

Whose Church is it Anyway?

Dear Folks,

For the last Thursday Theology of the millennium (won't you be glad when we don't hear that word anymore?) I'm offering you two thoughts.

The first is a one page "My Faith Journey" (normal seminary fare in the 90's) which I wrote this past fall. I'm sending it because I assume most of you know Ed, but most of you don't know me and so it's about time I introduce myself.

The second follows naturally from the first and hopefully will provoke some discussion from you because I think "Whose Church is it Anyway?" is one of those questions that's going to be with us for a while.

Happy New Year and if this really is the end of the world, See You in Heaven!!

Robin

My Faith Journey

Yesterday Greg showed up at my office door. Edward, the church's maintenance man, was working with the front door open so Greg came downstairs and asked if I had time for some prayer. He'd had to call the police on a friend who'd pulled a gun on him in the heat of an argument and Greg wanted me to pray for his friend, their relationship and his hope that they could settle their differences before they got to court.

As I listened to and prayed with this man who doesn't seem to be able to hold a job, usually has alcohol on his breath and has nowhere permanent to stay, I realized that my faith journey has been leading me to this place. I have been searching for the Authentic, for spiritual paydirt.

I was part of the Methodist church as a kid, but when my parents got fed up with church politics, we didn't worship anywhere during my teen years. In college I got involved with a fundamentalist group (a cult, really), learned a lot about the Bible, but ended up leaving in the midst of more politics and corruption.

I drifted for awhile, pretty disillusioned with churches in general, until my husband and I decided we needed to take our kids somewhere to worship and we ended up in a Lutheran church (which isn't hard to find in Minnesota!). We attended a large congregation in St. Paul until Hal got a new job and we moved to St. Louis.

Again, we found a Lutheran church to go to, though I went more reluctantly this time because it was smaller and harder to be anonymous. One week when I stayed home sick, the man who was to become my mentor taught Adult Forum. Hal brought home the flyers from the lay theology classes Ed taught and I decided to call and find out what they were about. Within a week I was sitting in one of his classes and it ended up being a pretty straight shot from there to seminary.

I spent two years taking classes at Eden Seminary in St. Louis as well as classes with Lutheran professor here in town (through what has since become the Lutheran School of Theology in St. Louis). After my internship, I commuted to LSTC to finish up my academic work.

While waiting for a call, I started volunteering at Immanuel to learn more about city ministry that I had become aware of through a Women of Color/White Women dialogue group at LSTC. I was called as assistant pastor in March 1996 and stayed for almost two years. I left at the beginning of 1998 to do full time work on a PhD in Historical Theology at St. Louis

University. Though I didn't intend to return to Immanuel, I couldn't stay away. I'd fallen in love with the people. I returned full time as co-pastor in May of this year and have been in the process of helping the congregation restructure with extensive help from a woman who grew up in the neighborhood and has an MBA in marketing.

We have begun to attract folks like Greg who have been estranged from church for a long time. We now call ourselves the "Come as You are Church" and we mean it. Either Jesus Christ is good news for anybody anywhere, or we have to stop using the word Gospel.

Last Sunday we added eighteen new members to Immanuel's roster (By the way, Greg, who now plays trumpet in our band on Sunday morning, was one of them). Six folks in the group (one adult, one teenager, four kids) were baptized. Since Immanuel's total membership had previously been forty, eighteen is a fairly significant increase.

On the heels of the joy of this new step in Immanuel's life, a related issue came to my attention through an article in the latest Christian Century called "The Reinvented Church: Styles and Strategies." Donald F. Miller talks about "new paradigm" churches and as he ticked off the characteristics of such congregations I realized that, though so many of the churches Miller was talking about in the article are white, upper middle class churches, Immanuel shares some common traits with them. "They are appropriating contemporary cultural forms...they are restructuring the organizational character of institutional religion and democratizing access to the sacred by radicalizing the Protestant principle of the priesthood of all believers...they view God as capable of supernatural intervention in our lives...they touch each other when they pray."

I'm so grateful for the boundaries, the markers of law/promise theology to help guide me through this "paradigm shifting." I feel like a sheep dog guiding the flock over rough, unfamiliar terrain. I am thankful for the instincts of the cross to help me keep the flock moving together and away from cliffs and pits and such.

On the other hand, there are situations where the theology gets stretched at times. For example, because of a myriad of circumstances, we offer communion to anyone who walks in the door on Sunday morning for worship. We don't make an announcement about all baptized Christians being welcomed at the table, it's strictly "y'all come."

I know theologically that it's wrong. I also know it's the right thing to do at Immanuel. I also know that though I do not like holding these two opposing positions at the same time, I have no desire to write indigenous north St. Louis liberation theology that moves the Eucharist into the position of an initiatory sacrament to resolve that conflict inside of me. The Come as You Are Church welcomes everybody. We love first, ask questions later.

Does the church belong to the traditionalists who've been holding down the fort for centuries or the zealots who just met Jesus yesterday? To the pipe organists, the cellists, the flutists or the rock band members? To the intellectuals or the mystics?

Yes.