

25 January 2009

It is a sad but true fact that it is all too often depressing to go to church meetings. From local church councils to association and conference meetings, all the way up to General Synod. Committee meetings are especially bad. They overflow with doom and gloom, with people gnashing their teeth over declining members, declining giving, roofs collapsing, staff quitting, and on and on and on. And of course right now all of the national doom and gloom doesn't help either. With all these businesses going bankrupt, how can the church manage to go on?

One of the perks – or quirks – of ministry is that I get to go to a lot of these meetings. They don't tell you in seminary that you're going to spend a lot of time sitting on committees. But they aren't all bad. A lot of great things happen at these meetings too. It just tends to be the bad news that we focus on, which is unfortunate for a number of reasons, not the least of which is that we in the church are supposed to be about good news.

One of the better committees I'm on, and am in fact the chair of, a punishment I sought out for myself – is the Committee for New and Renewing Churches. On the whole, this is a great committee, because it's about new things! New churches! But we have our share of woes, too: inadequate funding, we don't really know what we're doing, and we have no resounding success to report. Small ones, yes, but we have yet to start a megachurch like all the other denominations seem to have.

This month the committee invited the Rev. Cameron Trimble from the Local Church Ministry's evangelism program to come out and train us as a committee. Sometimes I feel like new church training in the UCC is really a case of the blind leading the blind, but it turns out that Rev. Trimble knows quite a bit about the subject. Then again, she started her ministry in the United Methodist Church, where she started two successful churches. She has since come to the true faith, the United Church of Christ, and has studied a lot about current trends for churches, and also specifically what works and what doesn't work in new church development.

It's not news that all mainline churches are declining. What surprised me in what Rev. Trimble told us is that megachurches are also declining. They still have those big, imposing buildings, but almost every one of them has declining membership and declining giving, just like us! She further told us that churches these days don't live as long as they once did. The average church lifespan has dropped from 78 years to 70. Ninety-five percent of churches have fewer than 150 people in worship on a Sunday. About one-third of people entering the ministry will leave it within five years, and fewer churches are able to afford a full-time minister anymore. None of this is really news. It's the same doom and gloom we usually hear, only with detailed numbers.

What was new, though, is that Rev. Trimble does not find all this depressing. On the contrary, she thinks this is an exciting time for the church. The church is changing, and we don't know yet what it will look like in the future, but there were a few things that Rev. Trimble would say: that the future will tend to be made of a few giant megachurches, but also many smaller churches. That the kind of church people want these days, and will want more and more in the future, is a church that in its beliefs, its ministry, and its polity looks an awful lot like the United Church of Christ! A church that is green, a church that is concerned with social issues more than with personal sin, a church that is committed to including

all regardless of race, gender, orientation, physical ability. A church that is about covenant more than doctrine, a church that respects freedom of conscience, a church that sees science and faith working together, not opposing one another. In fact, Rev. Trimble says that of all Christian denominations, the UCC is the one that is best able to meet those future trends. We in the UCC are the best-kept secret in Christendom. We're the church people wish for but didn't know existed. Yet we, being UCC, we don't know how to toot our own horn. Worse, we all too often let ourselves get bogged down in concerns over rules, plans, and procedures.

The harvest is ready, but where are our harvesters? Are they bogged down in committees? Are they being held back until they pass through all the proper channels, get all their authorization, have their credentials analyzed and their standing transferred? It is time, Rev. Trimble said, for us to stop acting like an institution and start acting like a movement. It is time, she said, to focus not on rules and structures, but on energy and leadership.

The thing is, when you look at the gospels, you find something that looks a lot more like what Rev. Trimble is talking about than an institution. Especially when you look at the Gospel of Mark. That gospel is nothing BUT movement. "And immediately," "right away," "and next." The Gospel of Mark doesn't just move, it hustles. It's shorter than the other gospels, and was most likely written before the others too, so it tends to be simpler, whereas the others embellish. Mark will tell a story in five verses that the other gospels tell in fifteen. But it's not just a matter of having been written first. The Gospel of Mark has a sense of urgency about it, that we need to act now, speak up and make ourselves known because time is wasting. It is, in short, kind of the opposite of what many churches seem to be about.

Take this issue of the calling of the disciples. Matthew and Luke don't get to this until the middle of their fourth chapters, but Mark gets to it by the fourteenth verse of his first chapter. There's no pussy-footing around. Jesus shows up, sees Simon and Andrew, says, "Come follow me!" and then he walks on, without even checking to see if they've responded. He spies James and John and picks them up too. He gives no sermon and works no miracles in order to impress them. He just issues this simple invitation, "Come with me, and I'll teach you to fish for people." He doesn't ask for their credentials or check to see if they've attended an accredited seminary. He doesn't vet them or get authorization. He just shows up and gets cracking.

Now, rules and institutions certainly have their place. At best they are designed to help us work better and more efficiently. But as Jesus himself would later say, the Sabbath was made for us; we weren't made to serve the Sabbath. We can't let rules and institutions get in the way of the work that needs to be done. This was good advice on Rev. Trimble's part to our committee. We kept peppering her with questions: what if the person isn't ordained, what if the church doesn't look like a regular church, what if they meet on Thursday nights instead of Sundays, what about a charter and by-laws and tax-exempt status? To which Rev. Trimble said, "Why do you care? If it's not doing any harm, then let it be." Or as Rabbi Gamaliel said two thousand years ago about some upstart followers of a guy they called the Messiah, if God has not blessed this, then it will fail. But if this is from God, then who are we to stand in the way?

What would it be like if we saw ourselves not as a church, but as a movement? What if it was our energy that defined us and not our rules of order?