

STORYTELLING

December 2024

“We have more in common than we think we do...”

Leading up to the potentially divisive election season, Pastor Marietta Nelson-Bittle of Spirit of Life Lutheran Church in Port Orchard decided to do some, in her words, “preventative pastoral care.” Building off of a Sanctified Art worship series called “I’ve Been Meaning to Ask,” Pastor Marietta created an experimental worship experience called “Conversation Church.” This was a worship service entirely focused around opportunities for one to one time and connections, both new and deepened, within her congregation.

It began with intentionality around the worship space. “We have a multi-purpose room,” Pastor Marietta explained, “so we could follow the early church practices of facing one another, rather than all looking at an ‘expert’ in the front.” They set up two circles, one inside of another, and people sat across from one another.

Worship began with a lectio divina on John 14, “as I have loved you, love one another,” and continued with a new song about acceptance before the main event – in place of the sermon was thirty minutes of individual, one to one conversation.

There were four questions:

What or who feels most like home to you and why?

What is something you have learned about yourself in the past year?

Share a key moment in your faith journey – how did that moment shape what you believe today?

Share a memory related to food – a family recipe, a baking ritual, or time with family.

After this unique experience, during what would usually be prayers of the community people were invited to put a reflection on an index card and put it up on a special board for that day.

People wrote things on their cards like “I never knew this about so and so...”

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Why was this kind of experiment important at Spirit of Life? In the last three years, there have been 30 new members. Coffee conversations weren’t enough to build lasting bonds that could survive tumultuous seasons – there needed to be permission and opportunity to ask curated, in depth questions. It was important to communicate that this would be a day of “everything different” during worship. Pastor Marietta wanted her people to have full knowledge of what they were getting into, up to and including a different chair arrangement! Church leadership picked an ambitious attendance number to pray for – and twice that showed up.

“It’s easy, these days, to dismiss someone based on one aspect of who they are – but when you know the answers to questions like this it’s easier to feel connection and to see others as siblings in Christ.”

The aftermath? People staying longer for fellowship. People who have never been seen in conversation before make a point to connect. People say they even learned things about others they have known for twenty years.

Community is something that people in every demographic are struggling with in this era. Spirit of Life has found a new way of helping people belong – knowing others and being known.

~ by Synod Storyteller Chavaleh Forgey