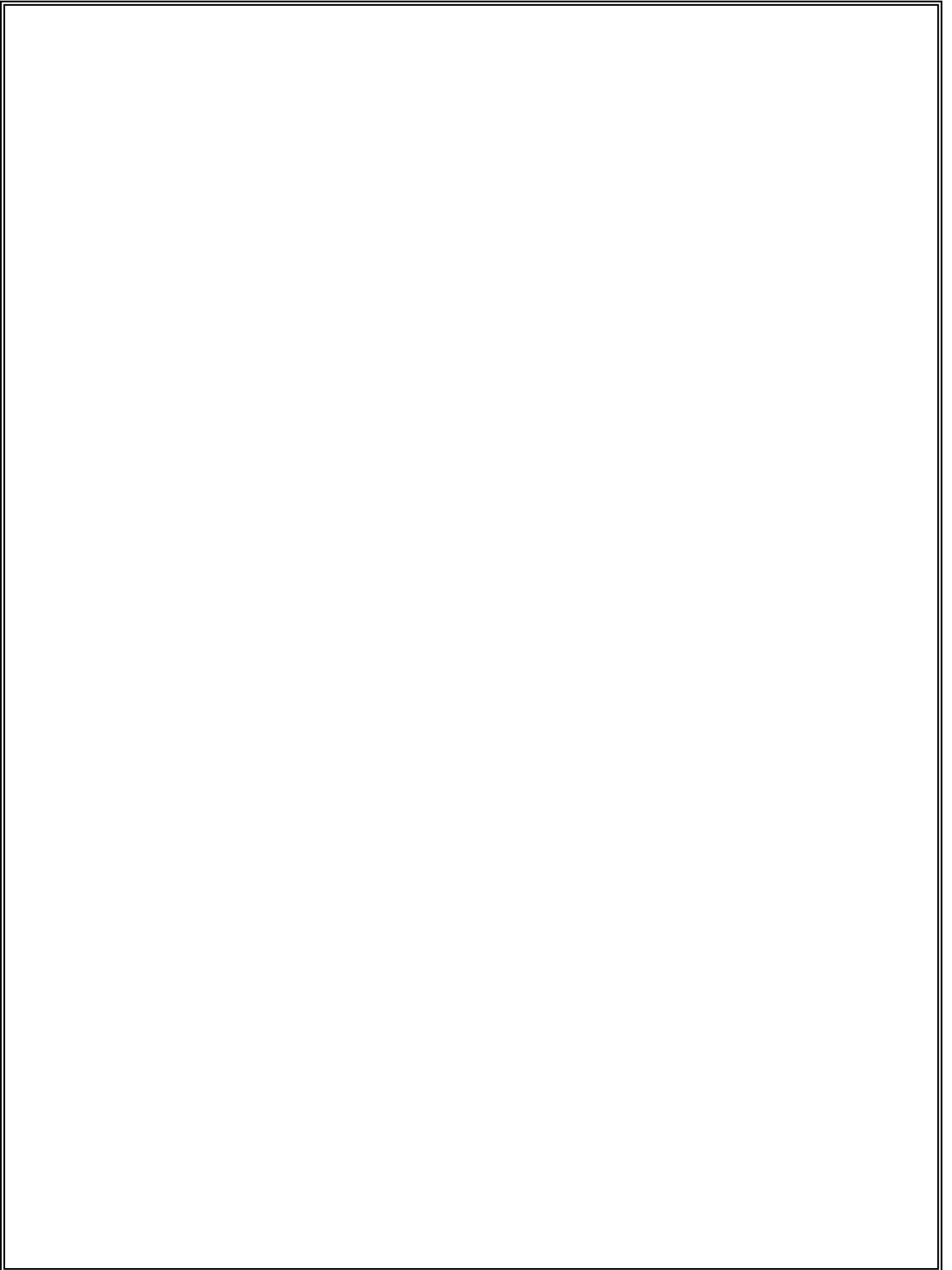


On the Integration of the Christian Faith
into the Homes and Lives of
Young Believers

A Monograph

The Reverend Fr. P.S. Winton



Preamble

The phenomenon is experienced across all religious groups. Clerics and concerned adults wring hands, nod heads and cluck and little changes. The sad truth is that in large numbers young people abandon the public practice of their faith. Some faiths and sects within faiths have more dramatic exodus than others, but the fact is that by the time, at least in America, that young people have acquired a driver's license, the car is rarely parked at the church, synagogue, or mosque.

