

LEADING MINISTER REPORT

GEORGE MARCHINKOWSKI

This is where we are

In his little book, *From tablet to table*, Leonard Sweet writes:

When any species undergoes a reproduction crisis, a name is given it: “endangered”. Arguably, Christianity has entered such a crisis; our inability to reproduce the faith is the number one problem facing our families and churches today. Christianity in the West has become a sterile, exhausted religion, its power to tell us fresh things about God and life expended in lifeless repetition, imprisoned conventionality, and predictable pastiche.

(don’t worry, I didn’t know what pastiche meant either – turns out it means “imitating the work of another artist”)

Last year, on Vision Night, I outlined the dilemma the institutional church finds itself in and looked at some of the influences that have brought us to this place. Some of the causes are thousands of years old (Christendom) and others are directly related to the worldview in the West which is now considered Post-Christian, Post-Faith or even Post-God. Remember this quote from last year: Rabbi Jonathan Sachs reportedly once said: “The grandfather prays in Hebrew, the father prays in English but the son doesn’t pray at all”. All of us have experienced this in our families and among our friends, the reluctance of younger people (but not only younger people) to make themselves a part of the life of a local church or to be seduced by an entertainment based religious offering that attracts for a while before offloading its adherents in disappointment. I’ve seen the decline first hand in the smaller churches in the Presbytery, some 28 members, where members are fiercely loyal but who decline steadily as the aged congregation continues to thin.

Can it be so simple?

Churches have responded to decline by investing in their youth, by expanding the technical competence of their worship leadership and musicians, by running endless programmes, and DVD based Bible study. Surely the hype and the smoke machines will lure the missing generation? Surely they will be wowed by the multimedia presentation? “If we only do what we are doing better” is what we think, then God will be faithful and “add to (our) number daily those who are being saved” (Acts 2: 47). It doesn’t work. Or, it works for a while and then not. What is required is to do something totally different and it starts by finding ways to ask non Church people why they’re not coming and in what circumstances would they come to something somewhere that seeks to create community when God is at the centre.

The cost of this, the consequence is letting go – so that the Church is no longer ours, made in our image but God’s, to use as God wills, to be an instrument in God’s hands.

Last year, I travelled to the USA in October to attend a Conference which sought to explore ways of ministering to non Church attending people. No conference is perfect. I’ve never attended one which delivered exactly what I was looking for but I was pleased to be a part of this one and among people with a similar longing, to communicate the Good News in a context like this. Three themes emerged for me. I’m not yet sure how these will become tangible here at United but I’m determined (with your help, of course) to give them a go.

The first was the Table, the second Good neighbourliness and the last meaningful service. Could it be that simple?

The table is the place where mercy transforms sin

In most of the projects, new worshipping communities I've visited, a table seems to be the focus point. Either, people come together around a meal to discover new friends, share life stories and make sense of difficult times. In many cities in the USA, there is a kind of "open table" where "everyone is welcome. Nobody is perfect. Anything can happen". There is a shared meal, sometimes elaborate or provided but mostly simple and where everyone contributes. Sometimes the meal leads to someone telling a story or saying a poem, reading scripture or teaching a lesson. Sometimes there is discussion, sometimes interaction and sometimes an activity around the table.

In New York, at St Lidia's, they make the meal together. In Kansas City, they bring and share. In Atlanta, there are homeless people. Always the table and the Good news together.

Historians tell us that the focal point in every worship "service" in the early Church was the table. This was before we got sacred buildings or paid clergy. The service took place around a table where "bread was broken" and believers "ate together with glad and sincere hearts" (Acts 2: 42 & 46). Could it be that we may have to return to something so simple as a shared meal, not necessarily a dressed up liturgical meal as our Holy Communion has become but a plain and simple shared lunch or supper?

The Gospels paint a picture of intimacy and learning when Jesus ate with people. Not only the last supper but the fish braai on the beach in John 21, the Emmaus "breaking of bread" in Luke 24, but also accusations about eating with "tax collectors and sinners" targeted at Jesus in Matthew 9 and Luke 5. Jesus shared meals with people and this allowed him to connect in ways the great sermons never did. Who can forget the lunch at Simon the leper's house when Mary poured perfume on his feet (Mark 14, Luke 7) or the suppers at Mary and Martha (John 12)? Then there was the wedding at Cana in Galilee and the feeding of the five thousand.

