

Imagine With Me: Spiritual Development

July 23, 2021

Transcript



Terri Hord Owens: Hello, Disciples, and welcome to another episode of Imagine With Me, where we are hearing from people across our church about the work they are doing, having the courage to imagine, giving themselves permission to change, and walking in freedom from fear, as we consider those four areas of covenant, narrative, tools, and spiritual practice. And today we're going to talk about spiritual practice.

I have with me some good folks from two congregations in the Indiana region - Becky Sundquist of the First Christian Church in Highland, Indiana, and Melissa Kleinschmidt, pastor of Countryside Christian Church in Winchester, Indiana, and Sara Shierling, who's a lay member of Countryside Christian Church. The Indiana region, under the leadership of Rev. Rick Spleth, has a couple of years ago offered an amazing program where they were offering grants for congregations who had creative ideas to promote spiritual development within their congregations. I remember seeing it in the Indiana regional newsletter and being so excited about it, and, Becky, you were involved with the Commission on Faith Formation in that region, and were involved in setting the criteria. Could you tell us a little bit about how the program was set up what the motivation was? How it was funded? How did Indiana put this into action?

Becky Sundquist: Well, it started with the process of trying to figure out what to do with our former campground, Camp Barbee, and, knowing that there were a lot of repairs and things that needed to happen there, the difficult decision to sell the camp became the foundation for where the grants came from. We had, upon the sale of that and a lot of brainstorming, the Christian Church in Indiana board determined that part of those funds would be used as a legacy of Camp Barbee and the faith formation that happened for so many decades through that camping program.

And so the grants were then formed for congregations to be able to apply for and receive funds that would assist processes, ideas, creativity for faith formation in the region. And so that's where - out of the grief of that sale, something new happened. For so many congregations to be able to apply for and use those funds to inform faith formation throughout the region.

THO: I can't tell you again how excited I was to see that these grants were being offered. That's one of the things I've been talking about as general minister and president: our need to ground everything that we do in spiritual practice and theological reflection. Let's talk a little bit to the folks at Countryside Christian Church. Melissa and

Sara, what led you to apply for a grant and what was your project? Tell us a little bit about what you did with the money.

Melissa Kleinschmidt: Well, I can tell you we - so before the grant was presented to the congregations, we were given a gift. It's called a Barbee Blessing, and every congregation in Indiana received a thousand dollars. (Wow.) And we had already started a program the year before called Messy Church. We had implemented that in our congregation kind of without a budget. And so our thought, when we received this generous gift, was, well, we can fund the one of the programs that was really reaching our children and out to the community. And lots of people had different ideas, and so we knew this grant was also on the horizon, and so we created a committee to really think about what it is - what our people in our congregation interested in and exciting - and excited about when it comes to faith formation. And kind of what happened is we created these two groups: one was focusing on Messy Church and extending that and rethinking that, and one really focused on prayer and spiritual practices. And the focus of labyrinths really emerged from that. And Sara was the leader of that group. Sara is a lay member of our - attends our church, but she's also our pianist and choir director, so she was part of that committee. And then COVID came in the midst, and as we were really kind of honing down which direction we - just we were gonna go, we thought, really, God was calling us to pursue a labyrinth because what would be more appropriate at that time when we were unable to really gather in large groups than to have a sacred space where people could come and, you know, spend time with God in a way that was safe? So Sara can talk a little bit more about how that group, right, focused their focus.

THO: Yeah, Sara, share with us how you thought about the labyrinth, and how you hope that it would, in fact, encourage that kind of spiritual practice, particularly in the midst of the pandemic.

Sara Shierling: Well, I joined the committee just because music - if you're going to give out money, I want to see about music getting something. And on the committee, and then as we talked about the needs of the congregation, the needs of the community, and then prayer, and there are no labyrinths, or labyrinths as has been called in the congregation, in Randolph County, and I, and we thought this would be a way of reaching out, not only to the congregation, but to the community. So, because there weren't any, and it's an education, it's a tool, and it's a way of changing, yeah, adapting, so luckily Warren -what's his last name?- Lynn came out and gave us guidance, because we did a lot of research, but actually how to build it was where he really stepped in and helped us.

