

## Monica A. Romano

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1. Please describe a progressive change you implemented or facilitated in a program or process within an organization. What did you learn? What did you discover that you needed to learn? What, if anything, would you have done differently?

Every fifteen minutes I pinched myself to make sure I was awake and not in a dream. When I wasn't pinching myself I was scanning the snow covered tree branches and ski lift seats for concealed video recorders thinking that surely I was on a hidden camera show. How could a snow skiing trip with a group of seemingly smart and talented teenagers be so fraught with difficulty and mishaps?

For three days I had witnessed an unbelievable tragic comedy of errors. Misplaced skis, misplaced one hundred dollar bills, broken bed frames ("We were only thumb wrestling, promise!" they claimed.), forgotten appearances for mandatory group meetings, adult chaperones imbibing in adult beverages, competitions to see whose flatulence could produce the largest flame when aimed at a lit match—all a part of the weekend's adventures.

I had only been employed as youth minister for this motley crew for two weeks when I inherited the already planned ski excursion. But with five years of youth ministry experience behind me and a healthy measure of common sense, I understood some significant changes awaited the youth ministry program I had been charged with.

Several weeks earlier a priest friend offered me the following advice upon finding out that I had been hired as the first youth minister of a civil war era cardinal parish in the diocese:

A minister's first job in a new setting is to be an archeologist. Gently and carefully she must uncover the sacred treasures of the community—those traditions and events the congregation holds dear. It's important to be patient with the discovery process. Give it time. Then after learning the sacred cows, changes can be made to the system.

And in most situations those are words of wisdom. But when a throng of senior high boys have as a regular spiritual discipline locking junior high girls in public restrooms, that is not most situations.

The source of the challenges within the youth group was not demon possession or universal criminal intent. The source was a misguided mission. The youth of the parish were not called into fellowship with one another to learn how to be cool in the world. They were called to learn how to be Christ in the world.

The "sacred cows" prized by the youth but unhealthy for the community disappeared overnight. Where the calendar had previously been filled with vacation-like events, outreach projects and Bible studies appeared. Meals once eaten hastily with loud music in the background were shared around a common table, and (*Gasp!*) hands were washed before eating. The annual ski trip was replaced with journeys to diocesan and national youth events, and the regular games of ultimate Frisbee, well those were kept. There's no gospel law against having fun after all. Also significant, the roles of the adults surrounding the youth shifted. Instead of being present out of a practical need for drivers and chaperones, I worked with the adults to form a group of advisors invested in the spiritual journeys of the youth.

Much was learned and affirmed from this experience of *Extreme Makeover—Youth Group Edition*. General guidelines for approaching ministry—such as being an archeologist—cannot be followed when the state of a program is putting people in physical, emotional or spiritual danger. Those instances call for immediate and certain action. In those times of immediate action, it is vital to have a clear vision of what the community is working towards and the ability to communicate that vision. The changes I made were directly met with frustration and even anger. *How dare I put a stop to the hallowed ski trip tradition?! What nerve did I have establishing consequences for broken standards at gatherings; did I think I was the youth's parent?!* Outlining my vision in response to such contention let the youth and parents know that I do not make decisions and changes simply because I can, but because I am invested in seeing a group grow in new and exciting ways. Instead of focusing on what was being lost, focus can be given to what lies ahead.

Having a developed vision is not enough, however. My goals must be compatible with that of the broader leadership structure. In the case of a parish, the rector and vestry have designs for the overall mission of the church. If the direction I am moving in harms instead of helps the growth of the congregation, not only do I lose my base of support, I harm the parish's overall ministry. Ministry—whether at the parish or diocesan level—doesn't occur in a vacuum, and the needs and concerns of the overall system are an important piece of my own work.

Additionally, part of being an effective leader is making room for people to disagree. Though I cannot be swayed to move in a new direction every time someone suggests a change, I would be foolish not to make room to listen and hear criticism. A willingness to listen to those who disagree with me not only validates that every member of the community is significant, it helps me to be open to change. It would be impossible for me to know the history of every situation or be aware of every available resource. Closing myself off to hearing what everyone has to say also means closing myself off to the possibility of correcting my mistakes, gaining a deeper understanding of how the community operates and discovering new resources available to strengthen and grow the ministry.

In regards to the post-ski trip reorganization of the youth program, I would have altered the format in which I processed the program makeover with both supporters and detractors. Instead of fielding comments and requests solely on an individual basis, I would have offered more opportunities for large group discussion. In the same ways that it is healthy and holy for me to process with people of various views and outlooks, it is good for everyone to do so.

