

Practice, Practice, Practice

By Bishop Paul V. Marshall

This is Bishop Paul's September column for the September edition of Diocesan Life.

One, but only one, of the bishops I have known has achieved a certain notoriety for going each and every year to the Caribbean at Christmas. Despite the decree of the Council of Nicea, which excommunicates bishops who fail to show up at Christmas and Easter in their see cities, he works on his tan while we are singing "O, little town of Bethlehem" in the snow (well, most years).

I do not write to draw attention to the eccentricities of one cleric. It's been done. Trollope famously sketched a rector who left his English parish in the hands of curates in order to live in Italy permanently, because it was much more "economical" to do so.

I am thinking of those who make pious excuses for unchristian behavior rather than confront it. One famously said that the bishop I mentioned goes south in the winter because "it breaks his heart to see the homeless shivering in the cold." Denial is more than a river in Egypt!

The Christian church has a limited set of objectives. Our catechism speaks of the church's mission as the reconciliation of people to God and each other. That includes explicitly telling the gospel of Jesus Christ and caring for those in need in his name and stead. The practical implications of this commitment are spelled out in the Baptismal

Covenant (*Book of Common Prayer*, pp. 304-305).

We dare not settle for any lesser commitment in the Church and its leaders. Everything depends on this kind of focus. Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ and resurrected Lord, and that word means boss of me, and of you. We are his followers and invite the rest of humanity to recognize the gift God has given us in his life, death, and resurrection.

Though this does not deny anyone else's grasp on the truth, it does claim that truth is a person, that truth is incarnate in Jesus, who is the Way, Truth, and Life. That claim may not be sold short.

My observation after ten years among you is that it is not true that "conservative" churches grow while "liberal" one shrink, although that is the claim of some. In fact, if that is the question, the fastest-growing churches in the diocese, both in terms of people and money, are not by any means conservative.

That distinction, though, is not the point. The churches – conservative, liberal or in-between – that actually do grow have energetic clergy who are committed to Jesus, who pray the Daily Office, and who lead by example. They visit the sick, feed the poor, and demand that the lay people in their parishes look beyond themselves. They are focused not on institutional survival or screeching ideology, but on following the Carpenter in practice. In practice.

How does one become an effective Christian leader? Practice. Practice. How do Christian leaders tell the good news with their lives? Practice.

Practice.

Effective church leadership is not a matter of mouthing doctrinal formulas or being nice to potential contributors. It is a matter of single-minded commitment to Jesus and inviting others to follow him. Adjusting my life to his call is what meaningful life is about for me.

That is why I demand in my leaders and in yours a commitment. The fact that I may not always get it, at least as far as I can see, is no excuse for inaction on my or anyone's part.

We cannot, must not, be limited by the myopia of those at the top of institutional religion, even of our own national church. Locally, if your vestry or rector is not interested in evangelism and service to the community, it is your obligation to ask why. That question is hard and certainly important, but it isn't the hardest part.

Each of us must ask ourselves in our deepest, most private place, if we are committed to praying and doing the ongoing ministry of Jesus in our communities and the world.

Each of us might ask ourselves also what we do to avoid seeing the plight of the poor.

As I write this I am in some on-going anxiety. After a year of planning and discussion, Diocesan Council is engaging in a "feasibility study" to

see if we 15,000 Episcopalians are willing to work for church growth in this country and service to our sisters and brothers in Sudan as they recover from a half-century of devastating persecution for their faith.

What if it isn't "feasible" to help rebuild Kajo Keji and plant churches in Northeast Pennsylvania?

Of course, I believe it is, or I would not be writing this. But what about all of us?

We have the opportunity at our pre-convention meetings (October 3, Church of the Epiphany, Clarks Summit; October 5, Christ Church, Reading; and October 10, St. Anne's, Trexlertown) to learn of the possibilities and work before us. I urge you to mark your calendars and attend those meetings as we begin formal exploration of our own opportunities and commitment.

We have made a great start in our work in Sudan over the past five years, and still have much to do in sharing the gospel with our neighbors here. It is our time. Let's embrace it.