

The Road Less Traveled – June 30, 2017

There is a pretty standard rule of thumb when it comes to attendance at any event. It's true for concerts, for lectures and especially for churches. At somewhere between 80 and 85 percent capacity, a room is full. There are exceptions, but for the most part, at any sit-wherever-you-want gathering, the room is full at 80 percent capacity. You can call this the "Not-Enough Room" effect.

It has a lot to do with the way we sit. People tend to take up more than one seat when they sit down. We don't sit as close to each other as venue designers assume we will, and we tend to sit near the end of rows, leaving empty seats in the middle. Most people are reluctant to climb over strangers or ask them to move in order to claim the seats in the middle of a row.

When a room is 80 percent full people walking in the door will see a room that does not have space for them, and some of them will leave. Many a church has embarked on a building project for a new worship space when their current space hits that point. No church, after all, wants to think about people walking away because there appears to be no room for them at the inn.

There also is a "Too-Much Room" effect. When a large room is at less than 50 percent of its capacity, it looks like no one is there. Again, it has to do with the way we sit. When a room is less than half full, we tend to spread out or gather in small clumps throughout the room. Whatever the reason, it feels like there is no interest in whatever is happening there. It feels like whatever event is going on is a flop. And people will leave because who wants to be part of a flop?

We spend quite a bit of time in our community talking about growth – the growth that we have experienced and the growth that we know is coming. Likewise in the church, we spend a lot of time talking about growth as well – how we will prepare for the growth in our community and how we as a church will grow with it. In some cases we talk as if we assume the growth will come to our church regardless of what we do, but that is a dangerous and erroneous assumption. Growth rarely happens without work.

Across the board, the people of Aledo United Methodist Church want our church to grow. We believe God wants our church – is calling our church – to grow. The main metric used for determining whether a church is growing is worship attendance. When attendance is going up, the church is seen as growing. When attendance is going down, the church is seen as being in decline. And by the way, there is no such thing as a stagnant church. That's the simple truth.

Here's the other truth, and it's just as simple. Growth starts at home. Growth starts right here. Growth starts with those who already call Aledo UMC home. A family looking for a church home is not going to commit to a church to which its members aren't willing to

commit. When someone new walks into our sanctuary designed for 700 and fewer than 200 people are there, it says something. It says that this shared worship is not important to the folks who call this church home. It says that church is not a priority to the people here. It says that this family really doesn't seem that committed to each other and to the journey of faith they supposedly share.

I offer this as food for thought as we begin implementing the initiatives of the *As For Me & My House* vision for Aledo UMC. At the core of that vision is that we exist to cultivate among ourselves and others a passion for Jesus Christ, believing that passion can not only transform us, but also can change the world. For that foundation to be strong, then all of us have to be all in. Passions become priorities.

In the 1940s "regular" church attendance averaged out over the course of a year to more than 3.5 times per month. By 2015, that number was only about 2.3 times per month. Meaning that people who considered themselves committed Christians and active members of their church only attended worship about half the time. And that is true, by the way, across denominations.

You know where it is not true? In churches that are growing. In churches that are growing you will find a culture where being an active part of the worshiping community is an expectation. It is part of what it means to be a member of that faith family. And people who are looking to step into a serious journey with Jesus? That's what they want, too.

I am asking each of you to make your passion for Christ a priority on Sunday mornings.