

What's going on? Faith at work: faith at work

by [Garret Keizer](#) in the [March 1, 2000](#) issue

Perhaps because I'm the very part-time priest of a very small parish, it has taken me a long time to learn the proper answer to the question, "What's going on at your church these days?"

I used to give an answer something like this: "We've just started a new study group centered on the Book of Acts." Or maybe I'd say, "We're in the process of restoring 17 stained glass windows even older than our century-old building." I wanted to let people know, you see, that few as we are, we're still capable of being "an active church."

And of course I probably also wanted people to know that untrained "local priest" though I am, I can still toss the ball around with the big boys. There was more than a little vanity to my answers and, if not much out of the ordinary was "happening at church," perhaps a little embarrassment, too.

Vanity and embarrassment, I eventually realized, were completely overshadowed by my ignorance. Not ignorance in the sense that I didn't know what was truly "going on" at my church, but ignorance in the sense that I couldn't recognize it for what it was.

Now whenever someone asks me, "What's going on at your church these days?" I give an answer that sounds like any one of the following.

Two of our members have just been elected to the town school board, and though they do not always see eye to eye even with each other, they are trying to bear witness to their Christian principles in a public arena not unlike the famous one in ancient Rome.

One of our members is trying to balance a full-time job with the demands of mothering a kindergartner and a nursing infant, while still finding time to advise a volunteer club for high school students.

Another of our members is going through a painful divorce in which virtually every day she must wrestle with questions of justice and occasions for bitterness, not to mention all the self-doubts that go along with unrequited love.

Still another, a social worker, has just encountered a case of child abuse that threatens to make him sick in his heart, not only about the abuser but about the worth of humanity itself. He looks to God for his salvation.

Oh, and we also had a fish chowder supper last Saturday where we made \$200.

Only one of the people mentioned above could find time to ladle out the soup. All of the others are probably feeling guilty. Given the way we think of “church,” I don’t wonder. Christians will say ad nauseam that “a church is not the building.” They seem a little slower to admit that neither is a church totally constituted by what goes on in that building.

As with so much else, this reluctance has as much to do with dollars as it does with doctrines, with careers as with charismata. We pay someone to be “our minister.” In turn we expect him or her to justify the payment with a number of sanctuary-centered activities. Inevitably we find ourselves compelled to justify our Christianity to this person in terms of our participation in those same activities. The other stuff we do is important, of course, but what “goes on at church” is what really counts.

In this regard, my own Episcopal denomination can provide a number of illuminating examples of the dubious value we give to “lay ministry” (along with the dubious definition, which, more often than not, amounts to “doing what an ordained person normally does in the world”). You will search our current Book of Common Prayer in vain to find an equivalent of the beautiful prayer “For Every Man in His Work” in the 1928 prayer book—though the current book has prayers for church musicians, church conventions and the “right use of leisure.” Perhaps Wendell Berry is right to say that since the industrial revolution, the prayer “For Every Man in His Work” “has become steadily less prayable.” Still, it’s hard to believe that a religion symbolized by the cross would find itself so at a loss for words—especially if work has indeed lost some of the dignity it formerly held.

My denomination also speaks of four “orders”: bishops, priests, deacons and laypeople. Three of these are designated by the adjective “holy.” Guess which three. When persons feel themselves called by the Holy Spirit to a special ministry, they undergo a formal “discernment process.” A fertilized human egg does not become

an embryo with any more wondrous alacrity than this process resolves itself into the question, “Do you believe that you are called to be a priest or a deacon?”—or something else that does not require or merit a formal process of discernment.

And when we argue about the full inclusion of our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters, the argument centers not on the sacraments of baptism and communion, but on marriage (understandably) and ordination (most tellingly). It’s hard to escape the impression that, for many of us, ordination remains the big enchilada, the work of grace most worthy of esteem and most in danger of “contamination.” Anyway, whenever someone accuses my denomination of being homophobic, I always respond that this is not an entirely fair charge. In fact, we are afraid of the entire lay order, regardless of race, gender or sexual preference.

It may seem that I’ve meandered a ways from our first question, “What’s going on at your church?”—but I haven’t really. You can take that question in a chatty sort of way, or in a more prophetic sort of way. What is going on—that is, what are you Christians up to? What we’re up to, it would seem, is still trying to figure out where most of the work gets done.