

With sling in hand, David went out to meet Goliath. . . 1 Sam. 17:40

THE FIVE STONES

A Newsletter for Small Churches



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- Three Choices For St. John's Episcopal Church**
Robert Outman-Conant - explores the options small churches face 2
- Ten Ways To Build A Healthier Congregation**
Clay Smith - offers 10 components of healthy congregational development 7
- Re-form-ing the Rural Church**
Lester M. Settle - discusses the future of the rural church 9
- Ministry in Small Urban Churches**
Robert Stutes - helpful, hopeful, realistic and challenging 11
- ✓ **Vision: One Congregation's Story**
Mark Miller-McLemore - conclusion of our case study 13 ←
- 10 Excellent Ways to Make Sure Visitors Don't Come Back**
Tony Pappas - guaranteed! 19
- The Gift of the Small Church**
Ansley Coe Throckmorton - celebrates the heartbeat of the "living church" 22
- No Little Places - The Untapped Potential of the Small-Town Church**
Klassen & Koessler - a book review 23

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In our last issue, we left First Christian Church, Chicago Heights, IL, in the throes of a dilemma. Now we pick up the story and see where faith has led them.

Vision: One Congregation's Story

Mark Miller-McLemore

All this background serves to bring us up to the time of the Board's retreat in March, 1988. The processes of looking at our community, self-examination and listening, and exploring options were excellent preparation for this "mountain top event." Just prior to the retreat, I spent some time assessing and seeking to understand my eight years in the congregation. I also sought to focus the questions I thought we needed to answer. Let me here quote from what I wrote then

"The State of the Church: A Look Back from the Pastor's Perspective."

"I would like now to look ahead and speculate about the next chapter in this church's life. I don't need to think about us as a growing congregation numerically, although that is possible. I would prefer to think about us being both faithful and thriving as a church. I don't want to think about us as struggling to survive. That drains too much energy and is not something that will attract people to this congregation. There are two issues that we need to resolve before we can move ahead. First is our purpose: Why are we here? Second is our location: Is it possible for us to thrive here? Our building is beautiful -- but it may be outmoded for our purposes now. Our community has a lot of problems -- but those can also present lots of opportunities for significant Christian mission. Our congregation is small -- but we have a lot of strengths. We are tolerant of diversity, our laity are highly involved in the life of the church, and we seek to put our faith into action. These are all classic Disciple characteristics. What can we do with them?"

My vision of Christian life is that we are healed -- then we are called to use our new found strength to be healers for others, as God in Christ healed us. There are no limitations or boundaries or borders that should keep us from being good neighbors, good Samaritans. As God loves us and makes us whole by the touch of Christ so we too are to be bearers and sharers of that same good news and healing touch. The church's role is to lead and challenge and support us in this. When Christians individually or in community narrow and cut short that vision to helping only "our own," then our mission is not fulfilled and our joy (and God's) is not as full and rich as it could be -- or as God would will. Can we make our vision this full?"

Our retreat was a conscious attempt to answer those questions which we felt were so important in light of some underlying assumptions about this congregation specifically and the practice of our faith in general. For most of the people who took part, God was very present and real. Rather than describe the retreat in detail, I would rather here list some components which were especially significant in its content and tone and outcome.

1. **Worship** was always central. We began with a brief worship service, included time for personal meditation each day, held a Sunday morning service which Board members planned and produced on the spot, and concluded with thankful moments. We really asked for and felt God's presence diffused through the whole weekend.
2. **Creative scripture study** was also helpful. I remember most the time of discussion in which small groups were asked to reflect upon the scriptures they felt to be most significant to them. When we pooled our responses, we found ourselves turning toward stories like the Good Samaritan, or passages

like the parable of the sheep and goats in Matthew 25, or Jesus' call to his followers to "feed my sheep" at the end of John. Bible study took place relatively early in the retreat, and people found it energizing.