And that was another community effort. We reached out to Boy Scout troops, Girl Scout troops - anyone - we had at least work Saturdays, and it was, as always, a building within the congregation itself. We had relationships that developed as we worked side by side, taking shovels and bricks and whatever was needed, and then water breaks, thank goodness.

And so last fall, we did get it done. We need a pathway - that'll happen sometime, that's still part of it. We have the materials, we just haven't built a nice level path back to it.

And Warren suggested that we have a labyrinth, a monthly labyrinth group, and so I started doing that, and something on Facebook. I tried to come up with a theme every month and pick a day and time for people to come learn how to use the labyrinth. And I kind of let that slide for a couple of months recently - and I'll get started again in August - because it was cold. It was winter. It was snow covered a couple of times, we couldn't use it. But now what I'm also trying to do is go be the program in the small groups within the church and then take them specifically out there and experience it.

And once people do it a couple of times, they're all about it. But you know how it is - it's that first time getting them out there. Unfortunately, the day of the dedication was a miserable, cold, rainy day, and I regret that, because I think if people could have walked out there that day, and done it, it would have helped. I don't know - maybe it wouldn't, but I think it's a lovely tool. It does reach to the community. People from other congregations that I happen to know - or don't know - have come out. It's just - and we're on the - I hope you're also, Becky, on that labyrinth locator. And anyone can stop and that's just phenomenal. And I've used it to walk other labyrinths. In fact, I did it as part of the research in Anderson and in Muncie, so it helped the community. You know, we really learned a lot.

THO: That's great. I, first of all, want to mention Rev. Warren Lynn, who is on staff at Disciples Home Missions, who has a real heart for spiritual practice and reflective practice, so it's exciting that he was able to be a resource for you as you were planning this. But what's really struck me is that you thought about what the community needed and what was, what need wasn't being met, that this would be the only one in your county, and now people hopefully will find out about it, about labyrinth locator. I'd love to come in and walk that labyrinth at some point myself.

And in some practices, I think we have to do that kind of education, right? Lots of practices mean different things to different people, but this is a place where you could have - it's safe because you could do it socially distanced. It's not a - it's a, very much, a solo activity, right? And the solace - and this - the solitude rather, is a big part of that practice of walking a labyrinth. Becky, your congregation also decided to do a labyrinth, which I think, you've just recently finished. Why don't you share what First Christian Highland is - thought about as you were applying for that grant? And then going ahead with your labyrinth project?

BS: Our congregation is blessed to have a church that sits on a good-sized property in the suburbs of Chicago, and they had decided before I had even arrived that they wanted to add a labyrinth to the property. And then as I came and we're working on different projects - one of them is we have gardens that produce produce for local pantries - that after we got that headed in the direction that we wanted, then we resurrected the labyrinth project. And so it's been many years in coming. And as

Melissa and Sara were talking about with the pandemic, that kind of kicked things into high gear, knowing that folks really needed a place - even though it just got finished last week - people need a place to be able to center and focus and gain a deeper connection with God. And so we're really excited that the first phase of our project is done and emails have been going back and forth already about benches and seating and pollinating plants that will feed our gardens that will aid in the produce. And so we're pretty thrilled about that dream coming true for the congregation and beyond.

And it just so happens that the day that we got an email from the region recommending that churches be closed for the pandemic - and at that time we thought, well, is this a week or two - and we were just - there were a couple of us that were at the school down the street, and talking with guidance counselors about food education in connection with our farm, and I just happened to mention our labyrinth project that's in the works. And the guidance counselor was so thrilled to hear that this is going to be a resource that they will be able to use for their staff, for their students. And people of all faiths are welcome to it.

THO: That's exciting, Becky, that it connects to something that you've already done. And labyrinths, because they are outside our four walls, right, and that's one of the things that we've experienced during the pandemic is how - we say it all the time, right - that we want to do church beyond our four walls, and serve beyond our four walls. We've been forced to do that, yes, over the past 16 months. But how exciting that people in the community in both cases will have this option. Again, people will be able to do it individually.

I always used to say to the congregation I pastored, if the only time that you pray or read the Bible is when you're in worship service, you're really not engaging in the kind of life that Jesus modeled for us, and imagined for us. So we all have to find a different ways of engaging in that spiritual practice, be it prayer, or walking a labyrinth, or just sitting still and being quiet on a bench for a few minutes admiring plants. I think I'm envisioning such peaceful surroundings, and I am close enough to both of these labyrinths, that I'm going to commit to visit them before the summer is over, just so that I can experience the joy of what you've created, and are even offering beyond your own communities.

