

You're Welcome

September 29, 2019

UMCG

This past week Sharon Anderson, Rob Anast and I attended a three-day Leadership Conference at the Church of the Resurrection in Kansas City. That's the mega-church started by Rev. Adam Hamilton. As we walked onto the sprawling campus and entered the huge sanctuary, Sharon looked over at me with a quizzical look on her face and asked, "Is this Methodist?" Yes! A vital, cutting edge, 20,000 member UMC mega-church does exist in the United States! Over 2,500 Methodist pastors and lay persons came together this past week to prepare for our denomination's next international gathering of General Conference in 2020 where delegates from around the world will gather next summer in Minneapolis, MN. There the UMC will continue to wrestle with, to struggle with the fact that we are still not fully accepting of, or welcoming of, LGBTQ+ persons. Will the official stance of the United Methodist denomination continue to be one of excluding LGBTQ+ persons from full participation in the life of our denomination? That was the question we addressed in Kansas City this past week.

And so we attended workshops. We worshipped together. And we heard from no less than 8 Bishops, including Kenneth Carter, President of our Global Council of Bishops. One of the highlights for me was the chance to hear David Brooks speak in plenary session. As many of you know, David Brooks is an Op-Ed columnist for the New York Times as well as an Executive Director of the Aspen Institute. He is currently a commentator on "The PBS News Hour," NPR's "All Things Considered" and NBC's "Meet the Press." He also teaches part time at Yale University. (Frankly, it's a mystery how he does all these things!) In 2015, Mr. Brooks wrote the book, *The Road to Character*. His newest book, *The Second Mountain*, explores what it looks like to move from being self-centered to other-centered, to embrace a life of interdependence and community rather than independence and isolation, and to live with joy, gratitude and hope.

Mr. Brooks attended several of our sessions before he spoke. I must admit that I was a bit surprised when he shared that his students at Yale, while longing for meaning and purpose and wanting to live lives that count...the majority of them are devoid of the language of moral discourse. Reflecting on his experience at the conference, he went on to say that his students "long for, yearn for what we have in the church...a community with a moral vocabulary, a language of evil, sin and redemption...an ethos that addresses the need for meaning and purpose in life...a value system that helps one move from a self-centered existence to a life centered on others.

The fact is, however, that “the church” has largely lost an entire generation of young people...in fact we have lost several generations of young people—from millennials, to Gen X’ers and Gen Y’s. These generations see institutionalized religion as largely irrelevant and are turned off with the churches’ exclusion of LGBTQ+ persons from full participation in the life of the vast majority of churches. David Brooks was frankly bewildered, blunt and to the point with us when he said, “Listen...this ‘issue’ you are discussing in your conference today is NO LONGER an issue in our society and culture at large. It’s simply not.”

Put another way, one of the major tasks before “the church” is to become a more welcoming, more inclusive church...not just in this one area, but more welcoming in general. So, we’re in the middle of a 3-week sermon series on our Vision 2020 theme of Reaching In...on welcoming and hospitality. And we’re basing much of what we have to say on Phil Maynard’s book *Shift: Helping Congregations Back Into the Game of Effective Ministry*. And Phil has one entire chapter devoted to this topic titled “From Fellowship to Hospitality.” In other words, to be effective in ministry, churches today need to shift from a mindset and ethos of “fellowship” to a culture of deeper, more meaningful relationships, of “hospitality.”

Maynard asks us to consider the following. I quote: “It’s a familiar story lived out in many congregations across the US every Sunday. Someone is in crisis. Or, a couple has their first child. Another family has just moved into the area. They decide to attend the church down the street. They don’t know anyone, so they slip into the back row of seats. Because the bulletin is geared to the congregation, they struggle to keep up with what is going on. During the ‘moment of friendliness’ a few people nod at them but most of the congregation visits with each other. After the service, someone points them in the direction of Fellowship Hall for refreshments, but when they arrive there alone, they are left standing alone. *It would be no different* if they attended a Sunday school class or other group in the church. People in the church have known each other so long that it is difficult to break in.”

Ponder with me some facts that Rev. Maynard has to share with us:

-- Somewhere between 60-80% of people who visit a church come because someone personally invited them.

--In most communities, 50% of the population are “nones” who don’t darken the door of a church. (This is true of our Tri-Cities area!)

--Most folks who visit a church decide within the first 10 minutes following arrival whether or not they will return.

- The driving factor in the decision to return is personal connections made by members of the congregation...not the greeters or pastor.
- People are more engaged in a church if they have at least one good friend who is involved.
- Follow up with first time visitors is a key factor in maintaining the relationship.
- Hospitality is central to Christian discipleship and can be learned through training.
- Hospitality is more than how one is welcomed to a worship event. It's part of a larger system of welcoming and discipleship both in the church building and outside its walls in everyday life.

