

The Bridges of God

January 19, 2020

UMCG

Reach Up! Rich In! Reach Out! Remember those words? That's our Vision 2020 statement. That's the mantra we as a church are prioritizing this year and the next few years. We're going to intentionally Reach Up to God through life-changing worship and study...Reach In to one another through intentional, radical hospitality that builds a strong community of faith...and Reach Out to our community and world through mission that meet people's real needs personally, and addresses issues of social justice. In the Fall and early Winter your pastors preached a sermon series on Reaching Up and Reaching In. This week and the next we'll focus on Reaching Out. Today, I focus on mission and outreach through our personal networks of FRANs (friends, relatives, associates and neighbors). Next week, Pastor Becky, our Director of Communication, will share about new ways UMC Geneva is seeking to communicate with our local communities via the media, social media, and other means.

I love this passage from the very first chapter of John's Gospel. Why? Because it reminds us of the basics, the foundational matters, the priorities of our faith in Jesus Christ. *First*, it reminds us that as followers of Jesus, the most important thing that we can do is to be like John the Baptist, Andrew and Philip and point others to Jesus! *Second*, we're reminded that people can find what they're looking for in life from Jesus. As John's two disciples follow Jesus, he whirls around and asks them a question, followed by an invitation. He asks, "What are you looking for?" Then offers an invitation, "Come and see!" Spend some time with me. And they did. And their lives are forever changed! *Third*, this passage reminds us of the way the Gospel, the Good News, was most commonly spread in the earliest church (30CE through 300CE)—through family and friends...through personal networks.

In his classic text, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, Michael Green tells us that "the great mission of the early church was in reality accomplished by means of informal missionaries, laypersons, devoid of formal theological training. (The church grew) not so much through formal preaching, but informal chattering to friends and acquaintances, in homes and wine shops, on walks, and around market stalls...In addition, the fellowship which the church offered, transcending barriers such as race, sex, class, education and ethnicity was an enormous attraction.

One of the most important methods of spreading the Gospel was by the use of homes (small groups) that offered real exchange of views and fostered meaningful discussion among participants. Pointing others to Jesus was the prerogative and duty of every church member in the early church.

Take a look at the front of your bulletin...the top section – Centering for Worship. (Read it.) Donald McGavran, a missionary to India and a missionary strategist, wrote the *Bridges of God* where he says the secret to church growth is everyday Christians spreading the Good News through their personal networks such as friends, relatives, associates and neighbors.

So...let me tell you a story. And as I tell it, I want you to identify the various ways members of one church used their network of FRANs to reach out to a young family in their neighborhood.

It was during the Great Depression. It happened to be a bright summer Sunday morning in one of the industrial cities in the Midwest. A man and his wife were preparing to go to church. The wife happened to look out the window of her house onto a field where a bunch of rag tag kids, boys and girls...most of them shoeless...were playing a pickup game of softball. “Why aren’t these kids going to church?” she wondered out loud. Turning to her husband she said, “Hey...let’s invite these kids to go to church with us!”

Most of the kids playing softball were children of immigrants, manual laborers. They were poor. Their parents didn’t own a car. In fact, some of them had never even ridden in a car. So when the kind neighbor lady came over and offered to give them a ride to church a mile or so away, it didn’t take much convincing for them to run home and get permission from their folks to go to church.

And so, every Sunday morning, this lady and her husband let a bunch of ragamuffin kids clamber into the back seat of their nice car, and they ferried them to church and back. Most of the kids had never been to church and in fact were quite mesmerized by the imposing Gothic architecture, the sanctuary’s high ceiling, the stalwart, dark, arching wooden beams and the beautiful stained glass windows.

“Wow! These people were rich!” the children thought. Indeed, many were in middle management or higher up in the city’s rubber tire factories. But they were kind. And welcoming. They saw past the children’s not-so-clean clothes. They welcomed the children. They taught them stories from the Bible in Sunday school. They accepted them as they were. They loved them. Above all, they shared Jesus with them.

