
Merganser Ducks and Common Prayer

**An article from the *Cathedral Times*
by the Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler,
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip**

At the first of the summer, when I travelled up to our little lake cabin only for a few days, I happened to see a lovely brood of small merganser ducklings. A very patient mother was gliding nonchalantly across the water, in a straight line; but the little ducks were paddling any way but straight. At one point, the brood of seventeen was definitely going in seventeen distinctly different directions.

The ducklings would lose track of their very mother every few seconds, too. They would dive and splash and nibble at each other, just like many other children I know! But through it all, they were also learning something very serious. By following and imitating their mother, they were learning safety: which features of the journey were dangerous and which were not. They were learning how close they could get to strangers like me. They were learning to dive. They were learning where the fish were.

I was amazed, a few weeks later, to see the same brood. But this time, the collection was far different. For one, the ducks had grown dramatically. Gone were the downy feathers, and they were developing their distinctive merganser hoods on their adult heads. And the most amazing thing was that all seventeen were there! None seemed to have been lost to turtles or hawks or shore animals. I was impressed!

Moreover, all the ducks were quite orderly. This time, they formed a precise line as they cut through the water. Their order was as smooth and connected as the curves on a snake.

I thought of those ducks as our programs at church begin this year. As children return from their summers, from places near and far, I notice that they have changed. I know they get tired of hearing it; but "My!" some of them have grown dramatically. And one particular age no longer is pulling this way and that, going in seventeen different directions. Another group is most well mannered now, walking as deliberately and steadily as that long line of mergansers.

Yes, our education routines have begun. Mothers' and fathers' return to their patterns of order and safety. And children continue to learn. They learn, most deeply, by imitating. They pick up habits and practices from their parents, their neighbors, their older friends and siblings, those who are close to them.

All of us learn from community. Even those of us who are finished growing physically still have much to learn spiritually. And sometimes it seems that our spiritual lives are going in seventeen different directions at once—including backwards. Where will we learn safety and maturity in that spiritual life?

We learn spiritual maturity, I believe, by common prayer. When we pray together, we become like those little ducklings learning to swim safely and orderly in the same direction. Of course we take turns and explore good things. We don't become so uniform that we lose our individuality.

But common prayer does teach us how to avoid pitfalls and dangers. It teaches us which values to focus on and which ones to avoid. Common prayer teaches us who to follow. Common prayer teaches us where to find food. So, I look forward to our growth together this year, the growth of all of us” from the smallest students to the wisest elders. We still learn in this lovely journey of ours. Though many members, we are one Body of Christ, learning to swim gracefully in this lovely life.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sam Candler". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

The Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler
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