

Online Reflections – February 3, 2020
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Becoming in tune with your community

Lately, I've had conversations with some of our synod's congregational leaders and some of my colleagues regarding being an *invitational church* – or being an *incarnational church*. What does this mean? In some ways, being an invitational church might mean that we want to invite people who are just like us to come and be a part of what we're already doing in our church. It's a way to gain more people to assimilate to the routines and practices of what we've come to know as "the way we've always done it before." An incarnational church is one that wonders and is willing to ask, "What must we do to be Jesus' bodily presence in our community?" It's about *being* the love, hope and grace of God to one another and to the world around us.

When asked to facilitate a future planning session recently, I was asked, "What in the world are we supposed to do? Our leaders seem to lack vision?" These words poured out of a church member frustrated at not seeing any real central purpose in all the many activities going on in their church. Their underlying question was simple: "**What's our mission?**" Mission clearly articulates what a congregation feels called by God to do - given the surrounding culture, time in history, the experience and giftedness of the congregation's members, and the opportunities and challenges of its surrounding community. Mission provides a spiritual target that helps align a congregation's activities. The ministries of the congregation, the way it spends its money, the things a congregation talks about most in its publications, and the focus of a healthy congregation's attention all cluster around this sense of mission. It is mission that moves the congregation from slogans to service, from banners to baptisms, and from killing time to kingdom living. It's about building and nurturing relationships and a caring community.

Maybe the discussion isn't so much about defining whether we're invitational or incarnational so much as it is in defining our own unique congregational calling...and then living into that unique calling. The Bible helps us understand how the surrounding community can highlight our unique mission as a church. Whether we look at different congregations in the book of Acts (for example Jerusalem, Antioch, Ephesus, or Rome) or study the "Seven Churches of Asia" in the book of Revelation, or survey the different churches addressed by in the New Testament letters, it is clear that each has a slightly different mission - a unique calling.

Why? Isn't the mission of all churches the same? After all, every congregation lives under the same two great commands to love God and neighbor (Matthew 22:36-40). All churches are called to fulfill Jesus' Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20). So why would the mission of each congregation be different? The answer is simple. In fact, you probably know it. The way each congregation was to obey the command to love...and the way each congregation was to fulfill the Great Commission were based on the community each congregation served! But, how do we do that? How do we assess our community's needs and opportunities so we can serve them and discover our unique mission as a church?

Ask!

Ask about *demographics*. Google, Wikipedia, your local Chamber of Commerce and other community websites can provide reams of data about the demographics of your community. Notice the racial and economic make up of your neighborhood. Look at the age breakdown. Pay attention to the education level. Notice how money is spent in your community. Look at crime statistics. This vital information can help you define how you might serve your community and it might also help you to know your community better.

Ask about community *needs* and find out who is addressing these needs. A visit with school counselors, the police chief, the mayor's office, juvenile case officers, area homeless shelters, Meals on Wheels leaders, Big Brothers Big Sisters leaders, or other local service-oriented non-profits can help uncover your community's needs. Even simple personal surveys of your members and their friends can help uncover key needs!

Ask other congregations in your area (and neighboring communities) about ways they have discovered to effectively help people and address their physical, emotional, financial, family, and spiritual needs. Find out what is "working" in other churches to transform lives. And finally, and most importantly, ask God. Ask God to give you God's eyes and God's heart for your community! Refuse to get up and navigate your day without first asking the Lord to help you see your community in at least one new way. When you see that "new thing," write it down ... put it in a note in your phone ... don't let it escape you. Do this for a month with a group of church leaders, a small group, or a Bible study group. Share your findings with each other once a week for at least four weeks. Now spend the *next* four weeks praying each day and meeting once each week to ask God to reveal what these discoveries mean! What is God showing you about your neighbors? Ask how your church can get to know them and love them.

Put these questions and prayers together with your own freshly "tuned-in to-your-community" heart and you will be amazed at the opportunities that bubble up to serve and deepen relationships with others. In addition, you will be well on your way to discovering your congregation's mission for right now and for right where you are.