While there is any number of in-house or even less biased groups to provide statistical data, we don't really need pie charts and line graphs to tell us what a simple head count on any Sabbath will tell us – by the time our children are juniors and seniors in High School they have left “organized religion” behind.

When the obvious is finally articulated in any given faith community and the “Why” question is posited, the instinct seems to be to look to the institution and see what is being done wrong or what is not being done at all. Maybe we hire a youth minister, or another youth minister, maybe we look at the program and see how to make it more “relevant” or “fun”. In any event, we are pretty sure that there is something lacking at the religious institutional level. And there is.

What is lacking at the level of the synagogue, mosque and parish church is a) the leadership to equip homes to practice the faith and b) the process which holds the entire faith community accountable for the practice of the faith in the home and in the full life outside the four walls of the formal and professional religious space.

The fact is this: when there is little reflection of the faith actually lived out in the lives of our people outside the church, synagogue, and mosque, it will be abandoned by our young people at first opportunity. What we have, by and large is “believers” when what we need, if our children are to embrace the faith, is “practitioners.”

What our young people know is that dinner conversation is consumed by discussion of schools and colleges or soccer and football and baseball and ballet and music lessons and purchases and American Idol and even world politics but there is no discussion of faith. What children and young people know is that

prayers in thanksgiving for meals or anything else is done only on special occasions or when the cleric comes to call. Prayers that were shared at bedtime have long ago disappeared despite the obvious fact that our young people have weighty, even life changing matters upon their hearts and minds.

What young people come to realize is that religious practice is reserved for an allotted period of time a day or two per week and it has little to do with the balance of the lives of the people they love and respect; hence it has little to do with *their* lives. Beyond that, some of the behaviors and practices of home and workplace are in stark and direct contrast to that which is professed by the faith.

What is obvious is that from Little League to the summer swim team phenomenon, when parents are energetically engaged with their children in the actual enterprise, whatever it may be, and no matter how a young person might try to hold parents at arms' length, these are the very enterprises that their children come to value more often than not for a lifetime. Hence, when the faith is not practiced at home, it will be abandoned – and is.

Other Factors

The chief factor in young people abandoning the practice of the Sabbath and the faith beyond is indeed the fact that the faith is not practiced in the home. That said, there are other contributing factors.

A significant contributing factor is that **when a young person does arrive at their respective house of worship for the Sabbath, the content and/or delivery of the program is poor.** Either we attempt to slug through poorly designed curricula that has little or nothing to do with the actual practice of the faith for a young person or we settle for sharing of donuts and pop-sociology being ever so careful not to intimidate young people with the truth of the faith we are asking them to embrace. Our materials are often poor and our preparation of teachers is little better. The typical high school Sunday School teacher will receive their materials a few weeks more or less before the Sunday School year begins and is expected to bring it to life Sabbath by Sabbath. So, we have ill-prepared teachers bravely entering a classroom as an act of faith and generosity, with little clarity about why they or the young people are present and/or how the material relates either to the faith *or* to the young people.

The worship component is often no better. The fact of the matter is that for most young people the worship experience needs to be a significantly different experience from that of adults. It is not difficult to design worship that feeds young souls, but it does require some time, some commitment to listening about what feeds young souls and the commitment of resources – particularly the time of clerics. Staff should be prepared for unorthodox locations and hours and be prepared to let the religious expression breathe so that young people can be touched by the worship experience.

A classic mistake is to assume that it is only a matter of musical tastes or to paint with a single brush assuming we know what all young people like in worship. It is reasonable, however, to spend some time studying how our young people engage the world around them and see if there is a way to invite them into the *practice* of a religious life.

I am satisfied as I observe my own treasured tradition, that if we expect young people to follow along with a 720 page hymnal and 1001 page Prayer Book we are virtually inviting disengagement. Add the historic biblical languages of the Abrahamic tradition and we are totally dead in the holy water.

Finally, the Sacred Narrative that, for a period of time governed the Sabbath has, in fact, been drowned out by the secular narrative; principally the sports narrative.

