What Godzilla can teach the church (Part 2: thoughts toward Solutions)

In Part 1 I tried to describe what I believe is a crucial problem for our church in modern society, namely the near total lack of “brand identity.” Everyone in the world knows who Godzilla is. Probably up to 70% of Americans have no idea what an Episcopalian is, let alone what our church teaches, believes or how we worship. How can we possibly address this problem?

In trying to address this, I thought about the online ad campaign currently being conducted by the United Methodists that my clergy friend had told me about ([www.rethinkchurch.org](http://www.rethinkchurch.org)) and the resources required to address the issue on a national scale. I also remembered the print ad campaign begun back in the early ‘80’s (if I remember correctly) that began as a project of a large parish in Minneapolis that offered ads they had commissioned by a professional ad agency to any Episcopal congregation for use in a local campaign. One of those ads showed a small television, with a clergy stole draped over it and with a chalice sitting on top, with the caption, “Have you ever seen a Sony that gave Holy Communion?” As I continued thinking, I remembered a bumper sticker that I’ve seen frequently (at least living in California!) and still do on occasion: “Think Globally, Act Locally.”

Here is the conundrum we face: A shrinking church has dwindling resources, which increasingly are directed toward survival tactics in order to keep the institution alive. Marketing requires resources, and in a survival mode situation, it is rare that an institution will re-direct resources needed for survival towards an uncertain gamble on growth. How many times in the past decades have we heard, “We do evangelism for the gospel, not for numbers”? Yet, our failure to market ourselves is, I believe, a contributing factor in our own decline. In the face of a society that increasingly sees “Christian” identified with a particular portion of the larger body of believers who self-identify as Christians, we have passively allowed that smaller segment to co-opt (or just outright steal) the brand label of “Christian.” And in the face of a society which is drifting towards greater inclusivity and pluralism, and the resistance to this movement coming from conservative Christians, I believe we have failed to inform our brothers and sisters outside the church that there are other opinions and perspectives on current social issues besides those presented in the general media in the name of those conservative Christians who have been the most visibly outspoken critics. That is, we have failed to clearly state that it is possible to be “Christian” without buying into the particular qualities or beliefs that describe the conservative faction of Christianity that is most commonly seen in broader media and therefore in the minds of most non-practicing Christians considered equivalent with that label. Whether it is the alignment of “the Religious Right” with the more conservative factions within the Republican Party, or the current fight played out almost daily in the pages of our newspapers about the court battles over marriage equality that have resulted in same-sex marriage bans being undone by judicial decisions, we have had multiple opportunities to speak out on behalf of the poor, the disenfranchised, the marginalized, and the oppressed in our society. I believe we have failed to follow Our Lord’s command to preach to those in authority on behalf of those without a voice. We have failed to offer another, more open, freeing and inclusive interpretation of the Gospel to a society that seeks fulfillment in all the wrong places: conspicuous consumption, addiction or personal gratification at all costs.

But, enough hand wringing! What are we, what can we DO about this situation? As I said, as I considered this question I remembered that bumper sticker: “Think Globally, Act Locally.” Rather than attempt a broad nationwide campaign which would require the commitment of significant resources which we simply no longer have, there are many ways we can act locally, in our own communities, using our own local media resources, to accomplish the same goal but on a much smaller, more local scale. Below are some examples, which I hope you will use simply as a point of departure and a means to stimulate creative thinking about what you can do in your community, with your resources, to speak to the issues that are current in your local community in which your congregation lives, moves and has its being.

1) We are living in a digital age. Social media is everywhere. But the church has, by and large, been slow to adopt it and learn how to utilize it as a communication, marketing and evangelistic tool. Nearly every congregation has a website, but most are dismal, boring, and not very helpful in terms of communicating the activities of the congregation, what it offers to those outside, and in particular, how that congregation’s belief system speaks to the issues that those in the community outside are grappling with. Why come to a church if it’s message isn’t capable of helping you live your day to day life, understand the larger context in which social issues might be framed, and give meaning and purpose to positive actions to address those issues? We are not, for the most part, taking full advantage of the tools now available.