I think the grounding of the spiritual practice, the very fact that you did this, has already allowed you to kind of minister beyond your four walls and not to just to your congregations.

As we wrap up, if each of you could just share what you think that the most important impact has been of either the labyrinth itself, or maybe just the process of getting to the labyrinth, what this meant for your congregations. Melissa, maybe we'll start with you.

MK: Well, I think, you know, for me, I think it's about building relationships, so not only within our own church when we came together as a group to just dream about - here we have this opportunity to apply for some funds, what would be best for our church? How

would it, how could we best use these funds for faith formation for our church? And so there was the building of relationships with that small group, and then building of relationships with people in the community. So, Sara had mentioned we had Boy Scouts and Girl Scout people from our congregation; we had - our gas company donated equipment and time of two people to come. And without them - honestly, they moved so much. So I think - and this, just the potential we had. We've had people from local yoga groups come out and use it with Sara's invitation. And the potential of offering something new that's, well, old that's new again, right? I mean, so, but to not only to our congregation, but to other people in the community; to me it's just the potential of what it has for us, building relationships with one another, with the community and then, of course, with God. That's probably the most exciting thing.

THO: Awesome. Becky, what would you say has been the most important impact on your congregation of this whole process of creating a labyrinth?

BS: I think as there was a lot of research that has gone into what labyrinths mean and what the practice can do, and even just the different styles, and where those come from, it's been interesting to watch the congregation, in particular the committee, really explore what deepening that relationship with God could look like, and to see the hopefulness and being able to bring this to the community as a tool. As we know, there are so many folks that are just yearning for a deep relationship with God and to be able to provide a tool, a resource, for folks to be able to really just allow their heart, their soul, their mind, their body, and spirit to get close to God, and to explore and discern what God has - hopes for each individual that gathers at the center.

THO: Amen. You know, Walter Bruggeman talks about, in his book *The Prophetic Imagination* - I've been rereading that in the last few weeks - he talks about being inside God's imagination, right, which is so far beyond anything that we could imagine or think of. But God also has - you know, that scripture in First Corinthians, where he says God uses the foolish things of the world to confound the wise - simple things, things that sometimes seem crazy, and unusual things that we're not familiar with, God uses that. God has such a desire to connect with us. And I'm so excited to learn about what these two congregations have done, using this exciting program from the Indiana region to promote faith formation, and creative ways of doing that.

I want to thank you all for spending a little time with me today to share with the whole church what you're doing, share your testimonies about - I'm just excited that there is some energy around spending time with God in new and different ways, because that's where it all starts. If our relationship with God and our understanding of who we follow as Jesus Christ is not healthy and strong, then all the other things that we say we want to be are just not possible. Lots of ways to do good in the world, but we're followers of Jesus Christ, and that means we have to have that grounded relationship with Jesus. And through him, with God and the Holy Spirit.

So thanks for joining me today, Disciples. I hope that you have been inspired and excited as I am to think about fresh new ways that you can develop your own personal

relationship with God. However you spend time every day - a few minutes in prayer, quiet reflection - there may be a community labyrinth near you that you don't know about. You can also, on DHM's website. I know Warren Lynn is always sharing great resources about spiritual reflection and practice. So you might want to visit dhm.disciples.org.

But also remember, we have a wonderful opportunity to gather together to hear some powerful Bible lectures, workshops, and an awesome time of worship on August 7th. You can register at disciples.org. We won't be able to gather in person for our planned general assembly this year, but we are going to connect and gather together virtually, so please join us on August 7th. And again, you can go to disciples.org and register. Yolanda Norton and Eric Smith are our Bible lecturers. Just like it would be if you were a GA, a wonderful set of workshops, most of them focused on how we're moving beyond the height of the pandemic, and how we really have to think about church, and the work of the church, differently.

So, thank you for spending this time with us today. I pray that you will find some quiet time with God to re-energize and fill your cup. The lectionary text yesterday in Mark 6, Jesus said, "Come away with me, and rest a while." Jesus wants to spend time with you, so find a way to do that.

Remember, God loves you, and so do I. And we'll see you next time on the next version of Imagine With Me. God bless you.