Maybe our response could be as simple as a shared meal?

Your neighbour is the focus of your love

In many ways the word "evangelism" has become an ugly word. When one speaks to non Church people, one sees them cringe at the mere mention of that word. Some speak of feeling bullied or of encounters awkward and embarrassing. The worst picture of what is supposed to be a life transforming conversation seems to be a knock at the door or a ring of the doorbell and two conservatively dressed people standing outside waiting to pounce. Perhaps this characterisation makes you sad or even angry but we are talking here of what outsiders think and feel, aren't we?

Late last year, I told you about watching the trailer to a new Hollywood movie, *It's a beautiful day in the neighbourhood*. The movie tells the story of a man (a minister) called Fred Rogers who hosted a family (perhaps, a children's) TV show for 40 years. The show, broadcast in America, was about welcoming and befriending neighbours. It was a show that became iconic of everything that was good about humanity. Mr Rogers taught the simple business of brotherly love. Mr. Rodger's faith was what motivated his kindness and his love.

What if one of the simplest ways to witness to our faith and build Christian community is simply to "love (our) neighbour as we love ourselves". Is this secret not hidden in the words of Jesus in Mark 12: 30 & 31? What if the transformation of the world could be accomplished by a gracious act of God and small responses of human love?

We need to look into this! What sorts of practical ways can we find to love our neighbour? And how can that build Christian community?

Serving meaningfully is the Christian way

Modern day evangelists tell us that people who label themselves as “spiritual” but “not religious” often respond warmly to invitations to do meaningful things. On the campus of Edinburgh University, Liam Fraser is building fresh expressions of faith. He says the environment is “toxic” to faith in Jesus but it’s the place God sent him to create green patches of spiritual life. How does he do it? He invites students and academics to do meaningful things. These could be picking up litter and cleaning local watercourses or beaches or it could be serving at a homeless shelter or visiting the elderly. If the task is meaningful, then people will come and it will present an opportunity to speak to them about Jesus, who loves them and gave his life for them. Perhaps we could think about ways to get involved in our neighbourhood? Understanding the neighbourhood’s needs will give us opportunities to invite the people of the neighbourhood to do something meaningful with us and in so doing, we can find ways to tell them about our faith.

For goodness sake, just do something!

All ministers know what a healthy church looks like. No one needs to tell us. It doesn’t have to be taught in a book or spoken by a fancy speaker. We know. A healthy church is one in which members are active in meaningful ways. A church in trouble is one in which the minister and staff are active and the members sit on their seats, point fingers and complain. What I am starting to wonder, though, is whether some of the things we ask our members to do, are in fact “meaningful”. Whatever we choose to do, going forward, must surely be well thought through and carefully planned.

These are some thoughts for all of us to chew on as we move forward into a new year. Here at United, we are strong in so many ways:

1. We have a sound infrastructure, a beautiful suite of modern buildings and a complement of talented staff;
2. We have a forward thinking and innovative Council;
3. We have a committed membership;
4. We have good service attendance and people respond well to invitations to learn;
5. Financially, we still are holding head above water although we need to be more careful than ever before.

We also face challenges:

1. Our youth and children’s work is good but small;
2. We don’t have as many young families as we think we should;
3. Our community engagement is low;
4. We face questions about how we will be sustainable into the future (use of buildings, planned giving etc);
5. Encouraging every member to be active and not to perceive the church as a dispenser of religious goods and services is a challenge.

Facing 2020 with hope and enthusiasm

Following Jesus is an adventure. You never know what he is going to do next and what he is going to require of us. As we look forward to a new year, faithfulness is always the number one aim. How can we be faithful to a generous God who has been so good to us? This will be our aim. And perhaps, these three ‘smooth stones’, the Table, being a good neighbour and doing meaningful things will help us to find a way to be faithful to where that wild Holy Spirit is moving in the world.

George Marchinkowski

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