2) And, since many if not most web searches are now conducted without the use of a desktop computer but rather with either a smartphone or tablet, it is important that the congregation’s webpage also exist in a format that is “optimized” for viewing on such devices, whose smaller screens and typically slower download speeds require simplified page designs, different fonts and page layouts, and simplified sub-page organization. If you want people under the age of 45 to find you, you need to be find-able via the media that they are most likely to employ to look for you, which is either their phone or tablet device, not a laptop, and even less likely a desktop computer.

3) Similarly, we are not using other electronic media such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and plain “old-fashioned” e-mail to communicate with ourselves. The cost of printing and mailing the traditional print newsletter could be much more profitably re-directed towards keeping the congregation’s website updated regularly, and using e-mail to electronically send the monthly newsletter to member families. In addition, clergy might be on the lookout for “apps” (applications or programs written for electronic devices such as smartphones, tablet computers and laptop or desktop computers) that can help members with their spiritual life, such as apps for regular bible reading, daily inspirational messages, religious or scriptural quotes for the day, and sending these out to the congregational members on a regular basis, to keep people connected with their spiritual family and source of inspiration in between Sunday worship services.

4) Your clergy, or someone in the congregation with writing or journalism talent, can look for opportunities to submit letters to the editor or articles for the opinion page of your local newspaper, either responding to news stories carried, such as those recently seen involving the legal battles for marriage equality, or the challenges to the use of the death penalty, or the economic system that has stymied the earning capacity of the lower and middle classes while the wealthy have accumulated increasing wealth and, with that wealth, political influence and power. The list could go on. But where are the voices of the church speaking to these current social issues? And I’m not talking about simply addressing these issues during a sermon, or an adult education forum, because those venues only reach those who are present in the church. It does nothing to let those outside the church know what we preach and teach inside. And if we don’t tell them, they’ll never know.

5) Most of our congregations are small (average Sunday attendance of less than 100) and located in smaller communities rather than in large urban or suburban areas. These smaller communities, if they are served by a daily or weekly print newspaper, are a ready source for free marketing, and are usually happy to provide coverage for special events, such as Blessing of the Animals on the Feast of St Francis, or the celebration of a patronal festival, the visit of the bishop for confirmation, or other parish event, such as Shrove Tuesday Pancake Supper (or at my parish, Waffle Sale, a community event that soon will celebrate it’s centennial!). Is there someone on the Vestry or in the parish tasked with consciously thinking to call the paper in advance and ask that a photographer attend and document the event?

6) When the youth group (yes, I know, I may be assuming a lot thinking churches still HAVE youth groups!) or some other group from the congregation holds a special event or takes on a major project, such as a day to help with a Habitat for Humanity build, volunteer at a school, food pantry, soup kitchen, or raises money for an organization such as “Free the Children” (www.freethechildren.com) again, is the local newspaper notified? Does someone write an article for submission to the local paper? Is that same article, with accompanying photos, added to the congregation’s website, so that visitors to the site can see what the youth or other congregational groups are doing to live out their faith?

7) Does your church have available yard space for a garden? Can you turn that space into a garden, perhaps adopting the “Abundant Table” model (www.theabundanttable.org), or simply as a youth group project to provide fresh produce to the local food pantry, or to offer the space for a community garden for the neighbors in the church’s community? At planting and/or harvest time, and in between, does someone document the hard work, and the satisfying results, photographically, so this can be posted on the church’s website, or sent to the local newspaper? What about selling at the local farmer’s market?

These are just some of the ideas that are possible. Many of these I have done or seen done myself. Some, such as making better use of social media, I have heard discussed for mental health practitioners such as myself seeking ways to better market our practices. The church is by no means alone in under-utilizing the tools that are currently available. But the church, like other long-established institutions, has been far too slow to adopt and adapt, and that failure has contributed to the current march towards extinction.

My hope in writing this is not to focus overly on the negative, doom and gloom, in our current situation. Rather, I hope this will be a call to action, locally and inexpensively but perhaps far more effectively than some national campaign, to get our light out from under the bushel where its been hiding for the past several decades, and rather to set it high on a stand, where it can be seen far and wide by those seeking answers to the challenges that confront all of us every day.