

Reaching Out: Who is Our Neighbor?

Today's second scripture reading comes from Matthew, chapter 28, verses 18 through 20:

Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

That's a tall order from Jesus, "making disciples of all nations." But it certainly gives us context for a more manageable goal: expanding our own reach in the community.

Building off of Sarah's message, our "why" as a church must also include **who we reach** and **what they need**. Then all we have to do is match their needs to our strengths. Oh, it sounds so simple...

At Super Saturday, Pastor Debra and I attended a workshop called, "Who is My Neighbor?" It was led by Pastor Liz Magill, the very engaging minister of Ashburnham Community Church.

Pastor Liz suggested that to create a mission-focused church, you should have three objectives:

First, meet people who have a need

Then, put them in charge

Finally, add worship or some sort of spiritual element into all activities you undertake together

So, how do we find people and learn their needs? It sounds scary to many of us, but Pastor Liz recommends that we actually sit down and talk to people *in person* to gather this important information. For such a long-term market research effort, she divides the prospects into five concentric circles, starting in the middle with

The Inner Circle

Then The Circle of Mission

Followed by The Circle of Strength

The Circle of Outreach

and The Competition Circle

The Inner Circle is **us**, those who attend every week, or once or twice a month, or even the folks we saw last Sunday and probably won't see again until Christmas. This part of the process should be easy and comfortable. This is the group we must use to practice our interviewing skills. And these are the kinds of questions we should ask each other:

What do you personally need, or wish was available?

What does our town need?

What are the strengths and gifts that you bring – or could bring – to the town's needs?

Who else should I meet and talk to?

Once we get some practice at this interviewing, we move on to the Circle of Mission. This is anyone who uses our buildings and property; in our case, it's the Boy Scouts, the Come to Believe Narcotics Anonymous group, and our yoga instructor. They regularly spend time in our facilities, but do we really know them? And do they really know us? It's time to sit down with them and ask the same questions we've asked each other.

Next, the Circle of Strength contains those people who are connected to the areas in which we excel. If our music ministry is a strength, then we meet with school and private music teachers. If we're good at feeding the homeless, then we sit down and interview homeless people and administrators at homeless shelters about their needs and those of the community. It may be more difficult to get time with these people, but they will be drawing from real experiences about what our community is lacking and who could step up to help.

The Circle of Outreach is the toughest one...which is why we don't start with it. This is when we begin to talk to STRANGERS, people from perhaps 100 households within a one-mile radius of our church. How do we find these people? We visit the coffee shops, ice cream shops, pizza places...do you detect a food theme here? This is when we say we're doing some research and ask if they'd be willing to answer a few questions about our town. Or perhaps we find our neighbors at the laundromat, a nail or hair salon or barbershop, or even the local pub? Approaching a total stranger is one of **the** toughest things to do, unless you're a natural born salesperson. And this is New England, so it might really freak people out! However, Pastor Liz says we can't be discouraged by refusals, and should try to gather information from as many locals as possible – maybe even those we run into at the playground or the library. To supplement our in-person conversations, we could attach postage-paid flyers with the questions to our neighbors' doors, asking residents to respond either in writing or anonymously online. If you're feeling **really** brave at next Saturday's block party, try asking our neighbors some of these questions...

When it comes to the fifth group, our Competition Circle, we have Pastor Debra's connections to other local clergy to help us make those contacts, and better understand what they believe our residents and our town are missing. She already may have discussed the community's needs with some of them.

Have you noticed what we did NOT ask any of these people:

Do you attend a church? If so, which one?

What do you think of our church?

Would you like to come to our church?

Can you help our church solve its problems?

In today's environment, these kinds of questions almost immediately turn people off! People want to be heard, and served, not pressured. By finding out what they think Machine Shop Village and the surrounding area need, and what skills or talents they or their neighbors might have to meet those needs, we can determine the niche that is best for us to engage.

Maybe people will tell us they want more services and events for singles. Perhaps retired people will say they need better transportation, or more daytime events, or new ways to stretch their dollars further. We certainly can't solve everyone's problems...but we can get a much better idea of the most pressing needs in our community and then match them to our strengths. **And here's where our research pays off: if we begin to better meet people's needs, they just might want to become one of us, and help other people in the same way.**

TCC hasn't yet decided to implement anything that Sarah and I have described. We'd definitely have our work cut out for us...but there seems to be very little downside in giving it a try. By welcoming everyone, but marketing to a **specific** group of people, we might indeed over time return to our roots as an active community church flourishing in the heart of this village. Thankfully, we always have divine help. As the scripture said, *"And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."*

Amen.

- Pam Foote, Deacon