

News for September 8, 2016

I've only been turned away from a church service once in my life. It happened during my senior year in college. It was a beautiful Easter weekend in Williamsburg, Virginia and I thought I'd better get up early and go to the early worship service because the 11:00 AM service might get crowded with all the tourists in town. Much to my surprise, when I arrived at the Williamsburg Presbyterian Church, there was an usher standing outside the closed doors of the sanctuary. He told us that the church was full. They had even seated people in the choir loft and the fire marshal wouldn't allow them to let anyone else in the building. I was flabbergasted. That had never happened to me before and it hasn't happened to me since.

I was reminded of that experience when I saw a post on Facebook that the Presbytery of Milwaukee had closed registration for their upcoming presbytery meeting because there was no more space. Apparently every seat in the sanctuary was full. Or maybe it was every seat in the fellowship hall where they were having the evening meal. Even if you wanted to attend, you were out of luck, unless they had some cancellations.

Now maybe part of the attraction is the speaker. They're bringing in Nadia Bolz-Weber, a Lutheran pastor from Denver who's the author of Pastorix: The Cranky, Beautiful Faith of a Saint and Sinner. At least in some circles, she's somewhat of a celebrity. Now I haven't checked, but I doubt that many Lutheran pastors have their own Wikipedia page. Probably even fewer would be described as "heavily tattooed." There are lots of Lutherans in Wisconsin so maybe some of them are sneaking into the meeting. Maybe our friends in Milwaukee Presbytery think they can learn something from this pastor who is "known for her unusual approach to reaching others through her church." Maybe we could too. Maybe we should invite her to speak at one of our presbytery meetings or at the Festival of Faith or at some special event.

Or maybe the folks in Milwaukee Presbytery are more faithful, more committed, or more something than we are in the Presbytery of West Virginia. Maybe Milwaukee Presbytery isn't so spread out geographically. Maybe it only takes them an hour or so to get from one end of the presbytery to another.

But, what would it take for us to have to turn people away from our worship services or from our presbytery meetings? How could what we offer be so attractive, so compelling that people would want to attend, that pastors and elders would offer excuses so that they could attend our meetings instead of finding excuses so that they don't have to be there?

Maybe it involves having better speakers, better programs. Maybe it involves having better worship services or more time for fellowship. Maybe it involves having shorter business meetings. Maybe it involves going back to smaller, more geographically limited presbyteries so people don't have to travel more than an hour or so to attend. (There may be good reasons to have smaller, more geographically limited presbyteries but I suspect that unless the meetings are somehow attractive or compelling, people will still find reasons to stay home.)

Or maybe it comes down to developing a deeper sense of commitment, a better understanding of what it means to be a Presbyterian, what we might call a stronger Presbyterian ethos. I don't intend to indulge in what often becomes a whiny longing for the good, old days. Instead I'm trying to help us discover what it means to be Presbyterian in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, how we can encourage and support one another, and how we can learn together.

What would it take for our worship services to be more compelling, for our presbytery meetings to be more attractive? What would a stronger Presbyterian ethos look like in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? That's what I've been thinking about. What do you think?

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