

ADDRESS TO CONGREGATION

April 27, 2008

Matching Programming to Buildings

- One problem persistently recurring at Evanston's First and only Congregational Church is the lack of resources – financial and human. These two are faced with an overabundance of resources in terms of physical space. The buildings we have were constructed in 1926 and '27 to anticipate, and then equal, the demands of a thousand to fifteen hundred members. Sadly, First Congregational has not enjoyed fifteen hundred members since somewhere around the end of the tenure of Dr. Brown in 1949 and, except for a couple of slight reverses since then, has been declining ever since. Now hovering at about a tenth of our strength sixty years ago, we are in what might be considered an expected quandary over how to fund what we have.

We have downsized staff and programming to the point at which, honestly speaking, we are at the tipping point, at which we either jettison real estate or personnel... and probably both, unless something drastic happens financially.

There are two possibilities of what the drastic actions will be. Either requires us to wholly reconsider the purpose of our faith community for 21st Century Evanston, because we know – biblically and historically – that our surrounding community is why we are here. Those two possibilities are (1) we scrap our current system of endowment, completely disregarding the wills and wishes of those who established the endowment funds and restructuring our investments so that they are at the entire disposal of the Congregation as we see fit, or (2) we revise our practice of financial stewardship so that the majority of our congregants contribute according to a portion of their income or the value of their portfolio – thus, moving our annual pledge campaign from the realm of fundraising into the realm of spirituality.

Stewardship instead of Fundraising

- I'm not kidding about this. We need revitalizing.

We have already done everything possible in the way of economizing. Our Church House is no longer home only to the ministries of the First Congregational Church. In fact, except for the staff and the Sunday School, the First Congregational Church has no self-sponsored ministries. Everything we do, we do either as a constituent of a network or as a volunteer resource, or as a titular landlord (we cannot actually be a landlord, because that would make us a for-profit agency; none of those who utilize our buildings pays rent, they make a recommended donation). We have cut back to the bare bones; we are a skeleton of a church and, like the people of Israel pictured as a whole batch of dry bones lying in a valley and waiting for the breath of God to blow life back into them, so do we find ourselves in anticipation of a new day.

We have reduced staffing to a skeleton crew, with our Office Manager now doing the work of two people and a hired cleaning service performing about half of what our Custodians were supposed to have done. Our Director of Religious Education and Formation works on a three-day schedule, including Sunday, and our part-time Director of Music has his hands full with an adult choir and conduct of service music.

I am the Senior Minister, but I have to rationalize that title with the fact that all Christians are considered ministers and that I am this particular faith community's leading (and therefore Senior) Minister, not because I am the director of a set of clergy including Associate Ministers.

So, we are strapped – by paucity of finances, overabundance of physical space, and

lack of staff. Each feeds on the other in a curious cannibalism.

- One solution would simply be to increase membership, thus increasing our base of support of money and volunteers and easing the strain on our present resources. We are working on this. I have done what adaptation I know to do to the worship service on Sunday mornings, so that it is approachable by a wider range of people and feels familiar or comfortable to more than just traditional Congregationalists and, particularly, traditional *First Congregationalists of Evanston*. There has been a rise in attendance, but we have a long way to go.

Further, we are recommitting ourselves to the diversity that the mindset of our majoritively liberal-minded members and friends think ought to be given evidence rather than only lip-service. But, remember, that the diversity we are seeking is not only welcoming first-timers-regardless-of-who-they-are, it is *embracing them!* Our openness must be more than toleration, it has to be *inclusion* of people “of all ages and abilities, races, sexual orientations, and national origins,” yes, and then some! Can we bear as well to affirm people regardless of socio-economic background, educational level, musical preference, and cognitive ability?

Part of that affirmation would be to let others know who we are and what we’re up to. But we are not publicizing on a basis other than announcing musical offerings the advantages of our faith community, and I imagine that this is because we have as a group become rather disgusted with the sort of evangelism that is commonly practiced in the wider world. Disliking the message of our Christian siblings does not mean that we ought entirely to forego Christ’s commission of us to preach the gospel! It means that we have to understand the gospel in the terms that brought us to faith, and in those same terms invite others to faith! It means that we have to learn to speak our faith in ways that demonstrate that we believe in a Messiah who takes away our sins but not our minds or our consciences!

- What remains, beyond these measures, is for us to rethink our church finances. And, personally, I would prefer that we get off the “We have a 1.7 million dollar endowment” bandwagon and onto the “I’m so glad Jesus lifted me that I want to lift up God’s name with my substance as well as my spirit” bandwagon. As desirable as that may be, I recognize (believe me!) how difficult that movement can be in this place at this time.

I have been househunting in Evanston and environs since November, and what I have discovered here is that – at least if you have bought a home here recently – you are probably house rich and cash poor, as I am given the impression that I am about to become.

If you are not house rich and cash poor, then you may have been a member here for a long time and have the mindset of when there are a thousand people here, each contributing equally to the life of the church and therefore offering adequate support for what we do.

If neither of these is your case, then the chances are that you are a new or renewing Christian and have been given the impression that the church is like any other charity receiving your regular contributions.

Each of these mindsets on its own will leave the church underfunded; all of them together leave us in the situation of scarcity in which we find ourselves. We cannot afford to approach our stewardship from an attitude of scarcity, but from the reality of abundance. God does provide and will provide, but we have to let God provide!

If you have not done so already – and I’ll grant you that some of you have – I want

you to begin considering your offerings to the church as part of your praise of God. Does what you give as your regular offering express, or even begin to express, your devotion to God? Does it give tribute to the glory you have experienced in your life? Are you saying “Thanks” or simply “Here take it”?

And if the latter, what will be required for you to move to the former? Are you waiting for results? Because if you are, let me remind you that your work, together with your prayers, has already had the result of bringing a pastor to your pulpit, but the way in which we are supporting the church financially cannot usually create measurably positive results.

Conscientization plus Activism, not just Activism Alone or the perception of Activism

- I have received numerous emails and visits from people who would like for our church to establish a powerful, spirit-filled outreach, but who complain that we are hobbled by a lack of interest or energy among the membership. The Outreach Team members have said to me, almost numberless times, that we need to have a communal, inspiring vision for our ministries. And we need to arrive at some conclusion about what those ministries shall be.

Acknowledging that, I have to advise all of you that our present goal for creating a community Open to and Affirming of all persons is probably sufficient for now, to establish who and how we ought to be. To be able to say and show that

*We are open and affirming to people of all ages and abilities,
races, sexual orientations and national origins.*

we will be opening our collective eyes to those who are in need in our wider community – in need of financial assistance, perhaps, but also of spiritual connection and wholeness of life. We need to examine together our statement and broaden it, make it as comprehensive as it can be.

Many have noted that the O&A statement at the beginning of our worship order has been set aside. I did this, around Eastertime, because of space limitations, but also because I had heard passionately from various quarters that the statement had repeatedly exceeded our ability, so far as actually accomplishing it was concerned. The statement is an admirable goal which I whole-heartedly endorse, but we have a lot of work to do.

- We need for as many as possible in our community to participate in Diversity Training. It will be helpful to us, to set a goal for the number of members who will have received the Training, before re-publishing the statement.
- Moreover, we need to sensitize ourselves to the needs around us, to recognize the signs of abuse or other mistreatment, and our attention to the delicate balance between community concern and others’ privacy.
- Something we can put into place immediately is the expectation that we will use Inclusive Language in reference to the Godhead and humanity, when speaking as the Church. In fact, I plan to assure that this will immediately become a policy for our worship services.