

An Interview with John Newton

Author of *Falling into Grace: Exploring Our Inner Life with God* and *New Clothes: Putting on Christ and Finding Ourselves*

What does the chief of staff of a diocese do? What is a typical day like for you?

I always chuckle when people ask me about a “typical” day in diocesan work. I am in the office much more than I used to be in my new role, which works well for me now that I have a daughter. I take Monday off, and so I would say that I am in the office 3 days a week. On average, I work out of the office one day a week for a variety of reasons and I typically visit a different congregation each Sunday. On days when I am in the office, I arrive around 7:30 in the morning and I try and spend the first 90 minutes of the day reading, centering, writing, and praying. Once the clock strikes nine, a frenzy of meetings, emails, phone calls, interruptions, and focused work ensues. I make myself leave the office at 4:30 to make it home by 5:15 so that I can spend time with my daughter before she goes to bed. Most of the work I do is with Bishop Doyle, the Canon to the Ordinary, the staff I manage, and clergy in the Diocese. There is no real typical day, but what I love the most about my new role is that I get to work on big picture vision and organizational development issues.

Before taking on the role of chief of staff, you were the Diocese of Texas’s Canon for Lifelong Formation. What lessons did you learn for congregations that are planning programs?

One thing I see with crystal clarity is that people support what they help create. I learned that there is a big difference between commitment and compliance. People can comply with someone else’s idea, but for leaders to be truly committed they need some skin in the game. Their ideas, input, effort, and work need to help shape the program. So often a congregation mistakenly believes that the solution to their challenges with respect to programs exists somewhere “out there.” If I’ve learned anything it’s that this thinking is wrong. The best solutions, ideas, and plans are always inside the hearts and minds of leaders and the best programs, even if they rely on tried and true curricula, always tap into the wisdom of the leadership team.

What recent developments in program planning have you seen that you find encouraging?

Program planning is trending towards holism and integration. Fewer and fewer people see Christian formation as a mere component in the Christian life that can remain separate and coexist with other parts such as mission, leadership training, service, and congregational development. People now intuitively sense that there is only one Christian life and that the best programs do more than fill people's minds with good content. The best programs now equip the whole person to make a love-spreading difference outside the walls of the church while also connecting people more authentically with those inside the church.

You've published two books with Church Publishing. Will the focus of your writing shift with your responsibilities?

I hope to keep writing, but I also need to be realistic. My new role in the diocesan office requires more time and energy. I also have a nine month old daughter and a wife who I love to spend time with. I fully expect that I will keep writing, but I don't want to force it. My plan is to stay open and to listen to the Spirit. When I believe God is calling me to write again, I fully expect that God will help me find time to write.

What do you do for fun?

I love to read, run, play golf, be with friends, and relax at home with my family. I also love to cook. Four years ago I did not know how to make toast, and so I have come a long way.

Can you recommend one book, one film, one website, and one podcast you want others to know about?

Book: *To Change the World* by James Davison Hunter

Movie: *Disney's The Kid*

Website: www.mbird.com

Podcast: reClaimed: Dialogues on Justin and Kinship: reclaimed.libsyn.com

If you could give church leaders one piece of advice, what would it be?

If you want to make a difference in the world or in the church, start with changing yourself. Who we are matters tremendously more than what we do. Actions that flow from a heart that is compassionate, loving, and surrendered to God will always bear the most fruit. By ourselves we cannot change the world. Our work is to become a conduit through which God changes the world. To make a difference we must first become that conduit through whom the Spirit can flow. Focus first on being and "doing" the will of God will come much more naturally.