I have observed that people who hold themselves to be faithful are no longer even apologetic for missing Church on Sunday if they were involved with their children in some organized sporting event. Matters of the soul do indeed play second fiddle to whatever sporting event is in season, ranging from fall baseball to spring soccer. Yet, I find no such exception in the literature of any serious religious tradition. It is not necessarily that sports take place on Sunday. One could argue that the Sabbath could still be honored and have room for sports, particularly as a family activity. The problem is that sporting activities now **replace** the keeping of Sabbath – in terms of worship and study. *The message parents are sending is, in fact, that sports are more important than the faithful practice of the faith – that commitment to one's athletic team is more important than commitment to one's Lord. By our silent surrender on the matter the Church affirms the new secular narrative as normative.*

The Good News in *The Good News*

There is reason to be hopeful. When believers are confronted with the reality of the loss of our young people to the faith, they become energized toward reversing the trend. The prevailing and predominant reaction is: "I am willing to model the practice of the faith in my home, and in my life beyond the Church walls, I just don't know how." The good news is that we can indeed equip people to *practice* the faith.

Some Historical Perspective

Prior to the advent of radio and television and the evolution of urban concentration in this country, religious education took place in the home. While there was some life within the community church, the vast majority of Scripture reading and explication took place in the home. The community church, and later the denominational or sect specific house of worship became a place of gathering for a shared experience of what had been introduced and shared in the home. The point is that the *home* was the primary venue for engaging the Scriptures, contemplating the faith and launching a practice of the faith - be it on the farm or as people faced the dangers, challenges and indeed the temptations of emerging urban centers.

Over time, the local house of worship has become the place of primary Scriptural instruction. In some ways, the introduction of Sunday School made less necessary the need to gather children around the family Bible. The responsibility was transferred from grandparents to the Sunday School superintendent. The one sermon a week became the foundation for the faithful and the local Church became that solitary place where religious instruction took place. Sunday Schools emerged and developed and with that development the home as a place of religious instruction became fully replaced. *Over several generations institutional religious instruction and worship replaced, rather than merely augmented, the practice of the faith in the home. By extension, understandably, responsibility for supporting young people in the practice of the faith is now seen as the responsibility of the Church or Synagogue and not the home.* When those institutions fail, the young person is, with respect to the practice of the faith, quite on his/her own. Insofar as the faith is not practiced or even reinforced in the home in an intentional way, the young person perceives rightly the low value of the practice and abandons it.

The Practice of Faith

In simple terms, what we seek is to equip people to practice the faith. The practice of faith is three fold.

Step 1 – **To know** the fundamental tenets of one's faith tradition. This is done primarily by knowing the stories of one's faith and the range of faithful interpretations of those stories.

Step 2 – **To own** – to accept and embrace to oneself by public, adult affirmation of some sort that these stories, traditions and meanings are one's own and that they point to a larger truth and belief system that one adopts as one's own.

Step 3 – **To make known** – to be prepared and willing to share one's faith. Across traditions, the degree to which this is done by word of mouth varies, but all Abrahamic faith traditions call for the faith to be shared by living or PRACTICING the faith in witness to one's faith.

This, then, is the work of the home; no matter its postmodern composition: to know, to own, and to make the faith known. It is work for a lifetime. It is first introduced, and always taught and reinforced in an intentional way *in the home* with a clear expectation that it will be carried out in the world of work, school and civic endeavor.

And we return to the question: *"How are we to do this? We are willing, but we don't know how."*

Introducing

What does the practice of faith look like?
What do we do so that our children and young people take to heart that which we claim to believe?
How do we operate our home in a way that it rises to the level of practicing the faith?

There are five easy steps. Seriously. Just five. But before one attempts these five steps, the first thing that needs to happen is the head(s) of the home, whatever the composition, must take on for themselves the responsibility that the passing on, instruction, and support of the practice of the faith rests with the home – reinforced by the Church, Synagogue or Mosque.

[In this section the writer is concerned with the practice of the Christian faith only. What is required for the practice of other religious expression will vary but the principle abides.]

As a home:

1. Read and study Holy Scripture regularly
2. Pray individually and as a home community
3. Engage in Christian service together
4. Financially support the work of your Church and make it known throughout the home
5. Keep the Sabbath (the entire home) along with other Christians

The data is compelling. Young adults, who have a life of practiced faith, came out of homes that did these 5 things. When these 5 things take place faithfully in the home, children and young people understand that it is at the core of what their home and life is about.

