

Sermon for May 12, 2019
Church Growth
Acts 9:36-43
The Reverend Roger Pancost

A boy came late to Sunday School. Knowing that he was usually very prompt, his teacher asked, “Johnny, is there anything wrong?”

“No, not really,” he said. “I was going to go fishing, but my dad told me I needed to get up and go to church.

The Sunday School teacher was very impressed and asked Johnny if his father had explained to him why it was more important to go to church than go fishing.

“Yes,” Johnny replied. “My dad said he didn’t have enough bait for both of us.”

This joke reflects a trend that has been going on for the last few decades... fewer, and fewer people are attending churches. When I was growing up there was a cultural expectation that everyone in the United States went to church. Then, at about the same time I became an ordained minister, mainline churches, like the United Church of Christ, began to realize that membership was declining. A survey done by the University of Chicago reports that in 1990 there were 74,302 members of the United Church of Christ in Michigan. By 2010 that number had fallen to 38,557, a decline of almost 50%.

This decline in church membership led to the development of church growth seminars. The individuals who lead these seminars promise strategies that will help increase church membership. Over the years I have attended countless denominational meetings where church growth was the topic. At one point in my career I drove four hours every few months to attend a leadership training program in another state. The main objective of that training was to grow the church numerically.

To be quite honest, I find this focus on church growth exhausting. I also find it misguided. I don’t believe that churches grow because they follow a set of strategies. I was pleased to discover that one of my UCC colleagues, the Reverend Jennifer Brownell, shares my opinion about church growth. In a recent Stillspeaking devotional she writes,

“You probably don’t ever have these conversations where you are (cough, cough), but the church people I hang out with spend a fair amount of time thinking, reading, and talking about plans or programs designed to get the church to grow. Screens or no screens. Small groups or leadership training. One kind of music or

another kind. And whatever the attractive program or plan is, it must lure the elusive “young family,” seldom seen in the wild and not easily captured.

Reverend Brownell then goes on to ask, “What if church growth, though, was less about a plan or a program and more about an orientation, an attitude, a way of being? What if the most attractive feature of your church to young families (and old singles and all the configurations of humanity in between) was that you had the kind of true peace that confronted conflict in a healthy, unafraid way? What if the most appealing growth plan was a commitment to faith so unabashedly reverent that it looked something like awe? What if the best church growth program of all was a community of people giving and receiving the kind of comfort that can only be inspired by the Holy Spirit?”

(UCC Stillspeaking Daily Devotional, May 6, 2019, “The Bible’s Church Growth Plan” by Jennifer Brownell)

Jennifer Brownell draws the conclusion that church growth is about an orientation, an attitude and a way of being, from her understanding of the Church of the first century. In this morning’s reading from the Book of Acts, we hear about how the church in Joppa lives out these characteristics.

In the church in Joppa there is a minister named Tabitha who has been caring for some of the most vulnerable people in the community...the widows. In addition to making sure that these individuals have the clothing they need, Tabitha cares for them with compassion and respect.

Tabitha’s impact on the community is so great that these individuals cannot bear to let her go. In response to Tabitha’s death, the people who Tabitha has ministered to, seek to help her by summoning Peter. Their action demonstrates mutual care and concern.

The church in the first century grew because the members gave comfort and support to one another and to the people in the community. They were deeply committed to their faith. And, they dealt with conflict in healthy and courageous ways.

I am grateful that the church I serve reflects this type of community. First, this is a church that is willing to address conflict in healthy ways. When I first came to this church people made it clear to me that the members have very strong opinions, and they are not afraid to express them. How wonderful is that? It is good to share one’s opinions, as long as you are willing to listen to, and respect, the opinions of others. I appreciate that in this church we follow a form of governance in which every person has a right to speak, and that important decisions are made together.

Second, this is a church where our commitment to faith sometimes looks like awe. We experience this awe in our worship through music and the spoken word.

We experience awe in our times of fellowship when love and joy fill the room. We experience awe in our studies when a new insight is received.

Third, this is a church where people care for one another with deep compassion. In the same way that Tabitha cared for the widows of Joppa, there are countless ways in the people of this church support one another.

Like the church in the first century, this church understands that it is called to reach out to the world around us. Following the example of Tabitha, our acts of love, compassion, and kindness help to lift other people up.

Sometimes we do this in small groups such as the volunteers at the Shelterhouse Resale shop, the crew that rehabs homes with One Week/On Street, the individuals who pick up furniture for Home to Stay. It is done through our inter-faith work. It is also done through music, such as the recent Brave New Voices Concert.

Sometimes we help to lift others up through our individual acts of compassion. This occurs when people care for a neighbor or volunteer their time with a social service agency. It also takes place in our places of employment. People are lifted when doctors bring physical healing, counselors offer support, teachers inspire, and scientist help find ways to care for the planet. It happens every time that we show the love of Christ by treating other people with dignity and respect.

To be quite honest, I don't hear anyone in the United Church of Christ, Midland, talking about strategies for church growth. This church continues to welcome new people on a regular basis.

While church growth is something to be thankful for, it is not something we should ever take for granted. It is important for us to continue working to create an environment of care and compassion where individuals can share the journey of faith, knowing that there is always room for one more.

By the way, if some Sunday you decide you would rather go fishing than come to church, I hope that you have a great time. Just remember that we will be here the following week, and we hope that you will be too.

