

## HEARTBEATS Staying Connected 7/18/2022

Dear Friends in Christ,

***ONE AT ONE*** – *Every day this week beginning on Tuesday, July 19 you are encouraged to pray for one minute at one o'clock. This week, give praise for what God is doing in the world. Rejoice in the ministries of our congregation, synod, and national church. Watch for and celebrate those times when God provides support and caring to others who do so because of their faith in Christ.*

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*Lately I've been thinking a lot about church growth and direction. Actually, I think about these things all the time, but I have been especially lately. So, I've decided to share some of those thoughts with you that you might be more aware of the dynamics of the church, present and future.*

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In addition to what I've previously mention, there are several other challenges facing churches today. One has to do with how the younger generations approach and understand religion. Because of the internet, many people today find they have a broad "menu" of religious beliefs from which to choose. Many folks have sort of designed their own religion by picking and choosing from a variety of teachings and values. The sources of these values and teachings have not been limited to just Christianity either. For a number of people, learning about things that they like from other religions or even philosophies or just opinions lead them to start "believing" in these ideas as part of the "designer" religion they have created. But because these beliefs come without historic or some kind of documented canon, or because they sometimes come into conflict with each other, these created religions end up being revised or altogether abandoned.

Another is dissatisfaction with the messages of intolerance and judgmentalism by some in the Christian faith. This has soured many on traditional Christian congregations. The messages of who God loves and who God hates (the Bible tells us that God loves everyone), who is in and who is out, and the message that some behaviors are completely unacceptable to God (which suggests that other behaviors, while frowned upon but tolerated) had brought many to turn their back on a religion that claims to be loving. It doesn't help that the accounts carried by the media focus primarily on the stories of Christians who go out of their way to condemn some, while narratives that tell of the good and caring work of many Christian congregations and denominations go largely uncovered and ignored. The general image of Christianity by those outside the faith is general negative and Christian are perceived to be condemnatory and hypocritical, leading many to steer clear of Christians. The result is that often the true message of God in Jesus Christ is lost to those who know little about the Christian faith.

Then there is the decreasing commitment of people today to just one congregation. More and more folks are finding as many as five different congregations that they like to attend. On any given Sunday, people will choose a church based on what the church offers or what the ones attending feel they want or need. Rarely do they actually join a church and many like the anonymity of being able to church-hop as they wish. One of the biggest downsides to this is that they seldom become invested in the mission and ministry of a congregation, preferring to avoid any real dedication to what any of the churches they attend are doing in the community or world.

These are real challenges for churches today. They should call our attention to the fact that simply being a church and expecting people to come just won't work today. Yet, God has a plan to address even these obstacles. Very simply, the plan is us. Jesus sent His disciples to "tell them that the

Kingdom of God has come near,” and to let them know of God’s love for all God’s children. It is up to us to share the story of Jesus Christ, beginning in our homes and with our extended families. Many are uncomfortable with the thought of doing this, but it’s primarily because they’ve never done it before. Congregations today need to invest resources in training people to share the good news. As Jesus said, “The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few.” The second part of that is what we need to address.

In Christ's love,  
Pastor Jeffrey