



WHAT IT TAKES TO STAY DOWNTOWN

In the changing kaleidoscope of the inner city, a church must take on new hues.

Trying to function like a suburban congregation in downtown Cincinnati was not working for Prince of Peace Lutheran Church. We realized that unless we became a neighborhood church, the prognosis was certain death. We were attracting few new people. The membership was growing older, and the leadership was getting tired. We might survive another five years at best.

To survive, we began to realize, we could not be a suburban congregation whose only identity with the inner city was that we happened to meet in a downtown building. Major changes had to be made.

By God's grace, Prince of Peace now is growing slowly into an inner-city church. The principles that guided our change were revealed through the pro-

cesses of prayer, listening to the neighborhood, and what I call *graced luck*: accepting the fact that when we stumble onto something that works, it is because God's Spirit guides and nurtures our attempts.

Ministering to All Kinds

The first principle directing our change was inclusiveness. In the inner city, diversity is the norm. We could not stay homogeneous. We knew eventually the white middle class would become the minority in our congregation. Two-parent families would become the exception.

Our transition to inclusiveness mainly just happened as we struggled to discover how best to serve our neighborhood. For example, Prince of Peace, through a staff member, became the representative payee for thirty people who cannot manage their own finances, many of whom are mentally, emotionally, or socially retarded. When these people started making themselves at home in our midst, we could either bar them or accept them. We chose the latter.

Later came the decision to no longer try to remake the inner-city people into traditional, middle-class

JOEL R. HEMPEL

Lutherans who dressed like us, worshiped like us, and enjoyed our music. Some of our leaders began dressing casually for worship, and we made the service more informal. We sought the advice of neighborhood attenders, and they were bold enough to point out changes that made us more inviting.

During our midweek fellowship, you'll now see people of all races, single-parent families, the mentally ill, low-income and rich folks alike. This weekly supper and worship service mixes the homeless and indigent with those who have solid, middle-class incomes. They wait in the same food line, sit at the same tables, and pray to the same God for his blessing on the meal they all receive free.

The Church as Family

Similarly, we have come to embrace the idea that we are family. Many people come to the church out of a broken or abusive home environment, so we seek to offer the healthy components of a biological family: support, nurture, education, confrontation, recreation, and freedom to be oneself.

This family atmosphere didn't happen until we in leadership decided to work on the little things: calling people by name when seeing them on the street, greeting people warmly (often with an embrace), giving people opportunities to help with some task or ministry, praising people and expressing appreciation at every occasion, carefully challenging people when they are doing something harmful, being generous with the church resources and personal resources, respecting people's culture and tradition by inviting their input for worship. These and similar expressions of interest let folks know we welcome their presence and value their participation.

We found that, at least initially, new members from our low-income neighborhood likely would bring to our family more needs than resources. For instance, many people wanted to be a part of our family but were not ready to commit themselves to membership. One woman became involved with us when her children were first enrolled with our nursery school and she began attending the weekly fellowship. When a crisis developed in her family, she sought counseling from our pastoral counseling service. When she needed food, we gave her emergency assistance.

After being a part of the family for years, she eventually decided to receive additional Christian instruction in the Christian faith and become a member. Why? After experiencing the church's commitment to her, she finally was ready to return that commitment and give more of herself to others.

Our worship, where everyone comes together, is the "showing off" place for the cultures and races of our family. The worship committee strives to arrange

that, over a month's time, all members of the family can feel at home in worship, singing their kind of songs, seeing their kind of folk in leadership, and participating in a mode of worship that reflects their tradition. Both members and nonmembers, children and adults, read Scripture and lead prayer.

With two white, male pastors, it was decided that a black and, ideally, female pianist from the Baptist tradition was needed. We found her, and our worship hasn't been the same since.

As might be expected, we met some initial resistance as we changed from a rather formal and liturgical form of worship to a more open, spontaneous, and inclusive form. When the ideas for a more nontraditional service were first introduced to the congregation, we heard comments like: "Why do we have to give up being who we are?" and "We need to teach these people how to worship."

This was painful. Thankfully God kept us moving slowly and respectfully, but we also decided not to be overwhelmed by people's natural reluctance and fears. Through our music, the variety of people up front, and the language we use, our worship now demonstrates our openness to different kinds of people.