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2. Who or what have been the three greatest influences in your life to date? How have these influences helped you to form your understanding of how best to engage in ministry with youth and young adults?

It is the first conversation into which I remember being invited. I was no more than four years old and sitting on the yellow, velvet upholstered rocker in my father's tiny living room. He and my mother were recently divorced, and as the only child in one of the first joint custody divorce cases in Alabama, it was my weekend with my dad. "Monica, we need to talk," I remember him saying, "And I'm going to talk to you like a big girl." I was excited—as most children are—to be a part of something that looked and sounded very grownup. My father continued, "Here's the deal. There are now going to be a lot of situations where it's going to be just you and me. And you need to know I'm going to make mistakes. And so are you. And that's ok. And sometimes in making those mistakes we'll hurt each other's feelings. But always, always, always, we can talk about it."

And talk we did. In that conversation my father became something new to me. He was no longer *Dad the Invincible Superhero*. He was a human being just like me. And I loved him all the more for it.

It was the summer before my senior year of high school, and the look on Fuad's face told me the conversation we were about to have was going to be serious. I had been traveling in Israel with a group of teenagers from across the globe for about a week when Fuad, an Anglican seminarian working with St. George's College, Jerusalem, sat me down for a conversation in the foyer of the school. The two of us had just returned to the college from a trip to the city's markets.

"Monica, you are from the south states, yes? I know this because you smile and greet and look every person in the streets in the eye. Stop it. You cannot do that here. That is not our custom. Many of the shopkeepers are men, and you are not. When you think you are being friendly and nice, you are actually being very forward with the men. You remember that loud discussion I had with the man with the gold hat near the lamb stall? He thought me to be your older brother or uncle and wanted to buy you for several hundred camels."

I was intrigued. "Is that a good price?" I asked.

"Monica, don't miss my point. When you are in a new place, you cannot always do as you always do. You cannot expect to instantly convert people to your ways. Yes, you are who you are. And that is good. But mind your manners. You understand?"

"Yes, that makes sense. I am sorry for not being more aware," I offered earnestly.

"Thank you. That is good," said Fuad. "And, for the record, yes, it was a good price."

It was too early in the morning for the phone to be ringing. My alarm had not yet sounded to signal it was time for me to get ready for my eight o'clock class. I was well into my second year of college, and by then everyone knew not to call before nine in the morning, and certainly not before seven. I picked up the phone aware even in my sleepy daze that conversation awaiting me was not going to be good.

I was right.

On the other end of the phone was a nurse from Children's Hospital in my hometown of Birmingham, Alabama. My seven year old brother, Tony, had suffered a massive stroke in the night. My mother and stepfather rushed Tony to the emergency room just moments ago and were by his side as the doctors at that very moment were pricking and poking and scanning my brother's paralyzed little body. The nurse told me it would be best if I could make the two hour drive as soon as possible to join my parents at the hospital.

In shock I responded, "Ok. Yes, I can be there soon. But what do I do when I get there? What do I do to make it better?"

Softly and succinctly the voice on the other end of the line offered, "You show up."

My life thus far has been replete with teachings and adventures. But it is the brief conversations above that stand out to me as I reflect on great moments in my life that have taught me about ministry with youth and young adults. As that earliest dialogue with my father revealed, and the passing years have confirmed, an honest relationship with another human being is life-giving in ways veneration of a false superhero can never be. Teenagers and young adults don't need me to be or appear perfect. We all have God for that. What they need from me is honesty, vulnerability and humility that helps make the sacred space we share a safe place for all to be and to become. Proverbial warts and all.

And in the Holy Land I was taught a holy lesson from a future Anglican priest: Know your audience. It is the first rule of public speaking, but it is also a primary rule of ministry. I cannot enter into relationship with youth and young adults expecting them to find them where I think they should be. Instead I am charged to follow the example Jesus gives: Meet people where they are. Learn and acknowledge their customs and traditions and ways of life. Then, and only then, challenge them to grow in the life Christ offers.

Show up. From the first hours following my brother's stroke ten years ago to his continued health difficulties today, all I've ever really been able to do for him is show up. I cannot make his life easier or better by healing the brokenness of his body and mind, but I can show up and be present with him amidst the struggle. In prayer, at the other end of the phone line and in person when possible, I remind him he is not alone. And the same is true in my life in ministry with young people. I cannot heal their brokenness. But I can show up and be present and remind them that they are not alone on the journey. And in doing so we—the young people and I—become for one another outward and visible signs for the inwardly known truth that God will never abandon God's people. And we are all God's people.

