



A Note from the Pastor's Corner

While I was lying in the ER with a blood clot in my leg, I began to think about a lot of things. Naturally, the fact that life is fleeting and fragile – even though our bodies may be quite resilient – lingered in my mind. The result of that ‘brilliant’ insight is realizing my time here is short – in astronomic time, in geologic time, and in human time.

I’m not saying that I think my last breath is just around the corner – though it may be – but that God has called me for a special and unique purpose, and I have yet to fulfill that purpose. Part of that calling is to be your Pastor, and I continue to try my best to minister in that way. But there’s more to my calling.

Like almost every church I’m aware of, ours is steeped in a mix of cultures: a traditional church culture, the fading social culture of the 1950s, and a culture of nationalism. Even in its hey-day of the post-war ‘50s, this was not a healthy combination. People learned to become good citizens and loyal church members, but very few were mentored to become apprentices of Jesus.

Today in the US, about 53,000 people drop out of the Church every week. So the question has to be asked, “How is sticking with that cultural mix working?” I’d say, not so good. Even though we in Central Square have been experiencing a steady growth in numbers over the last several years, it’s nowhere near the growth rate of the local population.

For a decade or so, the long decline from the church’s 1958 plateau, when over 70% of Americans attended church regularly, was ignored. But as the slide continued, the social upheaval of the 1960s was blamed, pastors were blamed, music was blamed, the courts were blamed, society was blamed, “liberals” were blamed, colleges were blamed, Hollywood was blamed. You name it, if it wasn’t blamed it was surely a suspect. Except, that is, for the church and its traditions. Today, less than 17% regularly attend church.

Sure, there have always been churches that had a good idea at the right place and at the right time. Many have tried to copy the methods used by churches such as Willow Creek and Saddleback – but, mostly, with nothing close to the results expected.

That may be because almost always, those good ideas have been overlaid upon the same old cultural norms. In other words, they were mostly a re-packaging of traditional ways of being and doing church. When the decorations are removed and people find the same attitudes and the same church they had grown tired of, they feel snookered and are less likely to ever try church again.

Along the way, though, groups of believers and Jesus-curious folk have met and begun something different. Basically, they do not take the rule-based, membership-oriented approach in forming their group. Worship is more about sharing their own personal experiences with God, discussing them, and celebrating them than it is about a routine program of events in which a handful are truly involved. It may not be traditional, but it sure is authentic.

But even those groups can fall into a routine – a semi-fixed way of conducting their time together which becomes their tradition. And so it is that the expression “one generation’s inspiration, is the second generation’s tradition, which becomes the third generation’s problem to solve” is shown to be true.

So what do we do? I can tell you what some churches have done. Some have tried to have two different types of worship experiences, which, if it works, results in two separate, competing congregations. Others have decided they are simply unable or unwilling to consider being anything other than what they’ve always been – and would rather hang on to the bitter end and go out of existence. A few have bequeathed their resources to a newly forming body of believers as their members go their separate ways.

I don’t like any of these choices. I suggest we pay very close attention to what we know of Jesus’ life and ministry. Jesus had no rules when it came to the people he interacted with, he ministered to, and that he taught. Anyone was welcome when he preached. Even his disciples were unclean and unacceptable to the religious keepers of tradition.

The only folks Jesus had problems with were the hardened, tradition-steeped religious folk who had all the answers – the ones who knew and enforced the rules of who was acceptable, who was not, how people were supposed to conduct their lives, and how God worked. Of course, they always had ways to justify how they lived their lives by referring to their favorite, time-tested sentences from Scripture and by appealing to long-standing tradition.

Jesus was chased out of synagogues, he was chased out of the Temple, he was accosted in public by prominent religious leaders, he was harassed as he ministered to the “bad” people, and he was degraded because of those with whom he rubbed elbows. And when he associated with people of other ethnicities or other religions, he was scandalized.

He did a lot of his teaching ministry out in public because the people that he needed to be with were not allowed inside the ‘holy’ places. Besides not being willing to lower their standards, the good folk of the day had an image to uphold. Not only was Jesus shocking – he was revolting!

I suggest it’s time for the Church in our nation to become both shocking and revolting, and to venture outside the walls of its buildings.

Grace and peace, Pastor Bud