

HEARTBEATS Staying Connected 7/8/2022

Dear Friends in Christ,

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.

There is an African proverb that goes something like this: If you put a frog in a kettle of boiling water, the frog, sensing the danger, will immediately leap out of the kettle. But if you put the frog in a kettle of cool water and slowly raise the temperature, the frog will remain in the kettle until it boils to death.

How long will the Church be like the frog?

Clearly, the world has changed a great deal in the past seventy years. The time of immigration (from the Midwest to the West Coast) has long since ended and we simply can't expect that Lutherans are going to move into our neighborhood and come looking for us. The most valuable commodity now is not money but time, and there is tremendous competition for people's attention and participation. The boundary between religion and politics has blurred dramatically. Parenting styles are very different than in the 1960's and 1970's. And the priorities of young people and young adults have evolved so that most older adults might not even recognize them. Yet, in many ways, churches have continued doing things in the same comfortable way.

How long will the Church be like the frog?

There is a saying that the seven last words of a dying church are, "We've never done it that way before." Not that there is anything wrong with tradition or that it should be simply cast aside. Tradition has value, both historic and with regard to congregational identity. But, too often, tradition can be the altar upon which many choose to worship. I know a church that cut out a hymn that they loved from a previous hymnal and glued it into the current hymnal so that they could continue to sing it every week as the closing hymn. But they cut it out, not of the last hymnal, but two hymnals ago. Why? "Because that's what we've always sung at the end of our services."

Tradition should be valued, but it also should be evaluated. What purpose does it serve? Is there something that could have greater meaning for our congregation today? Is there a need that we are ignoring because our traditions are getting in the way, yet we can't seem to let go of them? And, by the way, there aren't any traditions at St. Andrew that I think need to go, other than perhaps that of trying to get back to what we used to be. If we're honest, we should recognize that that's never going to happen.

Change in how the church functions, what it offers and how it offers it, is necessary when the world around us is changing. This is not change for the sake of change, but rather change that addresses the current needs of the neighborhood around us—the place that God has called us to serve. We are a reforming Church and that means that we constantly evaluate our congregation and its ministries with the goal of meeting the needs of people, both inside and outside the church. As I said in my sermon last Sunday, there is a tremendous field out there waiting—even wanting—to be harvested. We just have to take some time to ask, "How might we best do that?"

In Christ's love,
Pastor Jeffrey