

Yes, But Why Would They Want to Stay?

So I went to “Clergy Day” on September 5. Clergy Day is an annual in-service for Wisconsin Methodist ministers, usually led by a guest speaker. This is an excellent thing to do. I’ve attended Clergy Days every year since I’ve been here, and I would tell you all that I learned at them, if I could remember what any were about.

But I might remember this one. The speaker this year was Jim Griffith, whose specialty is church growth, and he talked about what we pastors need to do to get more people into church. For the first hour and a half, he explained that pastors have to get out of their offices. We need to spend time in the community: networking, meeting people, talking to people in restaurants and coffee shops. We spend too much time squirreled away in our little hidey-holes, surrounded by church members. We need to get out and meet people if we want to attract visitors. And, since all his examples are about how to meet young professionals with good jobs, it would appear that we need to meet well-to-do people. (He recommended the Country Club for networking)

Then, in the two-hour afternoon session, he made suggestions about what we could eliminate from our busy schedules to make room for this community time. First of all, he said, we spend far too much time on pastoral care. We need to limit our visitation. Visiting the homebound doesn’t produce new members. Hospital visits? People don’t need more than a quick drop in and prayer, and someone else can do it, anyway. We could let other people do things like pre-marital counseling. Basically, we need to stop spending so much time with hurting, needy people; the church needs new people.

But I have a question. Once we’ve gotten those people into our church – why would they want to stay? One little-noted fact, described by Dan Dick in his book *Vital Signs*, is that churches that attract the most people also generally lose the most people. In some of those churches, eight of every ten who join are gone within a year. So instead of asking just how to make people join, perhaps we should ask what makes people loyal.

Here’s one answer: Pastoral Care. John 13:35 says, “By this shall all know you are my disciples: that you love one another.” When people are loved and cared for, they stay. This past month the new Care Council sent every member and friend of the church a survey, asking how we can best care for, support, and encourage you. We want to know how best to be that church that genuinely cares for each other.

Rev. Griffith did actually have some wisdom for us. Yes, we pastors spend too much time in our offices. Yes, we should get out into the community. I actually am not particularly qualified to do pre-marital (or any other sort of) counseling, and the pastor certainly shouldn’t do all the pastoral care. But here’s where he’s wrong: we can’t set up evangelism and care as either-or alternatives. We must have both. We must have a solid, supportive, caring community of growing disciples in place as we invite others to join us.

Or else why in the world would they stay?