People Need Help

When people discover a church that will help them with physical and financial needs, they tend to be more open about their emotional and spiritual needs. Therefore, a third principle is assistance. We make money, food, clothing, and transportation available to people who need them.

This means we have to raise thousands of dollars every year and give it freely as a symbol of God's grace. A man's father dies in southeastern Kentucky; money is given for his travel expenses. A woman cashed in some food stamps at the beginning of the school year to buy clothing for her children and ran out of food by the middle of the month; food, money, and a referral to another helping agency were given.

Of course we sometimes have to say no when money runs short or the wisdom of experience tells us we are being conned. Many times our wisdom fails us, and we're conned anyway. But we'd rather err on the side of generosity.

Our low-income neighbors have been good models, helping us all to risk greater openness ourselves, and in so doing, we have received care, too. At moments when I feel hurt or upset about something, seldom is it long before someone from the community notices and says, "Pastor Joel, you look down." When I acknowledge it, the brief encounter often ends with me receiving an embrace.

Besides providing material assistance, our congre-

gation has also raised a prophetic voice in our community to assist our lower-income neighbors. When a friend of the congregation was facing eviction from her apartment because the landlord wanted to destroy her building to create parking, we felt compelled to confront the process. Our friend and her neighbors, who had been responsible tenants for years, would have been forced into less-adequate housing. A city ordinance requires a public hearing and city council decision before any structurally sound building can be razed, so various church members spoke out at the council hearing. This time the tenants' rights were respected.

We become involved because we've seen that when people are kicked out of their homes, or treated unjustly in other ways, their self-image is knocked a little lower, confirming their feelings of not being valued. And it is exceedingly difficult for people with low self-image to believe God loves them just as they are.

So at times, members of the congregation and staff have argued concerns before city council. Some have joined task forces and committees. At other times, we have even marched to demonstrate our concern. Though clear victories are seldom won, some headway is made in slowing the forces of injustice. In addition, just standing together for a cause contributes to healthy pride and Christian bonding.

Learning to Beg, Borrow, and Appeal

Every inner-city church must learn to beg, borrow, and appeal. After all, personnel is limited. The facilities are in desperate need of repair. Materials and machinery for running programs are not readily available. There is little money, and the new members from the low-income neighborhood need their meager incomes to get by. We entertain no choice but to ask for help.

Our methods are many. We sell crafts. We make requests to be included in the budgets of sister congregations. We stuff contribution envelopes into a quarterly newsletter. We seek sponsors for nursery school children. We stock our thrift shop with clothing retrieved from rummage sale leftovers. Government surplus food is purchased. We recruit groups from other congregations to prepare and serve meals

at the Wednesday fellowship. Any grants from foundations and service organizations we can wrangle are gratefully received. Also, the Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod has been approached repeatedly, and it has generously responded.

One anxiety-producing (and faith-stimulating) aspect of inner-city fund raising for me is my responsibility for finding my own income. It drains the creative energy I would rather invest in people

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and ministry development. But there just isn't enough money in our church to pay all the staff members. So we raise our own support.

Frankly, I am better at asking for financial assistance for others than for myself. At first, I had to work through feelings. *Aren't I worthy of a salary?* And in asking for money, I was afraid of rejection. With time and practice, though, I developed more self-confidence by necessity.

What remains, however, is the tension of asking for income for myself, knowing the poor are always with us — and in greater need. I'm not foolish; I know my family and I cannot do without an adequate income. Yet my very proximity to the vast suffering around me accentuates the disparity. Most helpful has been the assistance that caring people, generally lay professionals and business people, have provided by working to raise my support for me.

If it's difficult for an individual to ask for help, so it is for our church. The fact that other churches and businesses sometimes get tired of seeing us with our hand out does not make it any easier. But this is a humbling and necessary aspect of inner-city ministry.

Involving Everyone

We try to involve everyone in the Prince of Peace family in ministry. This is a challenge, but because the opportunities for ministry are so plentiful, it's necessary.

When people come through our membership instruction classes, we emphasize stewardship of time and energy. We consider involvement in ministry not only a response to ministry needs; it also pro-



Joel R. Hempel is community pastor of Prince of Peace Lutheran Church and director of Inner City Clinical Pastoral Education, Inc., in Cincinnati, Ohio.

vides an occasion to give and not just receive. People's self-image builds when their contributions are appreciated.