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3. In what way(s) do you see youth and young adult ministry at the congregational level being impacted by the principles of the “emerging church?” How does Anglican spirituality provide our youth and young adults with an opportunity to deepen their relationship with Christ in light of these principles?

BE(COM)ING

a task for life

The above header from the blog of the Rev. Ian Mobsby of the Moot Community in London, England, encapsulates the principles of *emerging church*. The ideology of emerging church seeks to connect the Church as it has operated for the last several centuries to the Christ as he has operated for all of time. Emerging church champions claim the desire to meet people in their places of *being* and share in their lifelong journey of *becoming*. And it is exciting to consider the ramifications of the emerging church on the youth and young adults of the Episcopal Church.

Being the admitted public radio addict that I am, a phrase on the subject of the emerging church from an older BBC interview with Richard Sudworth of the Church Mission Society has stuck with me. Sudworth named as his vocational desire to “make faith relevant to another culture.” In real ways the youth and young adult population in the Episcopal Church is “another culture,” set apart from the other generations by their specific customs and needs and dreams. Emerging church practices, following the principle of evangelism by example, are able to recognize and celebrate God’s presence in ALL aspects of youth and young adults’ lives.

One way that happens is through the emerging church’s approach to planning. Instead of executing sparkler-like programs that burn brightly for a short period of time, the emerging church asks that ministries approach their work with a long range vision. Instead of sparklers, the emerging church seeks carefully constructed and tended bonfires that offering lasting light. The gift to youth and young adults from this approach is a church that knows where it’s going and is structured in such a way as to offer consistent, long-lasting support. However, this requires patience. And for the youth or young adult involved in a congregation in the early phases of exploring the emerging church, congregation can seem unsettled as it aches from the struggles and pains of growth.

The emerging church concept of partnership ministry is also impacting youth and young adults at the congregational level. Whereas a more traditional approach to Christian formation would emphasize participants learning history and rubrics, the emerging church focuses on relationships. The effect of that on youth and young adults is that church looks less like a class at school and more like a family. Learning and growing comes from shared experience instead of text books.

The creative point of view of the emerging church is perhaps one of the more exciting precepts of the movement. The music of worship doesn’t have to sound like the familiar hymns of the 1982 Hymnal. And not all of the prayers have to sound like the familiar prayers from the Book of Common Prayer. The emerging church clears the way for youth and young adults to express and explore their faith and questions of faith via mediums in the visual arts, music, technology, dance, prose and poetry that have previously been relegated to their “outside of church” interests. The emerging church invites the gifts and talents of its members to be incorporated into the church, not left on the doorstep.

With an emphasis on lay leadership and de-emphasis on expert instructors, the emerging church offers a non-threatening, come-as-you-are invitation to youth and young adults to engage with the Church. The emerging church takes comfort in the questions, not the answers. This widens the field for who can serve as advisors to youth and young adults at the congregational level. No longer are clergy or certified lay ministers the only ones capable of guiding younger church members. Anyone who is invested in engaging with the Jesus narrative and the questions that arise from authentic engagement can function as an advisor.

The import of the physical structures of churches is re-imagined through the emerging church as well. Ministry with youth and young adults no longer requires elaborate, dedicated spaces on the church property. While set-aside spaces are highly valuable resources to a congregation, the emerging church offers that “church” can happen anywhere. Eight years ago I began Coffice, a weekly event where I have office hours at a local coffee shop and invite those interested to join me for a conversation and tea. Over the years this part of my ministry has grown not only in popularity and attendance within my own community, but Coffice in name and in practice has spread throughout my current diocese and across diocesan lines where friends and colleagues have found it beneficial to their own ministries. Coffice is one example of emerging church ministry reaching youth, young adults and other members of the community that a congregation might not otherwise engage. By following Jesus’ example of meeting people where they are in not only a spiritual but physical way, congregations can share in sacramental life with people who might have never walked through their giant red doors at 10:30 a.m. on a Sunday morning.

Anglican spirituality is a natural fit with emerging church principles. Emerging church detractors protest that the practices are of the world and not of God. But Anglicans, through their lenses of scripture, tradition and reason, see the emerging church not as a movement of the world, but a movement reaching God’s children who are on the fringes of the world. Emerging church is not so much asking congregations to distance themselves from the traditional church as it is calling them to return to Jesus’ model of apostleship. With the sacraments as an umbilical cord connecting the established Anglican way with the emerging church, life anew can be offered to youth and young adults they have otherwise gone unreached.

Ian Mobsby writes, “We are always becoming—never only being—life is process, a call, a gift.” What a joy it is to be a member of a communion awake to that truth.