

Austin pastor notes value of Christian calendar for spiritual formation

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In this interview, Don Vanderslice, pastor of [Mosaic Church in Austin](#), reflects on how his community of faith observes the Christian calendar:

I'd never been a part of a community that participated really fully in the Christian calendar until I came to Mosaic. We recently did some one-on-one conversations between our pastoral staff and leadership team, and almost every member of our community. They were conversations about spiritual formation, gifts, passion, commitment, other things. What came out over and over again, in asking the question—"How has Mosaic been a part of your spiritual formation?"—was how important the Christian calendar had been in spiritual formation over the past few years.

Don Vanderslice,
pastor of Mosaic
Church in Austin,
speaking at the
Transforming
Culture Symposium
in 2008. (David O.
Taylor Photo)

A number of our people were brought up in churches, but we have a lot out of the free church tradition, the Baptist tradition, and then about a third have Catholic, Episcopal, Lutheran, some kind of liturgical background. But they all highly value the Christian calendar and part of that has to do with spiritual formation. It draws us into the priority of journey, reminds us that

the spiritual life is indeed a journey, as we celebrate for instance that Lent takes us to Easter, which itself isn't just a day, but a season during which we dive into the Easter stories—plural—and leads in the Pentecost season, and then ordinary time.

The idea of journey or pilgrimage is that we're going somewhere, and not just landing on a holiday here and there. I've always found it odd that in the Baptist, free church tradition in which I grew up we were so devout in celebrating the secular calendar. Mother's Day, Father's Day—if there was a greeting card for it, we dedicated a Sunday to it. But if there was a day in the church year that had been embraced by Christians for about 2,000 years which said something about what it means to be church, we dismissed it.

The Christian calendar is a realization that in the same way God created seasons of the year, there are seasons for the church. We don't always exist in summertime or in winter. Of course, there's always a time to think about repentance, but in part of the church year we think seriously about what that means in our lives. When the church says at Advent, now we're starting a new year in contrast to the culture around us, we're saying something about our priorities and about our lives, holistically and spiritually. The calendar we follow says a lot about us. The calendar gives us a way of remembering our story.

Mosaic generally has a countercultural feel, and following the Christian calendar has counter cultural aspects to it. Is there an awareness of that at Mosaic?

Absolutely. We have a countercultural commitment, and the Christian calendar is countercultural. Throughout the year, we draw attention to the fact that it distinguishes us from the rest of the culture. I mean, we're not rah-rah about, but it comes out constantly. At Advent we call attention the fact that it's the beginning of the year, not the beginning of the shopping

season or even of Christmas, which has its own season (after Dec. 25). No, it's the beginning of Advent. We measure our time differently. When we get to July 4, we still preach out of the lectionary, and that wasn't created to celebrate American independence in the 21st century. Of course we talk about it being the Fourth, but we acknowledge that we follow a calendar that isn't tied to our patriotism.

It's a radical way of marking time and embracing what we have felt in the church is valuable.

How would you introduce spiritual disciplines like the Christian calendar to a congregation unfamiliar with them?

I've never been a pastor of a church that resisted those ideas, so I'm not an authority. But I wonder if it started with a small group of people in a church who were interested in exploring the idea, then letting the small group bring the suggestion to the full community instead of the pastor. And there has to be trust between staff leadership and the community.

It's odd in churches that they celebrate Palm Sunday and Easter with great joy but there's nothing in between. Holy Week puts that in perspective. It's a something we are very intentional about as a community. Our Good Friday is very dark. We don't try to explain Good Friday, give easy answers, we just take part in this last day of Jesus' life. Then our Holy Saturday is a silent service, where we do ask a lot of questions. They don't provide easy answers. It's a way to be, though, because it's a lived experience. Every human has had a Holy Saturday. We want to articulate that and not cheat our way out of it, just to be present to it. Then Easter really means something. We're exhausted by the end of Holy Saturday, and Easter is so energizing and enriching when we celebrate the resurrection.