3. We also looked for **alternative ways of access to our tradition**. Periodically, during times of reading or thinking we played pieces of music that in some way spoke of the church: "Simple Gifts," "Pachelbel's Canon," the "Ode to Joy" from Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, Willy Nelson singing "In the Garden." We asked people to reflect on which one of those pieces spoke most to them of the church and why, and this was helpful at getting people thinking in fresh ways.
4. There was, as usual among church folks, lots of **fun, fellowship, and good conversation** at meals. Time was designated Friday night and Saturday night for relaxation, and lots of games and singing and conversation took place.
5. We used **short articles to raise important questions** and asked groups to read and reflect on them.
6. We looked at **options being lived out by other churches**. By reading short articles and descriptions in small groups and sharing what we had gleaned with the whole group, we were able to take a look at diverse possibilities for churches. We read about small group ministries as a building block for one congregation, the revitalization of an old downtown Disciple congregation in the northwest, and the phenomenon of Willow Creek Community Church in South Barrington, Illinois. (Interesting here were the chuckles! They were so different from us as to bring humor.) The impact of looking at other churches, however, was to remove the sense of "it's not possible" and replace it with "with God all things are possible." These concrete examples accomplished that very effectively.
7. We spent time **focusing on our strengths and our past heritage** as a congregation. Since we knew we were one of the strongest of the mainline Protestant parishes in Chicago Heights, we were more accepting of what we actually did well. People lifted up our trust and care for each other; our willingness to experiment and try different things; our coming to the point of intentionally plotting our future, with God's help; our leadership; our acceptance of diversity; our music and worship; our ecumenical involvement; and our hands-on ministries as real strengths upon which we could build.
8. We spent serious time in **small groups** gathering insights and information and sharing with one another before funneling small-group findings back to the large group. This two-stage discussion process really allowed more people to speak. Nothing new here, but it was helpful.
9. Finally, we found a **consensus emerging from the large group discussions** about where we ought to go and who we ought to be in the years ahead. Much of the specific language of the resultant document "*What Is Our Calling?*" -- even the use of the word "calling" itself -- emerged from lay persons, not the pastor. I was impressed by people's ability to think theologically. Although all of us were tired by Sunday afternoon, none the less we found this to be an exciting and alive process.

It was a powerful event, as was the covenanting ceremony that marked the same process in a ritual fashion several months later. The tears I found welling up in my eyes during that ceremony were a reflection of my sense of exhausted and exhilarated satisfaction at the conclusion of our retreat. Most of the Board shared those feelings and attended together an ecumenical Lenten service the evening of our retreat's end at which I was committed to preach. I appreciated their support, for I needed it.

Fruitful Results

The period following the Board retreat and the congregational covenanting ceremony was one of great ferment and activity. The most immediate organizational result of the commitment described was the formation

base, to be part of this group which began to meet a task force to implement the "New Directions" emphasis on hands-on ministry in practical ways in our parish.

There was, a dramatic increase in the number and intensity and focus of such events in the congregation's life over the next few years. The new vision we shared unleashed creativity, excitement, and fresh work, which in retrospect I still feel to be rather astonishing. I will attempt merely to list the new efforts here without going into great detail.

1. We added another crew of adults who worked once a month at the Salvation Army soup kitchen.
2. We began to organize for on-going collection of food supplies needed for the local food pantry
3. The emphasis on our various clothing collections increased, and we began taking large quantities of clothing for distribution through PADS (more later).
4. We began what we called a "Garden of Eatin'" in the church's front lawn. Starting small but enlarging each year, a number of volunteers pulled out grass, then tilled and fertilized the ground in order to grow vegetables in a visible fashion so that the food pantry might have fresh veggies to distribute.
5. We hosted the foundational meeting that led to the formation of a local Habitat for Humanity chapter in the South Suburbs.
6. We publicized through paid advertisements the opportunity for a "working vacation" with an adult work-camp trip to Appalachia. We were able to organize an adult group in the fall of 1990 as well as another teen group the previous summer.
7. We found ourselves with a budget surplus for the first time in anyone's memory as we did our financial planning for the coming year. This money was dedicated to a "Dream Fund" to be used for something which could not otherwise be provided,
8. The congregation got into recycling in a more serious fashion.
9. Individual members volunteered for such diverse community ministries as taking pets to nursing homes, working with the local all-volunteer hospice organization, and working as literacy tutors.
10. The church made office space available for our local Literacy Volunteers of America at no cost.
11. Members of the congregation staffed the Salvation Army kettle at the area mall during the Christmas season.
12. The congregation continued to excel in the CROP Walk, ranking in the top 5 over these three years, while the walk itself expanded with more churches and individuals participating.
13. We proposed some intentionally cooperative interchanges with black churches and clergy in our community through the local Ministerial Association.
14. We supported and financially subsidized the participation of one of our members in the "Woman to Woman" C.W.F. study trip to Japan in the Spring of 1991.
15. We initiated a service project for Advent which we called "Bring-a-Friend/Help-a-Friend Day." The intent of this project was to take the "Bring-a-Friend Sunday" concept and package it together with what

we felt to be an underlying urge to be of service to those in need, particularly during the Christmas season.

