

Risk-Taking Mission and Service II

I would imagine that the vast majority of churches practice some sort of mission and service. They must do something to take care of someone. This would be true of fruitful congregations as well as dying congregations. But, **fruitful** congregations practice Risk-Taking Mission and Service, going far beyond what dying congregations do. The difference is substantial and critical.

One ministry is the creation and support of mission teams that go out from the church, beyond its community, to help the poorest of the poor around the world. This church has participated in Volunteer In Mission teams formed by the district, but this is not a regular part of our church's ministry, as it needs to be.

We have sent people to the Edisto Indian Reservation in South Carolina and to Jamaica. They come back with a new set of eyes. They have found themselves working **with** the people rather than doing mission **to** them. They see people clinging to their dignity as they live in what we could only call squalor. They see people in the midst of incredible poverty, who have almost nothing, who are happy. They need help to lift themselves up beyond the poverty of their nation, but they are essentially happy people. This contradicts just about everything our materialistic culture teaches us, that you need perpetually more and better stuff to be happy. This is an important lesson, a life-changing lesson, when observed first-hand.

At the same time as we send people overseas to do mission work, to take the life-changing risks involved with that, we also need to celebrate what our members are doing for this community. By this, I don't mean just the missions that originate in this congregation, but also the things our members are doing with other organizations and other programs. We have members who are involved with Relay for Life, with the Ruritans, MeadowView, the elementary school, the SPCA, and all through this community. We have been remiss in not recognizing these members and the valuable work they do. I'm sure we can correct this oversight in 2010.

Interest in missions needs to be cultivated among our children and youth. The youth group goes on a mission trip every summer, and is right now filling shoeboxes with toys to be sent overseas for Christmas. They sponsor Souper Bowl Sunday, when they collect money and go grocery shopping for the food pantry. While this is not risk-taking, it is planting the seeds of mission and service in their young lives.

Mission and service must be central in the Christian life, not just something on the margins to be addressed occasionally. Can you see how the previous Practices lead to this?

Radical Hospitality brings people into relationship with Jesus Christ through fellowship in the church. Passionate Worship helps us connect more deeply with Christ in the midst of the Christian community. Intentional Faith Development

through Bible studies and prayer groups and support groups and that sort of thing helps us grow as disciples, mature in our spiritual journey. And this mature, vital relationship with God through Jesus Christ leads us outward, serving the needy in Clarksville, Mecklenburg, and around the world through our giving and our going. But, back to risk-taking. What is the opposite of risk-taking? Safe, comfortable, predictable, convenient, even fearful. These words do not describe the ministry of Jesus Christ.

God plants churches in a world that is in trouble. Our schools struggle to provide basic education, and children still fall through the cracks. The prison system does not provide opportunities for rehabilitation, sending inmates back into the world they know with very little chance of improving their lives and staying out of trouble. The health care system is overwhelmed by people who need expensive treatments but don't have the means to pay for them. So many people use the Emergency Room as their physicians, the system is clogged up badly.

We are in a nation where drug and alcohol addiction is rampant, where domestic violence is common, where there are gangs threatening the peace of their own neighborhoods. The school drop-out rate is way too high, teen pregnancy is way too common, illiteracy among adults is bad, and too many people live lives of hopelessness due to their poverty, which leads to hunger and illness. And, too often, the haves say to the have nots, "Get a job. Pull yourselves out of your mess and stop bothering me."

And the church is right in the middle of all this. Remember this: Christ calls us towards the suffering, moving us closer so we can see his face in our unfortunate brothers and sisters. In his parable of the Good Samaritan, two perfectly respectable religious leaders walked right by the man bleeding to death in the road. They ignored him completely. They had absolutely no compassion for him. It was the hated, vile Samaritan who took the risk, bandaged him up, took him to an inn and paid the whole bill for a man he didn't even know.

Which is the role model for the Christian in 21st century America? Is it the two respectable religious leaders who left the man to die in the road? Or is it the Samaritan? Do I have to ask?

I'm going to close with a word from Bishop Robert Schnase, the creator of the Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations:

Churches that practice Risk-Taking Missions and Service are dissatisfied and offended (for Christ's sake!) by the abuse of children; the suffering of innocents; the oppression of the poor; and the recurring cycles of addiction, violence, and injustice around them. They hear in the human need of their neighbors the distinct call of God. Against all odds, they figure out a response and offer themselves faithfully and genuinely, even at some cost to themselves. God uses them to transform the world.

Amen.

Walt Westbrook 11/08/09