



Called Back to the Well

Revitalizing Congregations

What does it mean to have a spiritually vital congregation? That's what 58 men and women from eight San Antonio congregations are attempting to discern during a year-long program, "Called Back to the Well," conducted at Oblate School of Theology.

Program director Sue Joiner of the **Samaritan Counseling Center in Albuquerque** had a vision for exploring the systemic dimension of bringing spiritual vitality to congregations. Father Ron Rolheiser, OMI, president of OST, offered Yvo Tymen Hall as a monthly meeting space for participants throughout the year.

Father Rolheiser said that offering space for the program was fitting as a part of OST's ecumenical outreach.

"Sponsoring this program is our way of saying that we want to put our resources at the service of the community. We live on the generosity of our supporters, and we have to give back to the community by using our resources to serve its members."

The ecumenical program was launched Jan. 30-31 with a retreat in Tymen Hall. Participants were lay and clergy leaders from six Catholic parishes – Holy Trinity, Our Lady of Grace, St. Francis of Assisi, St. Mark the Evangelist, St. Matthew and St. Philip of Jesus – and two Protestant congregations, Covenant Presbyterian and the Episcopal Church of Reconciliation. Participants meet on the first Tuesday of each month. They also will have a Day of Reflection June 27 with Father Rolheiser presiding.

"Being spiritually vital is not about having a committee that plans an annual retreat," Joiner said. "It's about every facet of church life being steeped in God's wisdom. That means planning worship and being intentional about creating openings for God to touch the lives of people who gather."

"It's about forming disciples through education rather than just imparting information. It changes the ways we make decisions. Rather than having a quick presentation and taking a vote, it means discerning God's call in all decisions, and it requires listening for that voice," she said.

Joiner noted that while people go to church longing for a deeper connection with God, the churches don't always know how to meet that need. Her program is designed to help church leaders come to a better sense of what it means to be called by God and how to respond to that call.

The Rev. Robert Woody, rector of the Episcopal Church of Reconciliation, said the program was a welcome opportunity to dialogue about the spiritual lives of congregations and things that often don't make it onto the agendas of staff and planning meetings.

"Often you don't make time to discuss where we are in our spiritual lives. This creates an opportunity to do that," he said. He said participants prayed for people and issues in the news, which helps turn congregations' attention to real needs in the community.


For example, he said, part of the conversation was about teenagers involved in illicit sexual and drug activities. "We prayed for parents, teachers and others who may be mentors to them and thought about what we can do to create opportunities for frank conversation between those mentors and teenagers," the Rev. Woody said.

Beverly Kasprovicz, who helps with ACTS retreats, the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults and other ministries at St. Francis of Assisi Catholic Church, said Called Back to the Well has given her ministry team ways to make their congregation more deeply spiritual, both in the liturgy and in meetings and other activities.

"We ask God for his guidance at all our meetings so that our minds will be on what God's will is for us rather than our own personal agendas," Kasprovicz said.

"Before our liturgies begin, either a gong sounds or our pastor, Father Jim Henke, calls us to be silent to bring ourselves more into the presence of God," she added.

The year will end Dec. 1 with an all-day closing retreat.

"I'm hoping we can continue doing programs like this at Oblate," Kasprovicz said. "This program is supposed to end in December, but I don't want it to end." 



Mid-4th century Lunette in an arcosolium, catacomb on the Via Latina