16. The church became a most significant factor in the beginning of a program for sheltering homeless persons in the South Suburbs. Very little shelter was available south of the city of Chicago before 1990. PADS (Public Action to Deliver Shelter) is a model for churches to shelter the homeless. It was developed in the early 1980's in Aurora, Illinois. The plan builds on finding at least seven congregations willing to open their facilities as a site where homeless people can be fed a hot meal, be given a reasonably comfortable and safe and warm place to sleep, and receive a breakfast. Shelters rotate to a different church location each night of the week and are open only from 7 PM until 7 AM the following day. They are staffed by volunteers organized in, roughly, three four-hour shifts. Other volunteers provide and serve the meals. Sometimes another smaller group comes in to help in the early morning with cleanup.

Our church had talked about the need for shelter in this area, and I had been aware through our Ministerial Association's connections of the PADS model. When a couple of local groups (The League of Women Voters and a Community Center) both raised the possibility of doing work to shelter the homeless in our area, I was informed and present, and the congregation was ready to consider participating. In fact, members were rather enthusiastic. In a sense, we had been waiting for something like this to come along, bringing us more opportunities to serve. We were able to get in on the ground floor.

At this point, there are 13 sites and over 70 churches represented in the volunteer corps. About 40 people per night are sheltered, and the Board has just hired its first professional staff person to help direct the work.

17. Other areas mentioned in the "*Statement of Our Calling*" were also addressed. We instituted an increased awareness of the spiritual dimension of our church life through prayer, started a prayer chain as well as a "care team" of people who would be willing to provide basic help like a ride to the grocery or the doctor at short notice, sponsored a two-night seminar on dealing with grief, and held a cooperative "40-day fast during Lent."
18. We also paid attention to our facility. We were able to do some ramping, resurface the parking lot and provide designated parking, and attend to general redecorating.
19. The communal/ritual/celebrative dimension of our life was not neglected. After each of our first two years we held an end-of-the-year event that incorporated a slide-and-narration recounting of all we had achieved in the year just past. It helped us to see everything in one place and time, to laugh and cry at our goofs and losses, and to thank God for what was good. We also asked lay participants to share during the sermon time about the impact of their hands-on involvement in their faith life. That, too, was provocative and powerful.
20. We ran a brief article in each newsletter for about 3 years pointing to the importance of hands-on ministry to and with the poor and affirming its value to Christian life.
21. By about 1991, we figured that 55 people (representing 70 percent of our average attendance) were directly involved in these hands-on ministries.

Our information gathering led to an exceptional retreat that produced vision and decision making about the future. The vision produced the work and results in the following years. Now I would like to assess some of the important principles that I think, upon reflection, contributed. I have isolated 12 factors; you will no doubt add more.

1. We shared a **faith** that we would find or that God would show us a way.
2. We were seeking to be **intentional**. We wanted to look carefully at the important questions, being honest about difficulties and not denying problems in the situation. Most of all, we wished to avoid drifting until we could no longer make decisions.
3. **Trust** was key. We trusted each other, the congregation trusted its leaders and pastor, the leaders trusted the congregation. We all worked to create a process that we could (and did) trust, we trusted in God.
4. We were aiming to be **open** to new possibilities and aware of changes demanded to get us there.
5. We sought to be **informed** about the realities of our situation, pro and con, by **asking good questions**. We also sought to be informed about possibilities that had been actualized in other churches.
6. We intended for our decision making to be **shared**. It was important that lay persons be doing much of the looking, studying, assimilating of information, and discussing. It was important that not all of the insights be mediated through the minister. It was also important that this be an act of group or congregational discernment, not something grasped or seen by an individual or small group only.
7. We sought to build on our **experimental attitude**. We knew that we could make adjustments as needed. This gave us a willingness to **venture and risk**, which were key qualities. So often, churches with survival mentalities or with big decisions facing them take themselves too seriously or "freeze up" into inaction or paralysis -- or worse, humorlessness. Our willingness to experiment and assess helped us avoid those pitfalls.
8. We sought to make use of the best **wisdom of others**. Lyle Schaller's writings continue to be an amazingly fruitful source of the right questions for congregations to ask. His article on seeking a congregational niche was especially influential to us.
9. We sought to be as **creative** as possible. I mentioned some of the exercises designed to access our creativity during the Board retreat. The best example, though, came from a couple of years earlier, when we were in the midst of repairing the beams holding up the sanctuary roof. At one point, during a work stoppage, a thick chain stretching across the chancel held the roof beams together, keeping the roof from sagging. It was not the most attractive item in the sanctuary, but it was often turned to our advantage, as it was one Advent season when we entwined the chain with greenery and turned it into a decoration. We sought to be equally creative in discerning avenues of living out God's call for us.
10. We sought to ground what we did in **scripture, worship, and prayer**, so that what we discerned might be distinctively Christian and Disciple, and most appropriate to the church.
11. I think it is fair to say that we had a **minister committed** to the process and the people for the **long term**.
12. We shared a conviction that, if we were seeking to be faithful, **God would be faithful to us**. We understood God's faithfulness to mean that God would bring us enough people to sustain our energy and efforts in Chicago Heights.

