

Immersion Leads to Daily Faith Application

Building Christian Traditions by Viewing Faith as a Second Language

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Have you ever viewed the way we learn a language as an analogy to use in taking steps and setting goals to experience an immersion in faith and building Christian traditions as a way of life?

My background in teaching and learning foreign languages has given me valuable insights into how we can view our faith communities as places where we can learn to speak the same language and provide opportunities for everyone to be immersed. The end result of immersion is fluency. Fluency happens through immersion. Fluency leads to a way of life. A way of life that is consistent with Christian teachings is how we envision ourselves in faith communities. This contributes to moving us beyond the walls of the building and in to the world to serve and love our neighbor as we love ourselves.

I have noticed we tend to assume we are all on the same page and speak the same language in our faith communities. I believe the reality is quite the opposite. If we view each person coming through our doors as an immigrant, how does it change our perspective on hospitality and inclusion?

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. Acts 2:1-4 (NRSV)

Through Scripture, we learn the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples and gave them the gift of speaking a language that all understood. I view this as the first time we encounter faith being caught, not taught through building relationships with a common language. My interpretation of this reading is that without the Spirit, we all speak different languages and cannot understand one another. Common language gifted by the Spirit came upon the disciples and the result was their ability to not only speak another language, but be understood. When the Spirit came upon them, the language they spoke that day was not their first and primary language. I envision the disciples as immigrants in other countries as they spread the good news. I reflect on my own experience of teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) in the USA and use the terminology of how we can view speaking faith as Faith as a Second Language (FSL).

Using this analogy, it is through the gift of the Spirit we receive and have the opportunity to acquire faith as our second language. We may assume it is our first and native language, but most times this assumption is not accurate. When we learn and understand Christian faith talk and live traditions in our homes and in our community, we invite others to feel that same Spirit through our actions and words.

When we begin to assess our faith community and realize the need to speak the same language and also realize that we, as an organization, need to ask the Spirit to come upon us and help us become fluent in a common language, we can begin to investigate concrete tools and make plans to immerse ourselves in our faith.

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. Acts 1:8 (NRSV)

Learning a Language

There are lots of studies on language development. And there are plenty on how one can learn a language. If you were ever taking a trip to a foreign country and wanted to take a crash course on the language, you may have spent quite a bit of money for a book or a program that guaranteed fluency in a short period of time. It most likely did not take very long to realize it didn't really work. The truth is, to become fluent in a language, one must be immersed in one of two ways: By family, having parents who spoke the language at home or by an experience in the country where the language is spoken, either living with a family or working and surrounding yourself in the culture, community, and activities. This includes the home.

Studies show that if a child is exposed to a specific language and immersed in the culture before the age of 13, he or she will not have a foreign accent and speak fluently.

When the Children of Israel were preparing to enter the Promised Land, God gave them a clear set of instructions on how to teach their children:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. Deuteronomy 6:5-9 (NRSV)

The value of teaching Christian traditions and faith talk at an early age cannot be underestimated in our faith communities.

- ◇ What would happen in the church if we placed an emphasis on teaching our traditions to children under the age of 13 in the church?
- ◇ Are children a priority in your setting?
- ◇ What does this say to us about teaching adults who do not understand our language?

Providing Tools

Learning a language takes action and hands-on involvement. When you learn a language in school, you learn it the way the brain learns best, through action, song, food, and games. Even in

high school, basic childhood songs are sung to aid in language memory. There are plenty of resources and programs we can use to teach our faith. I believe an important element to identify tools is to find those related to Christian traditions and faith practices that apply to our own settings.

Choose carefully and then begin to use consistent words to describe the core rituals and traditions. Use them in newsletters and bulletins. Speak them every time you gather. Words and practices then have the potential to become the DNA of a faith community. This leads to fluency and becomes a way of life.

- ◇ What tools do you presently use?
- ◇ Are you using these tools and resources consistently and effectively?

Immersion

Immersion involves knowing the language and the culture. The food eaten, the greetings given, and the traditions established. Immersion means being surrounded by family and friends who know the culture and speak the language at home and when gathered in the community. Every faith community has a culture.

- ◇ Can people in your community readily identify and name Christian traditions?
- ◇ Do they practice them at home and in the community or just in the presence of one another?

