

Doing What Disciples Do
“Join”
Acts 11:19-26

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“I love thy church, O Lord,
The house of thine abode,
The Church our blest Redeemer saved
With his own precious blood.”

Timothy Dwight wrote those words more than 200 years ago, yet they continue to resonate in my heart. The local church is God’s best hope for humanity. It continues to have my thoughts and prayers and deepest devotion. I love the Church, and I know many of you do too.

THE CHURCH, IT’S NOT ABOUT CUSTOMS, IT’S ABOUT CHRIST

In the short span of 40 years, the center of the Christian movement moved from Jerusalem to Antioch. At first, the believers continued their custom of preaching to the Jews, but a major shift was about to happen. Some started preaching to the Greeks. *“The Lord’s hand was with them and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord”* (Acts 11:21).

Early believers embraced change. They adjusted their customs and traditions to the needs of the people. They were first called Christians at Antioch. Occasionally, people ask me the secret to this 155 year old congregation at BUMC that continues to grow and adapt to this fast-changing community. The secret is simple. Every time this congregation has faced a crossroad, you made a positive decision to move forward instead of stepping back. The key to this church is not the preacher, not even the staff, and certainly not our programs. The key to this congregation is generation after generation of members who have said, “Yes” when challenged to take bold new steps for the sake of others.

Customs change; Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

Myth #1 of post modern times: ALL RELIGIONS ARE THE SAME. You pick yours and I’ll pick mine. In the name of tolerance, we have managed to offend every major religion of the world. Christians were flexible about customs, they were clear about Christ. *“Jesus Christ is the Son of God, the Savior of the World, and Lord of all.”* Let us never waver from that message.

Isn’t that divisive, exclusive, narrow minded in a global community? Remember

what He said: Love one another. Love your enemies. Bless those who persecute you. Pray for those who spitefully use you. It's not Christ, but the causes for which Christians invoke Christ's name, that arouse hate in the world. Christ would be the first to grant people freedom to choose their god. Neither did He ever waver about who He was and why He was here.

THE CHURCH IS NOT ABOUT CROWDS, IT'S ABOUT COMMITMENT.

Take a group of young men, dress them in tight pants, put a number on their back and a helmet on their head, put them on a field to fight over a pigskin and crowds of people will come to watch them. Let a country music star write a song about some broken-hearted love affair and she can fill an arena of like-minded people who identify with her music.

Winston Churchill was asked, "Aren't you inspired to know that every time you make a speech the place is full?" Churchill replied, "I'm more concerned that if the occasion were my hanging, the crowd would be twice as big."

When Jesus fed the 5,000, the crowd wanted to make him king, but Jesus had a better idea. He told them He was the Bread of Life, and He had no plans to open a bakery chain of free bread in Galilee. From that time, many of His disciples turned back and no longer followed Him.

Myth #2: NO ONE WANTS TO MAKE A COMMITMENT ANYMORE. We are a society of option tenders.

Thirty years ago, a movement started in America developing church for those who "disliked church." Doing careful research they discovered certain people didn't like attending church where people asked your name, wanted your money, and exposed you to boring music. So, a whole group of entrepreneurs started churches for the unchurched. People were encouraged to attend anonymously, put nothing in the offering plate, and listen to a band play upbeat music in an auditorium void of any Christian symbols. Numbers of these "seeker" churches have been successful in reaching the unchurched, but as the leaders of Willow Creek shared with me a few months ago, we don't know what to do with seekers who become "finders." We have no systems to disciple people for a lifetime. We have 18,000 attendees on a weekend, but 7,000 members. Seventy percent of our income is spent on staff. There is nothing in our budget for missions.

I think things have changed since the world stopped turning that September day. I think people want to belong again. I think people want to make a commitment. I think people want to be challenged to a better life.

"Come home, come home, ye who are weary, come home." Come home to a church that will baptize your babies, celebrate your marriages, visit you in the hospital,

conduct your funeral, and walk with you and your children along a faithful journey of discipleship, a church that will not lead you in the door, but into life.

CHURCH IS NOT ABOUT SATISFACTION, IT'S ABOUT SERVICE

Church shopping is a sign of the times. People move into communities and shop for churches much like they shop for restaurants, department stores, recreation centers, and other family amenities.

Since I have never shopped for a church before, let me give you my criteria for finding a church. If I were going to join a church I would want to know:

- Does the worship honor God?
- Is everyone welcome at Holy Communion?
- Are women full partners in ministry?
- Is there a system for developing disciples?
- Are the opportunities to serve plentiful?
- Am I challenged beyond my comfort zone?

Myth #3 – PEOPLE WANT TO BE SERVED NOT TO SERVE

The truth is people want to do what they can to relieve the suffering of the world. When famine struck in Jerusalem, the first thing the Church at Antioch did was send an offering. Jesus said, *“The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.”* No one stands taller than when they stoop to serve.

CHURCH IS NOT ABOUT ENTERTAINMENT, IT'S ABOUT ETERNITY

Do you ever wonder how people down here who are critical of church plan to enjoy heaven? Don't get me wrong, church needs to be relevant. Pastors need to be sensitive to the struggles of the congregation. Music needs to reflect the triumphant songs of life, but holiness is more than hype. It is something different from a momentary high. Holiness is a way of life, a condition of the heart that can make you laugh and even cry, but more often leaves you pondering things in your heart.

Myth #4 – WORSHIP MUST BE ENTERTAINING TO BE EFFECTIVE

The truth is that worship must be a foretaste of eternity. A center city congregation started a worship service for the homeless who gathered nearby. While working with the poor is an essential part of what it means to be the Church, it is not always as romantic as it appears from a distance. Soon problems arose. One problem particularly threatened the whole ministry. One of the faithful church members came to the pastor and said, “Do we really have to have this service? Why are we doing this?” The pastor replied, “So people won't go to hell.” (Methodists don't talk too much about hell.) The shocked woman said, “We need to have this service so those people won't go to hell?” “No,” replied the pastor, “We need to have this service so we won't go to hell.”

The Church is of God. We never know what God might do. Age should have prevented Abraham and Sarah from having a son. We never know what God might do. Pharaoh should have stopped the Hebrew children from crossing the Red Sea. We never know what God might do. Herod should have killed Jesus in the slaughter of the innocents. We never know what God might do. Early Christians should have perished under the Roman persecution. Instead, they flourished. We never know what God might do.

Whatever God wants to do in my little corner of the world, I want to be a part of it.
How about you?