In preparing this sermon I've struggled with the challenge of making this topic of welcoming and hospitality concrete and down to earth. Well, one of the best ways to do that is through story telling. So I'm going to tell you a story. And as I tell it I want you to keep in mind the facts we just heard:

- 50% of people in communities do not come to church
- 60-80% of people who do visit a church come through a personal invitation.
- Most folks decide within 10 minutes if they're coming back or not.
- The main reason people return is a personal connection made with someone in the church.
- Follow up is key.
- A welcoming, hospitable atmosphere is crucial.

So...think of how these facts apply to the following true story.

Dick and Anne were a young couple, recently married in church. But once married, they didn't darken the door of the church for several years. They saw no need to...the church was basically irrelevant to them and their busy lives. Then along came the birth of their first child, a daughter, Dianne. Several weeks after Dianne's birth, Anne was surprised to receive a card in the mail from Mrs. Werner. Mrs. Werner had been her Sunday school teacher many years before when Anne was a little girl. The card said something to the effect: "Congratulations on the birth of your first child, Anne. Wouldn't it be wonderful to bring her to church so that she can learn the stories of the Bible just as you did? Please come!" Hey...it was a personal invitation. And on second thought, Anne realized that, yes, going back to church might help her raise her daughter.

A few weeks later when Anne brought Dianne to church, she was warmly welcomed not only by Mrs. Werner but others as well. She was also pleased to see one of her old friends from High School at church. Helen! Helen was delighted to see Anne in church and encouraged Anne to invite husband Dick to church. Helen's husband, Buck, had played High School football with Dick and they knew each other. Besides, Helen and Buck were members of a young couple's Sunday school class that they just loved. They had a great teacher and the class often socialized together. Besides, most class members were raising children and young families.

So Anne went home and invited her husband, Dick, to come to church with her. "No way!" he said. He refused to come to church with her. That is, until he was invited personally, by the men's group, to attend a Cleveland Indians baseball game. Dick was an Indians fan and, well, he would go to that! He went and had a great time. It was a multi-generational group of men who were down-to-earth, good guys who liked sports and liked to be with each other. Not bad!

A few weeks after the ball game, one of the men from that group called up Dick and said, "Hey, we need help at the homeless shelter downtown. Is there any way you could come help us serve a meal there this week?" Dick thought...yeah, I can do that. So he joined some volunteers from the church to feed the hungry and homeless. It was a satisfying experience, so Dick volunteered to go again in the future. Not long after that, he was invited to join the men's group to visit migrant workers on the outskirts of town. These migrant farm workers and their families needed clothing, medicine and food. That too was a powerful experience.

Meanwhile, his friend Buck kept inviting Dick to come to Sunday school class. Finally, Dick relented and went to church to worship with Anne, and then attended Buck and Helen's Sunday School class. He was warmly welcomed at church and Sunday school. He was also invited to come back by members of the congregation. And he did! Next thing you know, Dick was invited to go with several of the men from church who had a ministry visiting inmates at the local jail. Dick was petrified at first but went anyways. (Doesn't this remind you of Matthew 25 where Jesus's disciples fed the hungry, clothed the naked, and visited the sick and those in prison).

And the story continues. After several years in church, Dick began to feel a call to ordained ministry. When he went to share this with the Sr. Pastor of the church, the Pastor recognized him, but didn't really didn't know him very well. Why? Because the lay people of the church had gotten to Dick first. They had invited him to a baseball game...then to

hands on, meaningful outreach in the community...then to a Sunday school class (small group) that was relevant...and worship that was passionate and meaningful. Miracle of miracles...Dick was now sitting in the Pastor's office talking with the minister about ordained ministry.

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You know, when I landed in Kansas City earlier this week on Tuesday, I picked up my rental car and decided to take a swing by Smithville, Missouri, a few miles northeast of the airport. As I drove into town I made sure I stopped by the old Headquarters of the Gospel Missionary Union (GMU) and snapped a few pictures of the building. I then drove by to see our old home at 506 East Woods Street where my parents had lived for 20 years, from 1972 to 1992, when Dad served as the President of GMU. During that time he was responsible for 500 some missionaries scattered around the world. These missionaries engaged in evangelism, church planting and leadership training. They ran grade schools, high schools, Bible colleges and seminaries. They ran camps. They operated medical clinics. They engaged in ministries of mercy such as famine relief. Twenty years before coming to Smithville, MO to serve as President of GMU, Dick and Anne had spent nearly 20 years serving the Lord as missionaries in Mali, West Africa where they raised their daughter, Dianne, and their three sons...David, John and Rich.

Family and friends...inviting and welcoming people to church is incredibly important. Helping guests and visitors integrate into the life of our church is incredibly important. Inviting people into vital, meaningful relationships with the Lord and each other is at the heart of what we do as disciples of Jesus Christ. Believe me...I know this personally. Because I wouldn't be standing here before you today if members of Goss Memorial Church in Akron—ordinary followers of Jesus in Akron, Ohio—had not invited, welcomed and integrated my parents into their church and introduced them to a vital relationship with Jesus Christ. Amen.