One of these children, a little girl, kept coming to church. She came to know Jesus as her Savior through her Sunday school teacher...a Mrs. Warner. As that little girl grew older and went to high school, Mrs. Warner kept in touch with her. After WW II that little girl, now a young woman, married her high school sweetheart in that church. But like so many young people, she stopped coming to church after she was married.

And then the first baby came along. A little girl, Dianne. And Mrs. Warner heard about it through the grapevine. And so Mrs. Warner took the time...just a few minutes...to sit down and write her former Sunday school student a card. And on that card she wrote something to the effect: "Annie, congratulations on the birth of your first child, a daughter. I've missed you in church and would like to see you here again. Wouldn't you like Dianne to learn stories from the Bible and about Jesus?"

And so Anne started coming back to church with her baby. Not long after that she asked her husband to please come to church with her. He said no! Church just wasn't his thing. But when some of the men from church, including an old H.S. friend, invited him to go to a professional baseball game with the men's group, he said, "Sure." And he had a great time. And so he started to come to church with his wife and daughter. Soon they joined a dynamic Sunday school for young parents that turned their lives upside down.

After a while some of those same men from church asked Anne's husband, Dick, to help them serve in a soup kitchen, a homeless shelter downtown. He found that to be a powerful experience. The next thing you know they invited him to help some migrants with food and clothing who were working on the celery farms outside of town. That was an eye-opening experience. And then he got involved in a ministry visiting those incarcerated in the city's local jail. Now that really got him out of his comfort zone.

After some time, the Pastor of the church noticed this young man and his interest in ministry. And so he took him under his wing. And encouraged him. And the next thing you know, that young man sensed God's call on his life...a call to ordained ministry. And so off he went to school with his young family. While in school he felt God was calling him to mission service in Africa.

Soon after graduation he was ordained, and shortly after that, he and his family traveled to Paris where he and his wife, Anne, studied French at the University of Paris for two years. After that, they boarded a freighter south to Dakar, Senegal, W. Africa, where they landed in 1957. And that, in a nutshell, is the story of how my parents came to know Jesus Christ, and went on to serve as missionaries for 40 years.

Think about this! Where did it start? With one, kind, faithful, Christian woman who looked out her window one Sunday morning and saw children playing sandlot baseball. She SAW. That's where it starts!!! With SEEING. And seeing was followed by INVITING. And inviting to church was followed by WELCOMING. Welcoming those children into the life of the church. And welcoming was followed by DISCIPLING...helping those children become followers of Jesus Christ.

I've often asked myself, "What IF that lady had not invited my mother to church? What IF Mrs. Warner had not been willing to be a children's SS teacher? What IF she had not written that baby card to my Mom inviting her back to church? What IF those men from church had not extended an invitation to my Dad to attend a Cleveland Indians' baseball game? Or to get involved in various social justice ministries with them? What IF that pastor had not noticed my Dad and his interest in ministry?"

Prof. David Lose writes a blog for preachers. He summarized the message of today's Gospel lesson in three words: NOTICE, SHARE, INVITE. Professor Lose says that when it comes to our relationship with Jesus, our primary job is to see and share. Not threaten, not coerce, not intimidate, not woo or wheedle or plead. No...our primary job is to see and share.

When was the last time you invited someone to something? Think about it for a second. Was it to go out to a movie? A play? Dinner somewhere? Shopping? A sporting event? Let me ask: What do you like about UMC? Now...think about your FRANS. Who among them do you know that might like the things you like about our church? A special event – such as the upcoming women's retreat. An activity – like our upcoming gym night where we'll be playing basketball and volleyball. Our music in worship is second to none. A small group study such as Spirited Women, the men's Early Bird Breakfast or our new book discussion group, Spirits and Studies, meeting in the home of Jason Hartz and Josh Tibbs. People today, especially young people, are searching for opportunities to serve, to make a difference in the world. Why not invite your FRANS to serve at Hesed House or go on Appalachia Service Project? So, I encourage all of us...each one of us. Let's notice, let's share and invite! And let's see the amazing things God will do!

Amen.