

Lessons from Super Saturday: The Changing Church Landscape

Look around. What do you see? The same familiar faces? Empty pews? No children? I hear it time and time again “what a shame it is that more people don’t come to church” “where has everyone gone?” “why are sports held on Sunday mornings? If you have said one of these statements you would be acknowledging the truth of our situation.

Here are some sobering statistics: in 1960 **95%** of all people attended church. By 2017 the number had dropped significantly to **8-15%**. Our church is not alone.

In our changing landscape some of the reasons why people do not attend church are that they feel churches are hypocritical, out of touch and boring.

At one church the board of deacons decided to interview church members who were once familiar faces but who hadn’t attended church in the past 6 months. The primary question was “what has changed in your life or in the church since you last attended that may have affected your sense of connection?” No one was invited or “pressured” into returning to church. The question was solely designed to find out why people had disconnected from church.

The answers may or may not surprise you. Some of the responses were “we were so much more connected when the kids were in the youth program” or “somehow we got out of the habit of attending church when my husband retired and we started to travel more” and “we were really excited about church until the former pastor left to take another call.” You will note the key phrases in the question they posed are “change in your life”; “change in the church” and a key word **connection**.

Each new generation is less likely to affiliate with an institutional religion though they may be spiritual. Even though people are leaving institutional religion, god is still active in our world. Churches that are thriving today **have more focus on imagination rather than memories of how it used to be**. People seem to be drawn to meaningful and moving rituals, or to a community in which all are authentically included regardless of creed, orientation, socioeconomic status, abilities and race. They are seeking **connection**.

On March 16th, Pastor Debra, Pam and I attended Super Saturday which is a day long series of workshops focusing on the church of today and tomorrow. It is sponsored by the MA, CT and RI conferences of the UCC.

I attended a workshop called, “Weird Church” led by Rev. Don Remick, who is the transitional interim conference minister for the Massachusetts conference. The session was based on a book of the same name, authored by Beth Ann Estock and Paul Nixon. It outlines how churches must adapt and change in order to survive. It is not a comfortable subject. The workshop was 2 and a ½ hours long so what I am speaking to is merely a snapshot of the subject.

Pastor Don explained that the exercise necessary to generate change is to identify **our why** and **our how**, which will help lead us to the **results** we seek. Let me walk you through these steps. Before I do, I would like to share another concept from “Weird Church”. The model of seeking our why and our how are driven by the congregation. The pastor alone does not grow the church. It is not the sole responsibility of the pastor to put people in the pews and pledges in the collection plate. We are all part of the process.

The **why**. This is our cause, our God given identity and purpose. What do we believe? What awakens our life-giving passion and excitement???? If you remember Pastor Debra introduced the concept of finding our why at the Annual Meeting in January.

The **how**. Once we know our **why** these are the actions we take to communicate our cause, our enthusiasm. It is the way we decide to reach out to the community around us. How we step outside the box.

For example, **our why** could be that we are passionate about and want to reach out to the less fortunate in our

neighborhood. **Our how** could be offering a free meal once a week with a spiritual focus or opening a thrift shop right here at TCC. It would be a new way of demonstrating who we are to the neighborhood and community.....**and also give us a focal point as a congregation.**

The results would be the proof of the process or how our actions worked. They would be measured by how many people hear about us and want to help out. We would be attracting people who may be spiritual but not religious, people who believe in some greater power but not necessarily the institution of church.

Our success would also be measured by our impact in the community. Not necessarily by more bodies in the pews. Pastor Don emphasized that people feel connected when they are actively involved in making a difference, particularly a hands-on approach that cares for peace, poverty, planet and people.

I told you that this process would take us out of our comfort zone. **People do not mind change as much as loss.** Church as we know it is dying a slow death. It is time for us to make the transition from maintenance to missional.

I know you are thinking that we are already a mission oriented church. But giving money for special collections and donating socks, diapers and canned goods does not speak directly to our community or our neighborhood. It does not attract those around us.

The concepts are solid. They do, however, leave many questions. “what about the budget?” “what about tradition?” Rev. Don does not dismiss tradition nor the weekly Sunday service. It is just a question of stepping outside the box and looking around and developing stronger connections.

Finally, in this everchanging landscape Sundays are no longer a sacred time in our culture, we need to do more than offer a Sunday service. We must move outside our walls and connect with our neighbors, so they can connect with us.

Do justice, love, be kind and walk humbly with your god.

Amen

- Sarah Dunlap, TCC Moderator