The Ongoing Role of the Religious Institution

In this effort, one wants to make sure that we do not make the mistakes of the past. We do not want to do away with Church as we know it today. The Church is the Lord's own institution He left behind on earth until He comes again, so that we might help people in this life prepare for the life to come. The mistake we have made is to behave as if we are the *only place* where that formation takes place. And so, the Church should continue to work as hard as it can in Christian formation, doing all the things we have learned to do well. I am not advocating the *replacement* of the Church in terms of Christian formation; I am simply saying the Church cannot, when it comes to Christian formation, replace the *home*. It takes both Church and home working together if we are to form real disciples.

In addition to the work the Church has always done, there are some new things we need to do to support the home in their effort to practice the faith. Again, none of these things is hard - it is just a different focus.

1. We need to make sure that the Church has done a good job of teaching the fundamentals of the faith. We can spend a lot of time on "issues" in the Church, having never laid the foundation of the faith within which the issues can be discussed.

2. When things are important to the Church, we pray for and about them. We need to be diligent, energized and faithful in praying for all of our homes as they seek to practice the faith. We need to pray for families by name on an ongoing basis and know enough about what is going on in their homes to pray with some intentionality and specificity.

3. We must hold our homes accountable for the practice of the faith. We need to be brave enough to, in one breath, make it clear that “No, it is NOT all right that as a home of Christians you choose soccer on Sunday over worship.” and “Yes, it can be and is forgiven, and let’s reinforce why honoring the Sabbath matters.” Holding the flock accountable is not easy but it is essential.

4. We must provide the resources and support for homes as they practice the faith. We need extensive libraries of resources and we need clerics and trained lay persons to be available when a home faces a challenge in the practice of the faith. It may be as simple as finding that “just right” devotional book for a pre-teen girl or it may be as tough as talking to a young person about the death of a friend in an auto accident on graduation night. When homes commit to the practice of the faith the Church needs to be there with the tools and resources to help them along the way. We need to do this in such a way that resources are available within essentially every modern means of networking.

5. Finally, we need to understand that this is NOT just one more Church program. This is not something we are going to do for a season and then we are done. The practice of the faith goes on throughout life and the home needs to continue to be a Christian home, no matter how the complexion of the home may change. The resources may change and the feel may change but the practice of the faith goes on.

Getting Started

First, the task is to introduce the concept that the home is the fundamental small group of a Church and that Christian Formation rightly takes place there.

Second, figure out how to roll it out in your Church. Keep it as simple as you can. Start gathering resources and build your library. Be imaginative. What might you need? You will discover that you need resources for toddlers and for adults with older parents and for people facing death at the end of a long life of faith and everything in between. There is no separation of the practice of the faith and the

living of life.

Third, get your prayer support ready. The group needs to be big enough to pray for all the homes and all the folks involved by name, and you need to be engaged enough to pray with some specificity.

Finally, you will need to have support people in place who can check in with homes and make sure we are holding one another accountable for the practice of the faith and know when and how to intervene.

Your Church may choose to get folks to begin practicing all five aspects of the practice at once. Alternatively, you may phase them in one a year or you may phase them in gradually but faster than one a year. This will be dictated by the Spiritual maturity of the faith community. Whatever the choice, we do think it is important that you allow time to evaluate how things are going and make reasonable adjustments.

A Final Word

It is likely that this will be too much faith for some people. There are folks in your church and mine who really do prefer just *a touch of* the faith. They are content to come to Church, be pleasant, even engaged, but are not ready for this level of commitment. Some of those folks will eventually convert to the practice of the faith. Some will not, but will continue on with a superficial encounter with the faith. And some people will leave and find a safer environment. It will simply be too much Church for them.

You will also grow. People want to be part of something real. People want to be engaged in life in a way that makes life matter. This will be life-changing for many of your flock. Homes will change. People will be transformed. The Gospel will come to life in ways you can not now imagine. God will bless this. It will not be easy. But it is faithful.

Fr. Winton currently serves as Rector of St. John’s Episcopal Church, Charlotte, North Carolina. He is a former hospital Chief Executive Officer, Manufacturing Executive and Business Consultant. Persons are invited to freely copy and use this Monograph in whole, or in part, without restriction.

NOTES