At the Wednesday fellowship, for example, teams of people prepare and serve meals. Others assist in leading worship. Still others create art pieces to decorate our worship area. Then there are those who volunteer to help in our second-hand store, answer the phone, stuff envelopes, clean the church, or serve as officers and elders.

We are as yet undecided about paying workers to do various jobs. Volunteer work is a way of paying back the church and even strengthens sagging self-image. On the other hand, a few dollars can mean a lot to some of our people. Our informal policy is to pay a small amount — sometimes no more than lunch — for short-term jobs, but keep on a volunteer basis ongoing ministries like Sunday school and our thrift shop. And we offer our workers major portions of appreciation.

Besides the regular appreciation (which cannot be overdone), the staff officially recognizes workers

through an annual Congregation Appreciation Day. Following a special worship service, the staff serves a meal and offers a personal thank you to each member of the congregation. In addition, every fourth Sunday we highlight one of our ministries in our worship service, giving the workers and their ministry deserved recognition.

The majority of our workers and leaders are always women. That's because, in our setting, the preponderance of families are headed by women. This was one more area where we had to wrestle with how to translate our theology and practice into our context. We concluded that for our neighborhood, it is not only pragmatic but pleasing to God for women to serve as officers and in key staff positions.

The Necessity of Fun

The longer we minister in the city, the clearer it becomes that if we expect people to participate in worship, meetings, and learning experiences, fun and entertainment must be part of them. The stress



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and pain in people's lives are lightened with laughter, play, food, and fellowship. And we have found that people from different economic classes and educational backgrounds meet more equally when at play or in less formal settings. Our Saints and Sinners co-rec softball team and our monthly summer picnics are examples of coming together for play. But we try to interject fun into other, typically more serious, church activities.

A while back we noticed most of the low-income members were not staying for the voters' meetings on Sundays after church. The church business proved too boring for some. Others felt overwhelmed by financial reports and official proceedings. Still others felt excluded from the decision-making process. So we created an advisory council to supplement the quarterly voters' assemblies, as a way to relax the setting and mood for doing church business. This advisory council is composed of neighborhood representatives, elected officers, and staff. They meet quarterly on Saturdays in a retreat format. We provide supervision of children, a meal, and snacks. Together we worship, carry on light conversation — and conduct a business meeting. The turnout has been excellent. People feel included and able to express themselves more openly. No Robert's Rules dictate the process.

Not that the idea is new. Scripture indicates the early Christian congregations generally mixed business and pleasure: "Day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people" (Acts 2:46-47).

A Variety of Nurture

Mixing new people from the neighborhood with our faithful stalwarts created a tension: How do we meet everybody's needs? Our people newer to Christianity required more of "the milk of the Word,"

nurture in their basic Christian faith. We met their needs with most of our resources until we came to the painful awakening that we were not attending to those more mature Christians who needed "the meat of the Word." Our old regulars were starving.

- When these folks, our leadership, began showing signs of burnout, we decided experiences and classes were needed to care for them as well.
- So we began a "spiritual companionship group" that brought people together for structured spiritual discussion and prayer. In these groups, the ability to be introspective and reflective of life experiences was required. To these groups come few low-income members. For many, the pressures of survival distract from time for introspection. Perhaps spiritual development that requires an ability to go on the "inner journey" is a luxury of those who are more privileged.
- But we have learned to accept that because people are in different stages of spiritual development, not everyone will be interested in the same learning experience. Likes and needs lead people to exclude themselves from some activities. Being family does not mean we all have to be together all of the time.
- Our church, like all churches seeking to be God's people, is not consistently faithful to these principles. Workers get tired. Promises are broken. Plans falter. Sometimes people are inconsiderate or too critical of the very ones we seek to include, and people get hurt. Still others fail to follow through with commitments. When needed ministries never get off the ground for lack of money and personnel, we sometimes begin to wonder if God is still in charge.
- Yet our experience has shown us that a dying downtown congregation can survive, even thrive, if it is willing to become a true inner-city church. The necessary changes, like surgery, take time and cause pain, but on the other side lies a prognosis of many more years of life and vigorous service. ■

