real work of creating a community that is readied to reflect the glory of Christ. As Abbey Way embraces stability as one of our core principals, we seek to create an accessible

embodiment of the Gospel, enabling others to find Jesus and experience new life in Christ.

Transformation: Willing to Change

I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. (Gal. 2:20)

Together we share a commitment to continued growth and change: to faithfully as individuals and a community answer Christ's call to "come and follow." *Conversatio morum*, a Benedictine term that could be translated "conversion of life," calls us to a lifetime of transformation. It admits as a people of God we are on the journey of continual conversion—turning and returning to God, dying and rising with Christ—until the end of our life here on earth.

Conversatio morum invites us to on-going responsiveness to God and the people who God has named as companions on the journey. Esther de Waal in *Seeking God: The Way of Benedict* describes it this way:

Conversatio is a recognition of God's unpredictability, which confronts our own love of coziness or safety. It means we need to live provisionally, ready to respond to the new whenever and however that might appear. There is no security here, no clinging to the past certainties. Rather we must expect to see our chosen idols successively broken. It means a constant letting go . . . a commitment to a total inner transformation of one sort or other . . ." (de Waal 2001, 70)

Conversatio morum coupled with the principle of stability, create a dynamic duo of Kingdom potential. When growth and change in Christ is embraced as a way of life within a particular place and with a particular people, the possibility of long-term internal and external impact increases. The power of these principles combined is what makes Abbey Way such a potent place for the Spirit of God's work to be seen and experienced.

Obedience: Willing to Listen

My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me, Jesus. (John 10:27).

The heart of obedience is the word "listen." We choose as individuals and a community, to listen to God and to each other, honestly and openly engaging in

relationship, willing to submit ourselves in humility to each other and the values and practices of the community in Christ's name. At Abbey Way we desire to create a listening environment, so we can together discern God's voice and direction in our lives as individuals and as a community. As the Psalmist and the writer of Hebrews implore us, "Today if you hear his voice, harden not your hearts" (Ps. 95:8; Heb. 3:5).

Living in a culture where individualism and independence is valued over and against Gospel understandings of community and connection in Christ, the principle of obedience helps hold our intentions to the things we value and the One we profess to truly love. We choose to practice "listening" and responding together to the "still, small voice" as heard in prayer, spiritual direction and in the "underneath places" as we converse with others.

At Abbey Way, each member plays an important role in helping create our shared life. All are valued and recognized as essential in our learning to hear God's voice whether it is in prayer, worship, work, play or service. As we make ourselves available to know and be known by others, holding in common the principle of obedience—listening to God and to each other—we create the possibility of learning what it truly means to submit to one another out of love for Christ.

Intergenerational

The story of the one's life in Christ is both personal as well as communal. This is both theological as well as practical part of our life at Abbey Way. We seek to be an intentional community of faith. We choose to be open and loving toward each other, recognizing it is a place where God's reflection can be seen. We believe the act of opening to and receiving each other is as much for our own continuing conversion as for

the health of the community. We believe everyone is an integral part of our faith community. We help each other keep our faith alive, fresh and vital.

In these past years, story after story has emerged of the internal transformation that has occurred as each person has chosen to remain present to “the other.” After the initial commitment has been made, the work of staying attentive to the relationships that have been given becomes an active place for receiving God’s mercy and grace in order to remain faithful to the community.

One of the places where our life together is most notable is in our making space for all ages. A few months ago a young family came and visited Abbey Way. They happened to sit with my son Isaac and his girlfriend Connie at dinner. This interaction would not be newsworthy if it were not for little six-year-old Z. sitting next to I.. Z. is a delightful young girl with much to say about the world she lives in. She caught I.'s ear for most of the mealtime. When the night was done, a friend came up to me and reported that our guests thought that Z. was I. and C.'s daughter. We both smiled at each other with a knowing grin.

Abbey Way is a church whose fabric of gathering is bound by the quality of relationships between each other. You can especially notice this in how we are with our kids. The children are with us as people. They are loved and included. Children companion "their adult" for the evening. I. was Z.'s adult on that Sunday night. I. talked and listened to Z. more than anyone else at the dinner table. Z. sat beside I. in worship. Z. was with I. from the time we entered the building to when we locked up, thus the confusion about who were her parents.

In a time when people hunger for connection and community, Abbey Way offers something of significance for those who desire to step in. We are different than other

experiences of church. Our children are with us from the beginning to the end. An outsider may not know whose child is whose just from experiencing the quality of the interactions between the adults and kids. They truly are our children.

For a newcomer who is either not used to children or wary of the involvement of others with their children, Abbey Way can seem to be a scary place. We hold a common way of life together. We eat at the table together. We move towards the children as individuals and a group for guidance and shepherding. We come to the communion table adult /child/adult / child. We believe children can work side by side with us in our life together as a community. We believe they have something to say to us. We love them and protect them fiercely. To commit to Abbey Way means a person brings their whole self as well as their children into the circle of opening and turning towards everyone. This is quite a demanding ask for those who been trained to be independent of others even in their experience of church.

The funny thing about this story is that the truth of the matter is that Z. "is" my granddaughter: not biologically but spiritually. She is mine in the best sense of that understanding. I am a part of her life and she is a part of mine. When I was on chemotherapy this last year, Z. prayed for me. She approached me and asked me how I was doing. She cared for me. Conversely, I cheer her accomplishments and admonish her missing the mark. I love seeing her grow and become who God is creating her to be. I love her and she loves me.

When I read books on the church and what God is doing today in reforming the Body of Christ, these sorts of stories seem absent. I do not hear about how God reforms hearts and heals wounds when a body of believers chooses to struggle rightly with the inclusion of children in their communities of faith. Change for us at Abbey Way happens

on so many levels, from the willingness to stop a conversation with another adult and notice a child in need in a food line to making room for children of others beside us in worship with all their wiggles and wonders. The community has chosen to make room for the children since the beginning. They are part of us. How we are together with them is a unique mark of who we are as a church. Everyone is included at the table of our life together.

Conclusion

Our life together at Abbey Way is formed as the members live into common set of principles and spiritual practices. We welcome struggle with our own limitations and failures to live more faithfully. It is our commitment to a shared expression of Gospel life that helps to create a safe haven to courageously live as Christ's body with mercy, grace and forgiveness extended toward each other, making place in our heart's for each person. Abbey Way is a good place to be, to grow and become. We are one community of faith where the corporate life of the church is finding life in today's world.

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