

## Belonging

Vital Congregations Column for THE RELAY

By Douglas Ruffle, Coordinator of Congregational Development

One of the fundamental changes I have seen through the course of my ministry is the difference in attitude when newcomers visit a church. Thirty years ago I would assume—rightly or wrongly—that a person who came to church already believed in basics: they believed in God, they believed in Jesus. By coming to church, I thought, they sought a concrete way to live out their beliefs in a particular community of faith. They were wondering whether *this church* would provide the space where they could live out their Christianity.

It is different today. People may not believe even in the basics of faith when they visit a church. There are a different set of questions they are posing. “Is this a place where I can belong?” “Is this a place where my child can learn about God and godly values? In fact, some people come to church already convinced that they don’t believe in many of the tenets of Christianity (i. e. the virgin birth, the Immaculate Conception, the authority of ministers or priests). They come because they seek fellowship that is healthy for themselves and for their children.

Diana Butler Bass, in her recent book, *Christianity After Religion*, helped me put all of this into perspective for church life in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Bass, who was one of our District Resource Day speakers, says that people prefer to identify themselves as ‘spiritual’ and not necessarily ‘religious’ today. They engage church life seeking first of all to belong, and then they will see about how belonging affects their behavior and their beliefs. Years ago it was reversed: one believed first, then made behavioral changes and then sought out a church to belong to. Bass points out that in the Bible, Jesus did not ask Peter or James or John to believe in his doctrines first. He said, “follow me.” Jesus formed community first. The community of disciples then went about demonstrating their faith through actions: healing the sick, feeding the hungry, announcing the Good News.

People need community. A healthy church can provide a space where people can discover more deeply who they are, what is important, how they can impact their world and how they can instill in their children core biblical values to live by. The lesson of this, I believe, is that we ought not assume people who visit our churches believe the same as we do. We can, however, provide a safe space where they can gain clarity about who they are in God and how church life can make a difference in their lives. We provide the space where people can discover how *with others* they can impact the world. It can start with belonging before ‘belief’ takes shape. The challenge for our churches is to provide a discipleship system whereby people can learn and grow in their faith walk. As we gear up for the Fall season, we are invited to provide ways in which people can ask questions freely without fear of judgment or rebuke and where people can grow deeper in their understanding of God and what it means to belong to a church.

I recommend a reading of Diana Butler Bass’ book, *Christianity After Religion: The end of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening* (Harper One, 2012).