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The church is not a 'place where' but a 'people who'

Bill Tammeus | Oct. 19, 2011 A small c catholic

Despite several obvious differences between Catholics and Mainline Protestants [1], we confront many of the same problems.

Lots of our congregations have been losing members. Many of our youth are drifting away from the faith, some never to return. Biblical and theological illiteracy run rampant among our members. And on and on.

In my own congregation [2], we're trying to move boldly into our future by looking directly at our strengths and weaknesses and devising a plan for doing ministry for the next three to five years.

Such work is called a strategic plan, and I'm chairing a nine-member task force [3] working to create such a plan to recommend to our Session (our board of ruling elders) and to our congregation.

In the process, I've been exposed to a lot of fresh (and some stale) thinking about what the church is really about and how it might be possible to do ministry in this post-modern, post-Christendom age.

But nothing has been more helpful to our committee than to think through the foundational questions about Christianity, such as: Why does Jesus matter? And: Just what is the church?

Our pastor, who this past spring received his doctorate in 21st Century church leadership, has told us over and over again that the church is not a "place where" but a "people who."

That simple formula recently took on more clarity for me when I heard a leader of the international missional church movement, Michael Frost [4] of Sydney, Australia, describe his own version of the mission of the church:

"The mission of the church is to alert all people to the universal reign of God through Christ. There are two broad ways you can do that. On the one hand, you can speak about it. You can declare. You can tell people. ... On the other hand, you can demonstrate or show people what the universal reign of God through Christ looks like."

So if we imagine that when the reign of God finally comes, there will be no more hunger or homelessness or illiteracy, we work now to counter those conditions and give people a vision of the coming kingdom.

We do not imagine that our own hard work will bring about the final reign of God. Rather, we simply work to show people the love, compassion, mercy, justice and beauty that will infuse that kingdom.

The process of demonstrating what the kingdom will look like should attract others who see that vision and want to be part of it.

In my own congregation, that means that we are trying to focus our ministry efforts more sharply so we don't try to support a million different ministries with our money and talent.

This past year, therefore, we selected a community program that deals with abused and neglected children [5] and one that seeks to move people from homelessness to home ownership [6].

In addition to the roughly $130,000 our congregation is investing in these two agencies, we are providing people and other assets to help make them successful.

We can't solve the nation's homeless problem or prevent all children from being abused. But at least on a small scale we can demonstrate what it might look like if such matters could be solved. In other words, we can demonstrate the universal reign of God in Christ even as we also proclaim that reign.

Huge piles of books have been written about what it means to be the church and what the church should look like now. And a few of them even get the point -- a crucial point, indeed -- that the church is not a "place where" but a "people who."

Surely that is true, whether local expressions of the church are Catholic, Presbyterian, Orthodox, Baptist or Episcopal. But it's so easy to forget. And forgetting is at the root of the common problems all churches face.

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