

A Little Leaven Promotes Growth

by Chris Porteus, St. Stephen's, Earleville
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Years ago, a young girl asked me a fascinating question: "What is a church?" At fourteen, she knew many things, but like all of us, not everything. She was old enough, and I had known her long enough, to be certain that she would understand that a church is not one dimensional, but had many dimensions and many understandings. I started with the hardest one first, since I like to see if someone can stretch out to comprehend something a bit complicated and then will come back to the easy stuff. So I said that first and foremost it was a "community of people" who might meet anywhere regularly, who all loved in Jesus Christ, and who did what Jesus, God, and the Holy Spirit through Jesus' followers and Jesus himself said in the Bible to help make life better for all people. She said, "Gosh, do you mean that group could meet outside on nice days?" "Yes," I said, "Actually, when the church first began, followers of Jesus loved God and met to hear about God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit in people's homes."

She said, "Wow, my best friend says that all they talk about at her church is the building!" I said, "Yes, that is what very many people think a church is: a building that has to be always looking nice or else they're afraid that no one will come on Sundays." She said, "But you work in this building and it is called a church?" "Yes," I said, "it is called a church building, and it shows others that people who come here on Sundays come to give to God for their blessings, and to seek God's help for their hurts." She then asked, "So which of the two do you think is the closest to the real meaning of a church?"

My answer was that the building was helpful because it pointed the way for others who did not belong to seek help with their blessings and hurts, but that the true meaning of the church was a community of people who love Jesus and do those things. He asked his followers who knew him and for us to do what he asked, such as love our enemies, or help the poor, give thanks to God for blessings, or speak to others on the other days of the week about how great Jesus was and still is today. She said, "Gosh, that could be hard." "Yes," I said, "but do you think it might be a good thing to do." "Yes," she said, "I think it might even be very helpful to everyone involved in this community and those outside it, too." These are words spoken like a true Christian, and Carrie of Long Island, N.Y. is a true Christian.

When I knew her in 1986, she was an acolyte, and a confirmand. She is now a nurse and works in Smithtown, N.Y. in a clinic and still attends the Long Island church community, as she would say, where she grew up. She has served in many ways, but most recently as one who shares her faith at her work, to try to bring others to Christ and then meets with others in a group devoted to bringing in other people to the "Church Community," as she would say. She is now 36 with one child and a husband who works for Wonder Bread as a delivery man. They are a typical family for that area and maybe for the country, but not typical in knowing that a church truly is a "community" for Christ and not just a building. Perhaps we can learn a bit from this part of Carrie's story.