
From the Pastor's Desk

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Our Distinction; Our Hope

As a church, what do we do better than anyone else? To put it another way, what is the thing that makes us stand out as unique to those who are looking for a church?

In years past, that question might have been answered in various ways. Some might have said that they had the best theology. Most of us can remember a time when churches distinguished themselves from each other by highlighting their distinctive doctrines. More practically, others would have stressed that they had the best Sunday School program, or the most active youth group, or the best organ or choir. Some – you might call these “concrete thinkers” – would have stressed the advantages of our building or the beauties of our Sanctuary or stained glass or gardens.

That's how churches used to distinguish themselves, but notice one thing about all those distinctives: *they only show how we are different from other churches*. In other words, they seem to assume that everyone wants to be a part of a church and are seeking to help them choose which one. But what if that assumption is invalid? What about people who aren't looking for a church at all? There are more every year. Proclaiming that we have the best doctrines or Sunday School or organ or stained glass windows to people who are indifferent to all the above is a little pointless.

So, what do we as a church do better, not just than other churches, but than anyone? When you ask that question, you quickly realize the answer is: not much. Our children's programs are not as professional as the ones at the Y or sponsored by the school district. Our youth activities are nothing compared to the ones at the Boys and Girls Club. Our choir is not as good as the Lyric Choir. There are nicer building and more beautiful gardens elsewhere. Even our mission projects, as great as they are, are pretty limited compared to those at the Neighbor's Place or the Aging and Disability Resource Center. Frankly, if we're no longer competing just with other churches but rather with society as a whole, we don't *do* anything best.

Is there *anything* about the church that is distinguishes us from society? Well, there *could* be. In John 13:35, Jesus tells his disciples: *By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.* Notice that this is not love for the whole world or love for our enemies. Those are important, too, but this is less ambitious. This is just “love for one another.” Let people see that in the church, we love.

And you genuinely cannot find that anywhere else. The church is not (or shouldn't be) a hobby club or political group that forms around people with the same interests. It's not (or shouldn't be) an age-defined group like a college fraternity or a senior citizen's club. It's not a support group for one demographic, like a Mom's club or a divorce recovery group. It's a gathering of people who have only one thing in common – an encounter with Jesus Christ – who might differ in every other way, but who despite all these differences love each other. We are still one body, because our love for each other matters more than having shared interests or opinions or whether we have the best music or programs or flower beds. If we do this, if we love each other across generations, political affiliations, and racial and economic differences – if we can be *that* kind of community then we are unique in our fractured world.

(For another take on this, see the article on pg. 9, the [“Connections”](#) page.)