

Risk-Taking Mission and Service I

Perhaps of all the adjectives Bishop Schnase uses in the Five Practices, “Risk-Taking” would raise the most concern. This church has embraced Radical Hospitality, Passionate Worship and Intentional Faith Development – at least from what I can tell from the discussions.

But, do we want to get involved in Risk-Taking Mission and Service? We might be happy to make a phone call to someone who can't get out of their house, or even pay a visit or deliver a meal. We might not have any trouble at all helping out at the food pantry, the SPCA, or even at Madeline's House. These are certainly “mission and service,” and we can do them without risk. Why does Bishop Schnase insist on ***Risk-Taking*** Mission and Service?

There is a turning outward, out from our comfortable lives, out from our family and community. Then there is the **stepping** out, into the unknown, into places we never would choose to go were it not for our relationship with Jesus Christ. We don't forget about the shut-ins and the poor in our own area, but now and then, we take a huge step outside our comfort zone and work among people who are not like us.

Bishop Schnase says that these are the “extraordinary opportunities for life-changing engagement with people.”

Life-changing: Let me tell you about my first mission trip. The day after I graduated from college, a group of us went to Haiti for 10 days. Our mission was to paint a church and the attached school. Honestly, painting is not a great mission, but all of us came back changed.

First, Haiti is the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere. Even though I'd lived in Laredo, TX – one of

the poorest cities in the US, I had never seen poverty like they have in Haiti. Many of the city-dwellers lived in shacks made of corrugated tin and cardboard. Entire slums stretched out to the horizon. It was heartbreaking.

Second, I had always assumed that the middle-class white way of practicing Christianity was the norm for the whole world. Not true. We attended worship services in all kinds of conditions, most reflecting the poverty and the culture of the Haitians. They would have found our ways of worship very strange.

We all came back from that trip with a much broader view of the world, and of the church.

How was this risk-taking? At the time Baby Doc Duvalier was the dictator. We were there at his pleasure, and could be shipped home or jailed at any time, if he thought we were somehow subverting his authority. And as foreigners, we were on the radar of the secret police. So, we risked our lives as well as our comfortable, middle-class world-view.

Risk-Taking Mission and Service makes an impact on the ones serving, on the ones being served, and on the church that sends them. Through it we answer the call to love those for whom it is not automatic, easy, common or accepted. And Christ definitely calls us all in that direction:

“But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.” (Luke 6: 35-36)

Here is a great question Bishop Schnase gives us to ponder: “What have we done in the last six months to make a positive difference in the lives of others that we would not

have done if it were not for our relationship to Christ?”
In other words, what have we done lately that involved some risk in serving people who are not like us?

Here’s another thought. When we take a risk, we risk failure. We, as a church, have to be willing to embrace failure if we are going to reach out in new ways. While we don’t want to encourage failure, we want to encourage risk-taking, which might result in failure. And we tell those who failed, “That’s alright. Nice try. Let’s try something else.” When we are taking risks for Christ, there is no shame in failure.

Finally, is there no place for those of us who cannot hop on a plane and go to Haiti or Jamaica? Are we to be left out? No. Not everyone can do this. Not everyone, no matter how willing, can be on mission teams. Remember what Paul says in Romans 12:4 – “not all the members have the same function.” Those who answer the call to Risk-Taking Mission and Service need support and encouragement from many church members. Money must be raised. Prayers must be offered. Families of missionaries left at home need support, too.

The ones who go off on the Risk-Taking Mission and Service trips will be a small percentage of the church’s membership. But, the entire church must be committed to the work. We all must be enthusiastically answering Christ’s call to help the poorest of the poor, the people Christ himself identified with in Matthew 25. Clearly, when we touch the lives of the worlds abandoned and marginalize, we touch Christ himself:

“I was hungry, and you gave me food. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I was naked and you gave me

clothing. I was sick and you took care of me. I was in prison and you visited me.”

We must care for the people we know when they are in need. But, as Jesus said, “If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same.” (Luke 6:32-33)

We must take care of our own, but that is not the whole call Christ has for us. He sends us where we would not go on our own, to help people we would never meet on our own. But, because we hear Christ’s call and answer it, the world is a better place, and we become better disciples.

Rev. Walt Westbrook November 1, 2009