
From the Pastor's Desk

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Good News Stories (Yours)

A year or so ago, the Wisconsin UMC Conference strongly encouraged all pastors to read a book on church planting. Part of the Conference strategy is to begin new churches wherever possible, so we were asked to read a guide for church planters. It included the following advice:

Memorize your opening introduction of yourself to new people. Make sure it is clear, concise, and distinctive. Remember, you are selling yourself, not a vision, or a church. Keep in mind most good conversations are dialogues rather than monologues, so ask a lot of questions.

To summarize: when meeting people who might join your new church, make sure you have a finely-tuned, one-size-fits-all, perfectly-crafted presentation of yourself, designed to make you look attractive (“not a vision, or a church”). “Sell” yourself. But, although obviously what matters in this encounter is your sales-pitch, remember that other people sometimes like to talk, too, so ask them questions so they’ll think you care about them.

That’s how I read it, anyway. For one reason or another, I didn’t finish the book.

Here’s the thing, though: as much as this slick marketing approach to church makes my skin crawl, and as revolting as it is to think that evangelism and church planting are “selling” anything (least of all ourselves), there is a grain of truth here. *Our best, perhaps our only, way to tell the good news of the gospel is to tell our own story.*

No, we are not to sell ourselves. We aren’t even to draw attention to ourselves. We are to draw attention to Jesus, but the most genuine way to do that is to talk about how Jesus has changed our own lives. Listing “Four Spiritual Laws” does not draw attention to Jesus. Reading the “Roman Road to Salvation” does not draw attention to Jesus. Drawing a picture of a cross that bridges the gap between God and humanity does not draw attention to Jesus. Not the real Jesus. Not the one whom we meet in the Gospels.

That Jesus ate with sinners, because he was interested in them, not because he was recruiting members. That Jesus asked people a lot of questions, because he liked them, not as a ploy to draw them in so that he could then talk about himself. That Jesus fed people, healed people, and forgave people, and then he sent them away, saying “Go home to your friends and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and what mercy he has shown you” (Mark 5:19).

We don’t do this well. Maybe because of those huckster evangelists and church planters selling themselves on the gospel street corners, we usually avoid talking about Jesus in public. We don’t even know how to start. In our services in January, we’re going to be hearing and telling some stories, learning how to tell our own. We who have met the Jesus of the Gospels have, in fact, been changed. And that’s a story worth telling.