Vicar’s Voice Autumn 2019-10-12

Some people ask why the some churches are moving ahead and others are suffering.

I heard a discussion about this recently with Michael D. McLaren. He is a great thinker. Many of his conclusions I have also realized over the years. He noted that besides population shifts, demographics and economics there are three major things that affect the health and growth of a parish.

1. The members treat each other well. If a congregation is full of backbiting, unresolved conflicts, and distrust, people coming in will “smell it in the air” and look elsewhere. The qualities of love, kindness, warmth, and welcome are not sufficient causes for lasting growth, but they are necessary conditions.

2. The members simply can’t shut up about their church. They are so inspired on Sunday that they want to talk about it on Monday at the water cooler or on Facebook. Not only that, but they honestly feel, “My friends’ lives would be better if they could be part of a community like ours,” so they invite them out of generosity.

3. Visitors almost always come because of #2 – a friend who welcomes them. But visitors only become members when existing members welcome them, include them, make space for them, and involve them. Churches that are warm to each other (#1) aren’t necessarily warm to newcomers.

These insights by Dr. McLaren are vitally important. The trouble is that we often find communities that attach to a church local political and sociological needs and concerns which blur the call of Jesus. Such things as being against the rights of women, the inclusion of all people no matter what their orientation, color, wealth or health, and the health of the planet- all can move us away from Jesus’ education through his modelling and teaching. In Luke 17: 11-19, the healing of the Lepers, we often forget that only one thanking for the healing was not a Jew but an outcast of the outcasts, a Samaritan. They were despised in Jesus day. All of the categories above are outcaste people and events of our time. Would Jesus have it all included in a response to who we are? Yes- as Jesus was an emergent thinker. That, of course, raises the essential question: what is the work of Jesus Christ today?

If you ask me, the answer is clear: to learn to love God, neighbor, self, and the earth wholeheartedly. And that’s my dream: that more and more of our churches would rediscover love as Christ’s prime directive (and Paul’s too – remember 1 Corinthians 13 and Galatians 5:16?). Imagine what would happen if our churches became schools or studios of love, and that all who joined us became a more and more loving version of ourselves? As we move into the fall, let us greet all people and address our issues of all types in todays world within the Spirit of God as shown to us by Jesus of the Gospels.

Together, we walk as progressive emergent Christians. Blessings, Vicar Dave.