**Contemplating Experiments to Explore how to be Church in these Days**

In preparing for preaching recently, a passage from Matthew—the one where the children in the marketplace taunt one another--caught my attention. To remind you:

[Jesus spoke to the crowd saying:] 16“To what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another,  
 17‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance;  
  we wailed, and you did not mourn.’  
18For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon’; 19the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.”

This passage’s references to Jesus and John first triggered thoughts about how often our expectations of how another “should” act get in the way of our really seeing who they are, truly hearing what they have to say. But then I noticed how the children said “we did \_X\_\_ for you, and you did not \_Y\_\_ [respond as we’d have expected]” and I moved into a different thought stream.

I was reminded of times when I’ve visited congregations and heard about how this or that program or change had been attempted with the goal of enticing people inside and/or outside the congregation to participate/become more active, but with less than anticipated results; or how a service endeavor or “outreach activity” (e.g. meal, VBS, etc.) was offered to no or little response from the community, and how disheartening this lack of response felt. Reflecting upon the passage above, I wondered—had the children (i.e., congregation) about offering something and expecting a return of participation. Had the children engaged in building relationship through which to hear what was needed/desired by “the others,” before a decision was made about what to offer? Or was the focus upon what would grow the congregation’s base—oops, children’s group—and offer either a) what they were most comfortable with/interested in providing; or b) based in assumptions about what would be most appreciated but without checking out assumptions with those the activity was intended to draw in?

Many well-meaning, hardworking church folk so often faithfully invest themselves and other resources in activity that seems very worthwhile, interesting, “valuable”, and previously has brought intended results, but are finding that the folks “out there” aren’t responding as expected. Does this mean we should just give it up? NO! God has continuing intention for the Church, if we but have eyes to see (truly see our neighbors) and ears to hear (the complex realities of their lives). Through practices of deep listening, people watching, and intentional relationship building motivated by interest and curiosity rather than to further our own cause (e.g. grow the congregation) we will better notice where God is at work in the world among “the others.” We can better see how we, as the Church, might fit in more effectively as a “good neighbor,” in ways that further the breadth of the reign of God rather than weighing potential engagement against possible return for us.

But where to start? This type of thing often feels overwhelming or even threatening to congregations. You can’t eat an elephant in one gulp, but a bite at a time will move you along (admittedly a convoluted analogy, but hopefully you get the picture). The missional small step experiments encouraged through Reimagining Church process we will launch this fall is one way small groups in congregations might choose to figure their way forward into more effective witness as the Church, grounded in listening deeply to both God and to others beyond our walls.

What is most often the movement of congregations is to craft new programs but it turns out that programs are the last place to put attention in our quest to be vital communities of faith. If you think of the building blocks of vitality seen below, as a Jinga game, you will notice the one thing that can be removed without impacting any other aspect, are programs. Ponder on this a bit.



One of the outcomes I hope to glean from those of you who are our synod’s observant, curious, creatively-thinking people (who may or may not be part of Reimagining Church), is identification of those places where God seems to be calling us, as a synod, to develop new ministry: among populations not yet being reached; those who have become disillusioned by “the church” but who still love God and want to follow Jesus’ way; and those yearning to be a part of nontraditional, creative ways of nurturing faith community. We, as ELCA Lutherans, have certain ways of understanding God, reading scripture, and experiencing grace that we sometimes take for granted but others hunger to know. Help me to learn where we are being called, as the East Central Synod of WI, to experiment our way into effective mission that connects with those who are not yet aware that they are also beloved of God.