People Are Seeking and Returning to Churches Again! Are You Ready?

by Paul Koch, Regional Minister

"So here's what I want you to do. When you gather for worship, each one of you be prepared with something that will be useful for all: Sing a hymn, teach a lesson, tell a story, lead a prayer, provide an insight." 1 Corinthians 14:26 (MSG)

Noted theologian Brian McLaren asks in his book, *The Great Spiritual Migration,* "What kind of spiritual movement could challenge willing churches to move from systems of belief to a shared way of life centered on love?"

What's that phrase he used? Spiritual movement? This, of course caught my eye as our church, The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) has always resisted calling ourselves a denomination but "A movement for wholeness in fragmented world." Our non-doctrinal beginnings don't prop up a system of belief but covenant connection – a shared life centered on God's "limitless love." That's a movement I want to follow!

McClaren furthers that we aren't doing anything new and radical, except following the teachings of Jesus directly are counter cultural in much of Christianity today. *On page after page of the Gospels, Jesus and his disciples practiced movement dynamics in Galilee, Judea, and Samaria. Jesus seized the opportunity for change created by unrest in Galilee…by the injustices of the Roman occupation, and by corruption among the religious elite.*

He framed his message through a powerful image (kindom of God), a unique art form (parables), and through powerful slogans ("Turn around, for the kingdom of God is at hand," "Love your enemies," "Deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me.")

He developed a protest and messaging strategy that included public teach-ins (the Sermon on the Mount), demonstrations (healings, exorcisms, feeding of the five thousand), political theater (his triumphal entry into Jerusalem), and advanced action-reflection leadership training (retreats with disciples).

A community organizer would love Brian's next observations: *His mobilizing structures included the three, the twelve, the seventy, and special two-by-two initiatives. In addition, he taught his disciples to build allies among "people of peace," and to be willing to let people walk away if they were not ready for the demands of movement involvement. He developed rituals of initiation (baptism) and renewal (Eucharist), calling people to initial commitment and strengthening them for the long haul.*

His movement culture was unique and distinctive, characterized by feasts, parties, joyful processions, and festivals at which stigmatized and outcast people were warmly welcomed. He gave women an unprecedented level of responsibility in his movement, and among his inner circle he included people of diverse gifts and temperaments, from a poet like John to an activist like Simon the Zealot to a steady pillar like Peter (at his best).

His movement culture also emphasized contemplative solitude and withdrawal to nourish the inner life and sustain the struggle over the long haul.... Their lives in the movement were characterized by great joy, great sorrow, and great love.

These same dynamics were at work in Paul and others around the Mediterranean, as the "kindom of God" movement expanded to the far corners of the earth. These patterns reemerging throughout Christian history—in the desert fathers and mothers, in Saint Patrick and the Celts, in Saint Francis and Saint Clare, in the Wesleys and the early Pentecostals, in Dr. King and Desmond Tutu, in Dorothy Day and Oscar Romero, and I would add Thomas and Alexander Campbell, Barton Stone, Walter Scott and Preston Taylor.

Since its earliest and most dynamic centuries, Christianity has been most vital when it has been energized by movements of self-organizing—or perhaps we should say "Spirit-organizing"—cells. These cells have taken root and grown like seeds in communities and institutions. There they have grown, multiplied, and borne fruit—fruit in just and vibrant institutions, fruit in thriving, peaceful, joyful communities.

McLaren is prophesizing for a faithful and relevant church needed for today. I would say Thriving! Thriving is defined here as living into who God is calling your church to be at this time and place. There are no false standards of attendance, budget increases, logrhythmic growth patterns. It is all about acknowledging your beacon of light. I heard one Disciples pastor affirm that his church is not about increasing the number of members but the Spiritual growth among the Disciples they have. (Paradoxically, and God always works in paradoxes, a mission of furthering personal spiritual growth will increase the metrics that others understand as success.)

In the latter half of I Corinthians, Paul is laying the blue print for what being a Thriving church is all about. This passage follows directly chapter 11 on communion, chapter 12 on the unity and purpose of all members, chapter 13 – the greatest gift is love, and now chapter 14 on ordering worship.

Earlier this fall, I was in Chicago for a Congregational Vitality and Innovation Consultation of our Disciples Home Missions. It was led by our own Derrick Perkins and our sister, the Rev. Traci Blackmon of the United Church of Christ. We were presented with the exciting news that since our church was founded in 1968, membership and average worship attendance are on the upswing.

For decades, statistics have showed a dramatic decline in church attendance along with the percentage of church volunteering. Perhaps due to years of isolation during COVID and social discord, people are hungry for meaningful relationships and lets keep it going so people will discover what a church is all about.

Together, we composed a list of the Top Ten hallmarks of a vital and thriving congregation. People are not looking for a church is a relic of a comfortable past but is one meeting the generational needs of today. The growing churches are doing these!

1. Missional Work - Church isn't about what it does for me but what I can do for others. This includes check writing to Disciples Mission Fund and the Christmas Offering along with local mission efforts.
2. Community Service or Tending to Needs in the Community - Like the Wizard said to the Tin Man, "Your heart is not measured by how much you love, but by how much you are loved by others. Always gauge how you are known in the community by your presence.
3. New Expressions –We are steeped in the heritage of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) but are not ruled by traditionalism trapped by previous decades. Keep re-imaging how you worship and organize. Let First Corinthians 14:26 continue to guide you in being church, and not just a good-intentions club.
4. Willing Participation – When there is a new idea, is it given voice? Are people eager to jump at the chance to help?
5. Discipleship – We used to call this evangelism but I am afraid that term has been co-opted for the time being. Don't you care enough about your best friends and neighbors to invite them to experience what you are experiencing?
6. Spiritual Growth and Development – This is the basket where I place all of my eggs. If a church does not lead to you to Spiritual Transformation, what is its purpose then. This depends on us individuals to begin the journey though but we are more than here to help and make it happen.
7. Joy – If you are Happy and you know it, clap your hands! When you are in a community of joy, you know it. If there is no joy, new people will not come back.
8. Connection – Being a Regional Minister myself, I see the direct necessity of connection first-hand for a congregation's survival. A church has three manifestations – general, regional, and local. Each is a necessary leg of our stool. One does not exist without the other.
9. Paying Close Attention to Vitality Rubrics – Yes, we are called to look at certain numbers such as are people who worship with us able to maintain their financial households, how accommodating are we to people of differing abilities, do we truly offer and extravagant welcome, and yes, does our pastor make a living wage reflecting the hours she puts in and how much tangible support does she have?
10. Lastly, the Curating of Individual Stories – Do we provide space to really hear and know each other? Individual stories create a Narrative and the narrative is like a giant billboard of who we truly are as a community.

Traci said to us that we cannot change what we are unwilling to face. These 10 assets of a thriving church reflect courage. The root word of courage, *couer*, is heart.

God bless you, Mid-America Disciples for being a beacon of courage! Your Regional Ministry Team is ready to walk beside you as you seek to grow!