

The Road Less Traveled – May 11, 2018

I hope you were able to attend worship on Sunday and hear Rev. Margret Fields lay out a possible partnership between Aledo UMC and her ministry, Project-44. The proposal – called *Family 2 Family* – combines the distribution of food to those who are hungry with the opportunity build relationships grounded in a love of and commitment to Jesus Christ.

In case you missed Margret on Sunday, here's how it works. Project-44 – a 10-year-old ministry that has multiple focus areas – helps us find families in our area who are in need. Working with the Tarrant Area Food Bank and other sources, Project-44 then packs boxes of fresh produce and other food each week for distribution to the families that need it. Individual families in our church make the commitment to deliver this food to a recipient family each week, and they commit to doing so for a year. The delivery of the food creates the opportunity for the families to get to know each other and for relationship to be forged. We as a church also would host an occasional dinner that will bring all of the families – those who deliver the food and those who receive it – together to share in a meal and time of fellowship.

The idea is over the course of time relationships are built and the love of Christ is shared. It's that simple.

It is simple, but some of you approached me with questions after Sunday's service. Margret and her husband Ben, who founded the Project-44 ministry, will spend the evening with us on Wednesday, May 16 and will share all of the details and answer all of your questions. But in the meantime, I wanted to address a couple of those questions and share my excitement of the possibilities of the proposed partnership.

Why are we doing this? We already have a food pantry. Absolutely true, and we will continue to be in ministry to those who come to us seeking food. Our Manna Room currently distributes between 45 and 55 bags of food per month to those who come to us seeking help. It is a tremendously important ministry and one of which I am very proud. The reality is that we are pretty much the only place in town that someone can go to get food. And we will continue to be. But the Manna Room does have its limitations. First, it is dependent on people coming to us. And the truth is that some people simply won't, either because of pride or because they simply aren't aware of it. Secondly, the Manna Room is a mechanism for getting food into the hands of people who need it. It really isn't conducive to building relationships. We do have a few folks that we see on a regular basis, and we get to know them and something of their story. But with many we do not have the opportunity. And for those who we do get to know, they are interacting almost exclusively with our staff, not with the bulk of our church family.

What is the cost of this program? Can we afford it? The cost to Aledo UMC to be a part of the *Family 2 Family* program consists primarily of manpower. Our side of the partnership is to identify families within the church willing to make the yearlong commitment to engage in

ministry with families outside of our church. There is no financial cost to the church to be part of the program. The food is already available, and because much of it is fresh produce, it has a limited shelf life. Project-44's goal is to get food in the hands of those who need it, and for that to happen, it needs to expand its distribution network. That's us, as well as the other churches with whom they have partnered. That is not to say, of course, that Project-44 is not interested in financial support. Your family may decide you cannot make the commitment to serve another family each week, but you want to support the ministry monetarily. That support would be welcome, of course, but that is a decision for your family. There could be a cost associated with hosting the occasional dinner that brings the families together, but I suspect we could find folks willing to provide that on a volunteer basis.

How does this fit in with our vision? That really is the question, because we made covenant together a year ago that *Cultivation a Passion for Christ* was our basic *why*. It is the underlying reason for everything we do and the lens through which we view every decision. And the reason that I have become so excited about the possibility of *Family 2 Family* is that it fits perfectly into our mission. We exist to cultivate a passion for Jesus Christ. And at the heart of that vision is the belief that that passion is cultivated primarily through relationships. It's why we are focusing so much attention on how we interact with each other through small groups, why we are being so deliberate about caring for those who are new to the church, and so on. Too often, though, that cultivating of relationship gets moved to the side when we answer the call to serve. In those cases, ministry becomes focused on what we are *doing* for someone, rather than truly engaging with them as fellow children of God. But by going to them, engaging them in *their* context, we communicate to them that they are not simply a project, but a fellow human being of sacred worth with whom we want to engage, get to know and love. It may sound like a subtle difference, but it makes all the difference in the world. Finally, this is Kingdom-building work that anyone can do. If you are a family with small children, you may not have the option of going on a mission trip. But you can do this. Your children can be a part of this. And I can promise you, they will be blessed.

If you are intrigued by this, then I hope you will come for dinner on Wednesday, May 16 at 5:30 p.m. and hang around afterward and visit with Ben and Margret. I've already heard from some of you that you love the idea and are ready to make the commitment. If that's you, then Wednesday evening will be your opportunity to do that as well. If you're simply not sure, then I especially hope you will come. Even if this ministry does not fit into your life right now, we're counting on your prayers.

In the meantime, I look forward to seeing you Sunday.