

Imagine a Church like This!
Matthew 25: 31-40

During the Afterglow on Christmas Eve a visitor asked me where I had served over the years. I name a few places and the fact that I had worked in two different denominations.

That conversation got me thinking. I have served as minister in four churches. I worked as a Church Business Administrator in two United Methodist churches. I have served six churches as their Interim Minister. And I've also preached in numerous other churches – 58 to be exact. That means that I have been in over 70 churches during my ministerial career and none of them was alike; yes they all had things in common but no two churches were identical.

All that started me thinking about what an ideal church look would like, and I've come up with five components that I believe would make my ideal church.

<1>

In my mind I see a church where **NO ONE** is excluded, a church that not only puts on its signboard all are welcome, but actually opens its arms to ALL of God's children.

Lyle Schaller, many years ago wrote an article "Who is excluded from your Church?" He presented a whole list of people that churches often exclude from worship – non-English speaking people, American Indians, Hispanics, people who cannot hear, alcoholics, the mentally and physically disabled, people who work on Sundays, people who feel they can't dress suitably for church, single adults, especially single adult males, illiterate people, the very rich, the very poor, political radicals.

I think every church wants to be open and loving, and yet there are signs that we send out to strangers that say "You're not welcome here."

I was invited to preach at a church that had all the necessary information on their sign board, the name of the church, Sunday's Sermon Title, my name as guest minister and even the words "All Are

Welcome" The one thing they forgot was the time of worship!

<II>

I see a church that is not only open to all people but a church that actually celebrates diversity. I see a church where being different is beautiful.

We live in a pluralistic world. There are many riches of thought out there just waiting to be tapped. The church can embrace them and learn from them. Within the last decade there has been a growing movement known as "Progressive Christianity." There are eight points to being a progressive thinking church.

A progressive thinking church believes that (1) following the path and teachings of Jesus can lead to an awareness and experience of the Sacred and the Oneness and Unity of all life; (2) Affirm that the teachings of Jesus provide but one of many ways to experience the Sacredness and Oneness of life, and that we can draw from diverse sources of wisdom in our spiritual journey; (3) Seeks a community that is inclusive of all people including but not limited to: conventional Christians and questioning skeptics, believers and agnostics, women and men, those of all sexual orientations and gender identities, those of all classes and abilities; (4) Knowing the way we behave towards one another is the fullest expression of what we believe; (5) it finds grace in the search for understanding and believes that there is more value in questioning than in absolutes; (6) strives for peace and justice among all people; (7) strives to protect and restore the integrity of our earth; and (8) commits to a path of life-long learning, compassion, and selfless love.

To be the church in today's society is very different than it was in grandpa's or grandma's day. Diversity in thinking and programming can be challenging and at the same time very rewarding.

The Church of Jesus Christ can stand diversity. It can embrace people who are different, it can allow for varying spiritual experiences, it can make room

for a variety of programs that reach out and touch different lives.

<III>

Thirdly I imagine a church that is affirming, a church where its members lay aside their negative feelings in order to express their gratitude and appreciation for each other on a regular basis.

I will never forget Margaret. To say the least, Margaret was not one of my favorite people. Margaret spoke her mind; Margaret was honest, honest to the point of often hurting other people. During my years in Fargo, there were many times that Margaret and I didn't see eye to eye. It started on my first Sunday. Apparently it had been the practice to announce who gave the flowers. No one informed me of this practice and so I didn't do it. As I stood at the door following the service, Margaret came up to me and let me have it with both barrels. And yes, she had given the flowers in memory of her husband. It didn't take me long to realize that if I did something on Sunday that Margaret didn't approve of I would have a phone call on Monday. Margaret and I learned to tolerate each other; one might say that we were necessary evils that learned to co-exist in the same space.

I will never forget one Monday morning. It was the Monday, after I announced that I would be leaving Fargo for Sarasota, Florida. There was no phone call that Monday, but around 10:30 I heard the outside door open and I heard Margaret calling my name. There was no place to hide; both doors from my office led directly into her path. Had she come to gloat, she never came to the office, she always called.

"Michael," (Margaret never called me Mike)
"Michael, we need to talk!"

Oh boy, what have I done this time? I started thinking back over Sunday's activities, what had I done that warranted a PERSONAL visit from Margaret.

She marched into my office without waiting to be announced; she sat down on the couch, and moved things off the coffee table and pulled a white table cloth from her basket and placed it over the table. Next came a thermos of tea (at least she remembered

that I don't like coffee) and then a box of warm homemade cinnamon rolls.

I went over to the arm chair and sat down opposite her. After a few awkward moments of conversation, Margaret got to the point of her visit: "Michael, I know that I've not always been supportive of your ministry here." (I nodded my head, thinking that that was sort of an understatement) "I know that I've been a little negative at time." (Little would not the word that I would have used) "But I have come to say, that you have done a fine job as our Senior Pastor... I believe in giving bouquets to the living."

This wasn't the Margaret that I had come to know, what happened to the REAL Margaret, the woman who seemed to take great pride in devastating my Monday mornings with her phone calls.

True, Margaret hadn't been supportive; true she had been negative. But somehow she found a way to lay all that aside. Somehow she found the strength to reach out. Over the years I have observed that church people are more often better at throwing bricks than offering bouquets.

What would happen if a church started to affirm its members?

<IV>

I see a church where people share with each other – share the depths of their pain and the heights of their joy, a church where members lay down their pride so that they can be more transparent with each other.

*"Oh the songs we hid singing only to ourselves;
and oh, the burdens we carry needlessly because
we are too shy to admit we are in pain."*

I will never forget March 18, 1983 I was living in Sarasota, Florida. The day was beautiful and I decided to spend most of it at the beach. I decided to leave the beach around three o'clock and head home. About a block from the house I saw a fire hydrant with a hose attached to it. As I followed the hose and turned the corner onto Searcy – that I noticed that there had been a fire at the end of block – it only took me a second to realize that it was my house that had been totally destroyed.

In the days that followed I was amazed at the outpouring of love, both from the people of First Congregational Church of Sarasota where I was

Interim Minister and from the people at Nativity United Church of Christ in Livonia, Michigan who two weeks earlier had called me to become their Senior Minister.

It has been said that the church is not a citadel for the morally perfect, but a hospital for sinners. Hospitals are places that help people get well. But how can we get well if we can't admit to ourselves that we are ill, and allow others to minister to us.

We all have gifts, the gift of listening to others, the gift of prayer, the gifts of weeping with those who weep, and rejoicing with those who rejoice. Each of us is richly blessed. It is in the sharing of these gifts that we find ourselves truly blessed.

<V>

Lastly I see a church that is committed to outreach; a church where its members are willing to lay down their church work in order to do the work of the church. Stephen Vaughn once said of a church: "They were so busy doing things that mattered that they had no time for the thing which mattered most of all."

What matters most of all – beautiful facilities, exciting worship, elegant preaching. I don't think so. What matters most is that we work on loving each other at home; on loving each other in our congregation; on loving each other in our neighborhoods and in our community. I see a church whose members realize that the ultimate purpose of the church is to be a servant in the world.

There is an Indian tale that goes something like this: "A group of young braves came to their old Chief and said: 'What do we have in our hand?' The Chief said "A sparrow." One of the braves asked "Is the sparrow dead or alive?" You see, they had agreed that if the chief said "dead" they could open their hands and let the sparrow fly free; and if the Chief said "alive," they could crush the sparrow until it was dead. And so the boys waited for the answer. The old Chief thought for a moment, and then said "It is as you wish it!"

So shall the life of this church be!