A Postscript: Where Are We Now?

What about the present? On one level the congregation is in much the same situation now as when we began. The staff of the congregation is the same. There has been no significant advance in numbers, but no decline either. Our average attendance remains about the same (67), although our giving has increased. We

are in the same location, and the area surrounding us is still in seriously bad condition. The abandoned shopping center across the street is still an eyesore. Our building is still three times too large, but it has not gone downhill significantly, and we have managed to do some redecorating. Word is out that the local School District is getting worse. The city has been termed "the most corrupt city in the United States" by the Federal attorneys prosecuting former and current city officials. A recent article noted that population declined from 37,000 to 33,000 between 1980 and 1990, with minorities increasing from 43% to 50% (Chicago Tribune, August 8, 1993, Section 2, p. 3) As early as 1990, I began to raise questions with our Elders about the viability of our congregation despite our new-found calling. We wrestled with numbers-related questions for several months, but the events of the year proved to be so exciting and compelling that our questions seemed unimportant and our doubts were resolved.

I took three months' sabbatical beginning in January, 1992. In part I needed to get some distance and regain perspective. In part I needed to regenerate. In part I wanted to see how other churches were doing things. In part I wanted to do some reading and writing. But my absence coincided with some budgetary problems which raised anxieties about the congregation's survival and brought the question of growth and location to the forefront again. The New Directions emphasis seemed to wane in 1992 with the exception of our major efforts, mostly PADS. It seemed we had a lack of numbers, leadership, energy, and dollars to sustain and build on all the excellent things we had been doing. The concern for growth led us in early 1993 to a Parish Enrichment Conference, a subsequent architectural consultation, and yet another consultation with the Board of Church Extension. We have now considered again whether we can remain in this location. We simply do not get enough visitors. It seems probable that the middle-class whites who might normally come to a Disciple congregation will not come to Chicago Heights, no matter what. During my sabbatical I visited several other small churches or churches who were engaged in the kind of community ministry that we were. In every case, they had significant outside help in the form of staff or funding. In most cases, they also had a smaller facility, more suited to their size. I am not sure it is possible with 70 in attendance and one full-time staff person to do what we were doing for very long. So, after careful study and lots of sharing and discussion, we have decided to relocate. We're in the process of marketing our facility and looking for a new site now.

In his booklet Why Not Relocate? Schaller notes that there are many stopping points along the process to relocation. One of those can be a commitment to stay put and engage in neighborhood ministry. Oddly enough, I found this book immediately after our retreat in 1988. What I read raised red flags and questions right away. But I filed it in the back of my mind and set it aside. Perhaps, in part, it gave me motivation to greater efforts to make our "New Directions" work. Now I am pulling that book out and reading it again. Was our decision just a "station of the cross" along the way to a move to where people will come? Was our vision not genuine? Was our call authentic?

We have not "saved" a community from decline. We have not found the path for all small congregations to follow. We have not discovered the way to do "urban ministry," whatever we mean by that. We have not discovered a path for all congregations to be renewed -- in hands-on ministry. But we were able to accomplish some significant things in our activity and work together.

Perhaps PADS was our reason for being where we were these last five years. It is likely that PADS might have come about without us, but it would not have been as straightforward or as simple. Was this our mission, our calling for those years? Perhaps it was. If so, it was not a small contribution to make.

It will be interesting to see where we go from here...



Mark Miller-McLemore, pastors First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Chicago Heights, IL.