*If someone considers the prophetic writings with all the diligence and reverence they are worth,
while he reads and examines with great care, it is certain that in that very act
he will be struck in his mind and senses by some more divine breath
and will recognize that the books he reads have not been produced in a human way, but are words of God.*
— Origen

*Do not quench the Spirit. . . . When it moves and stirs in you,
be obedient; but do not go beyond, nor add to it, nor take from it.*

— George Fox

*When we preach atonement, it is atonement planned by love, provided by love,
given by love, finished by love, necessitated because of love.
When we preach the resurrection of Christ, we are preaching the miracle of love.
When we preach the return of Christ, we are preaching the fulfillment of love.*

— Billy Graham



HANDING OUT WITHOUT BEING TAKEN IN

Several years ago I served as associate minister in a large, downtown church. One of my responsibilities was to dole out the meager social assistance funds our church had for people in need. A steady stream of persons flowed into my office with enough stories to fill several good-sized volumes.

One man claimed to be a deposed minister of public information for the government of Sierra Leone. Another brought me detailed plans for an electronics system, claiming he needed \$200 for a patent fee. Still another dropped his trousers in the middle of my office to show me the prosthetic device for which he needed refills.

Amid these dramatic appeals came a number of genuine claims from persons who, for one reason or another, found themselves in desperate circumstances. My job was to distinguish legitimate needs (true stories) from professional con jobs (false stories).

This is not to say the con artists did not have their own legitimate needs as well, but when resources are scarce, it seems a good policy to help first those persons who are forthright with their stories.

Over the three years of my ministry there, I was taken more times than I care to remember, but gradually I began to discern certain identifying characteristics of the con artist's style that helped me be more certain in my assessments. I offer them here fully aware that no list can ever replace the compassionate judgment that must enter into every decision.

Actions typical of con artists

1. Volunteering irrelevant documents such as hotel receipts, bus ticket stubs, or applications to bolster their stories and create an aura of credibility.
2. Offering an abundance of details not necessarily related to the main thrust of their stories.
3. Name dropping — seeming familiar with well-placed persons or with persons you know remotely.
4. Forgetting, or being otherwise unable to produce, a key fact, the missing link necessary to corroborate their story.
5. Inhibiting the verification of the story: "This must be dealt with in absolute confidentiality" or "Don't say anything to this person."
6. Partially answering questions. Attempting to shift the subject. Seeming not to hear a key question.
7. Stressing the urgency of the request, which leaves no time to verify the story: "I must have the

money tonight, or it will be of no use to me."

8. Always manipulating suggested solutions back to their terms. Usually this means they must have immediate cash; no other solution will do.

9. Attempting to produce a sense of guilt in you for doubting their honesty.

10. Appealing to your desire to play an important role in a significant story.

People legitimately in need usually exhibit few, if any, of these characteristics, while the con artist will display most of them.

There are, in addition, some precautions ministers can take to keep from falling victim to the trickster.

Methods to avoid being taken

1. Follow through. Check the story despite the pressures put on you. The honest person will do everything he or she can to help you verify the story.

2. Delay responding to the request until you have had time to think. Is the story plausible? Did you sense the person using any of the above tactics? Could you convince someone else of the legitimacy of the request?

3. Remember the natural tendency to want to play important parts in gripping stories. Don't let this factor impair your judgment.

4. Vigorously pursue every alternative to giving money. Offer to arrange directly with lodging facilities for a room, or with restaurants or a grocery store for food. Be aware that con artists often try to circumvent your caution with the excuse that they need to travel somewhere, so be especially leery of giving money for travel. Bus and train tickets easily can be converted to cash.

5. If you conclude that giving money is the only possible solution, decide firmly how much you will allocate to this particular situation and do not allow yourself to be swayed from your intentions.

I am convinced that, despite the mistakes I will make, it is better to err on the side of compassion than to turn away a legitimately needy person. But I am equally persuaded that we are responsible as pastors to use our slim resources in the ways that will accomplish the greatest good. Hard-headed screening helps retain resources for those with legitimate need while curtailing the inadvertent funding of nefarious enterprises.

— Scott Campbell
East Longmeadow (Massachusetts) Methodist Church