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What It Means To Be A Church

BILL McDONALD

Years ago while I was serving as Campus Minister at a church-related junior college, the president put together a list of 116 questions which he wanted the faculty and staff to consider as they approached the accreditation process. Question number 71 was, "What is life?" Thankfully for the future of the school the rest of the questions were more specific and answerable! When asked to write an article from a pastor's view on "What It Means to Be Church," the vast scope of possible responses reminds me of that earlier question. So, at the risk of leaving out the most important parts, this article will cover only a taste of what the local church offers, but hopefully a taste that will leave one wanting more.

The local church is about experiencing Christ. "O taste and see that the Lord is good; happy are those who take refuge in him" (Ps 34.8). At Crestwood Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Lexington, Kentucky, our Minister for Children, Colette Hensley, and I conduct a six-week Pastor's Class prior to Easter every spring. The menu is varied and crowded: Stone-Campbell heritage, theological conversations about sin and redemption, questions, the symbolism and meaning of baptism and communion, a walking tour of our church and its rich history, questions, time to meet with elder mentors, lots of Bible study, questions, prayer journals, and did I mention questions? On baptism Sunday, their hair still damp from the living water, the newly baptized come to a section of our communion table set down on floor level to share their first communion together. This year Colette lit a candle for each of the eleven new dripping disciples, reminding them that Christ's spirit flames in their hearts and shines out from them to the world. Then as the congregation took communion, loaf and cup was passed to these new branches of the vine. Most of them had sat in worship for the last several years hungering for the elements that were passed in front of their eyes, hungry to be part of the fellowship, thirsting for something that they sensed other worshippers had. So, when one young boy, aptly named Luke, swallowed the simple elements, he arched his eyebrows and exclaimed, "Ohhh, that tastes good!" The psalmist would agree with our Luke. So would I. What the church is about is giving seekers a taste of what they have hungered for, giving wanderers a taste of home, letting the cynical and disheartened experience the filling love of Jesus. The local church is about experiencing Christ.

The local church is about experiencing community. Part of Jesus' great prayer in John 17 says, "The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one as we are one. I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me" (John 17.22-23). The family had been visiting the church for a few weeks. As I sat in their living room, their sons with freshly-slicked hair and Sunday clothes for the preacher's visit, we talked about Crestwood, about their church background, about the faith programs they wanted for their children. Sensing that the family and the church were a good match, I asked them if they were ready to become members of Crestwood. And their response, "Why?", floored me. No one had ever asked me that question. "Why should we become members? Why can't we just worship and participate in the church? What value is there in membership?" I have to admit that I was so taken aback that I had to phone

them later with my response! Why can't we just float in and out of a church at will? Are we not worshipping just as sincerely when we are visitors? Are the classes and programs of the church not open to all? Of course the answer is that church is not only about what we receive. That family sitting behind yours is your kin, whether you know it or not. The loneliness of the widow down the aisle is your burden. The new baby squalling in the back pew is your joy as well as her parents'. The church is not a movie or play to experience and talk over on the way home with your immediate family. The church is something you live into, an expansion of your family circle, a community from which you derive nurture and to which you give nurture, a commitment to the many so that we may be one. Jesus does not just call us to himself, but to each other. A large attendance on Sunday morning won't convince the community of God's existence, only of our popularity. But if they see us bound to one another in love and open to them in love, then the reality of God is hard to deny. What else could draw us across societal barriers to share our love equally with all? The local church is about experiencing life-changing, world-changing community.

The local church is about experiencing call. As reported in the Gospel of John, the first two sentences that the resurrected Jesus said to the startled disciples in the upper room were meant to settle them down, "Peace be with you. Peace be with you." The third sentence was meant to stir them up, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you" (John 20.21). I flew over Long Island with an experienced pilot, my first time up in a tiny two-seat airplane. He explained all the controls and gauges, demonstrating what they did. Then he said, "Have you been listening to me?" I assured him that I had. "Good," he said, "then you fly the plane." And he let go of the controls and put his arms behind his head. What I felt at that moment must have been what the disciples felt that day in the upper room. "No, no, no, no! You stay! You keep running the show! Not me!" Dick Hamm, former General Minister of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the U.S. and Canada, gave us this vision, "To be a faithful, growing church, that demonstrates true community, deep Christian spirituality and a passion for justice" (Mic 6.8) and this mission, "To be and to share the Good News of Jesus Christ, witnessing, loving and serving from our doorsteps to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1.8). In 2001 Crestwood added a new building to our campus. With a gymnasium, youth rooms, fellowship space, library and classrooms, it fit the description of what churches were usually calling "family life centers." But somehow that name did not fit our vision, a facility that would meet the needs of the neighborhood and community, while calling us to think outside the immediate family. After lengthy discussion, we named it the Mission Center. Al-Anon starts the day off here and AA meets long into the night. The largest Parkinson's support group in the region offers hope and friendship to those watching beloved lives wilt away. Scout troops train good citizens, Hispanic newcomers learn English, health fairs and blood drives care for the physical needs of the community, art classes are taught to senior citizens. When Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast, the Mission Center was set up as a Red Cross shelter to hold 160 evacuees. When they didn't come, the scores of people who set it up took it down—and then two days later set it back up again when more were thought to be on the way. Benefits have been staged here for a family burned out of their home and for tsunami victims tossed out of their realities. A banner hangs on the wall of Chalice Hall in the Mission Center. It reads, "From Our Doorsteps to the Ends of the Earth." Occasionally Jesus has to calm us down, but always, always Jesus stirs us up. "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." The local church is about experiencing call.

Across thirty-six years of ministry, I have seen what the church means to people. When the suicidal man didn't know where else to go, he drove to the church. When the escapee from the state mental hospital was out but alone, he came to the church. When the marriage folded, the broken husband, searching for meaning and stability, came to church. When she could not cope with her husband's death, the one place she could feel relief and peace was the church. When life offered her no friends, she came to the open arms of the church. When God seemed too far away to ever touch, the church gave her some tangible piece of God to hold. When the alcohol and the pills drove her to the brink of losing everything, in desperation she came to

the church. On a bright Sunday morning when I was in third grade, in a family in which things were good but something was missing, my mother walked me down the block to the Decatur Street Christian Church in Memphis for the first time. And our lives were never the same again. The church is where the created meet the Creator, where Jesus demonstrates the true nature of God and humanity, where the Spirit answers countless questions and yearnings.

Sometimes what it means to be church is to dig in and make sure that God's work is being done. Other times it means stopping and marveling at what God can do. If there is ever an answer to the question "What is life?" I suspect it will be found in that experience which we call church.

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