Fluency

To learn a language, typically one is taught for one to five hours a week whether in school or private lessons. At the end of a year, most can still not speak the language fluently and struggle to understand native speakers. In our faith communities we are fortunate if we can gather more than one hour a week. Typically, we see people once a week for one, maybe two hours to teach the faith. To become fluent, one must be immersed and surrounded by family and friends in the home and in the community. Immersion cannot happen during one gathering happening for one hour once a week. Fluency results in language and culture becoming a way life. In our faith communities this would mean that one understands our culture, recognizes the scripture as a valued part of the culture, and actively lives Christian traditions at home and when gathered in community.

From experience, I know that if you are fluent in a language it's inevitable; when you hear that language spoken in a room, you gravitate towards the person speaking the language. You thirst to be near them. If you were ever loved into another language and culture, you thirst to experience it again. So it is with faith. When Christian love is spoken, one thirsts to be near others speaking the same language.

- ◇ In terms of our faith, what would it mean to be fluent?
- ◇ When you think of people in your own setting, who would you say is fluent and why?

Application

When we apply our knowledge to something, it means we use our knowledge for a specific purpose. The same goes for our knowledge of scripture. Often times we neglect to provide opportunities to talk to one another about how we are connecting God's word to our own lives. We hear messages from our leaders to help us interpret and understand lessons from the Bible, but seldom follow up with conversations relating the same scripture to our own lives. Helping the faith community understand the implications of learning scripture and connecting their own lives to God's Word is important. We often make the assumption that everyone knows that applying something from the Bible to our own lives is helpful in learning more about how we express ourselves. It is related to the way we speak the faith. Reading scripture is what we do. Applying it to our lives is part of our culture.

- ◇ At what point in the learning of a language does a person begin to apply what they have learned to the way they live?
- ◇ What opportunities are there for people to read scripture and apply God's word to their own lives?
- ◇ Are there times when people can tell one another about God's work in their lives?

Challenges

In most faith communities, we emphasize service and have programs to feed the homeless, or help others in the community. Although people do the work, often times in some communities, they cannot verbalize their actions using Christian language or do not connect their work with God's work. In some settings, people donate dollars but do not reach out in hands-on mission opportunities. Moving from the faith community to the world can be a challenge. Our opportunity to evangelize lies in our faith fluency and is dependent on how we describe ourselves.

When a military family is relocated to a base in a foreign country, although the language and culture outside the base may be different, the base provides a safe haven where families are able to shop, go to school, and to church in a setting where they speak the language and recognize the products and systems. For many military families adjusting to living this lifestyle can be challenging. In most cases one can choose whether or not to leave the base. Many choose not to leave. The foreign language and culture presents too much change and a level of discomfort. For those who do take the steps to leave the base and learn the language and get involved in activities different from their own, the benefits are immeasurable.

I believe what happens when you venture off the base and get to meet others is that they begin to know you. There must be an interest shown in getting to know all about their language and their culture before they even begin to question you about your own background. As relationships are built, there is a level of trust that solidifies. Those from the other culture thirst to know more about you. From love and respect, the opportunity to invite someone from the other culture on the base to see how you live presents itself. As a result, there is a comfort and feeling of safety in sharing one another's lifestyles and respecting them. The end result is love

and trust. It is not until these two important feelings are part of a relationship that love grows. Out of love grows more questions about one's lifestyle and ultimately one's faith. It is not only a challenge to gain a person's trust in a foreign setting, but without first taking steps to know one another, taking steps towards inviting someone to your faith community is nearly impossible.

- ◇ When those from your faith community are active in the community, do they know faith language and traditions well enough to be representatives of your community?
- ◇ When you do service in the community, does what you do and how you speak reflect your faith?

Key Questions for Leadership

- ◇ How is Christian tradition taught in our faith community?
- ◇ Are we aware there are people, even long-time members, in our faith community who do not understand our language or Christian traditions?
- ◇ Do we have opportunities to role model faith practices, rituals, and traditions so that all people understand our language?
- ◇ Do we see our role to be providing tools for and equipping leaders and facilitators to teach Faith as a Second Language (FSL)?

Something to keep in mind: Those immigrants who become fluent and articulate in English can eventually work and assimilate to a vibrant life in the community in the USA. They eventually begin to speak English with their children in the home also. Envision this as an analogy of what may happen to those who become articulate in the language of faith. Could they eventually live out their faith every day in the home, at work, and in the world?

The future of the church is in our hands. Come, Holy Spirit.