

Rethink Church
Ezekiel 37:1-14, Acts 2:1-6
May 31, 2009

In her book, *Traveling Mercies*, author Anne Lamott wrote, “I make [my son Sam go to church] because I can. I outweigh him by nearly 75 pounds.

“But that is only part of it. The main reason is that I want to give him what I found in the world, which is to say a path and a little light to see by. [People with a deep sense of spirituality] follow a brighter light than the glimmer of their own candle; they are part of something beautiful.... Our funky little church is filled with people who are working for peace and freedom, who are out there on the streets and inside praying, and they are home writing letters, and they are at the shelters with giant platters of food.”ⁱ

Many of us can probably relate to Anne’s desire to find a path through the world and a little light to see by. Like Anne, we have found that path and light by following Jesus. We come to church because we need a community to keep us on the path and to remind us of the Light of Christ which is larger than ourselves. It is easy for us to become isolated and disconnected from the community of faith. There are many things competing for our attention, everything seemingly more important than anything else. We can certainly commune with God in a multitude of ways, but one of the critical means of connecting with God is through community. We need companions on the journey of faith.

Anne Lamott wrote about making her son go to church 10 years ago. I imagine that by now he outweighs her and is a young adult, beyond her ability to make go to church. Late high school and young adulthood seems to be the season of life when folks wander away from the church, trying to find themselves, seeking their own identity, searching for their path in life. Many of us have experienced such a season of searching ourselves and we observe it happening within our own families.

The United Methodist Church has launched a new media campaign called, *Rethink Church*. There is currently a blitz of television commercials and advertisements in major magazines inviting people to *rethink church*. It addresses two different audiences.

One audience is young adults ages 18-34 years of age. The purpose is to invite them to reconsider the Christian community. Perhaps they have some misconceptions, hurt from the past, questions about beliefs. They may have been turned off by the theology of “lightning rods” who seem to garner media attention with their extreme theology. Those of us with moderate theology don’t make great stories for the media, so our voices aren’t heard. With open minds and open hearts, people might experience something fresh and meaningful in the church.

They may be pleasantly surprised to find disciples of Jesus who share their questions. Perhaps they've experienced the church as hypocritical, not putting faith into action. They might stumble upon a community of faith that truly lives the message of Jesus, where the stranger is warmly embraced, the needs of the hungry and homeless are taken seriously, the church is concerned more with the survival of those outside itself than with its own survival.

It's no secret that not just mainline denominations, but "*all* institutional forms of Christianity—regardless of their theological stance—are in decline in Western countries."ⁱⁱ In her new book, *A People's History of Christianity*, Diana Butler Bass writes, "Jesus fascinates millions, but Christianity, the religion that began with Jesus, leaves countless people cold. What happened after Jesus—oppression, heresy trials, schisms, inquisitions, witch hunts, pogroms, and religious wars—witnesses to much human ambition and cruelty. The things people do in Jesus' name often contradict his teachings.... This dismal historical record surely was not what Jesus intended as he preached a merciful kingdom based on the transformative power of God's love."ⁱⁱⁱ

We can't deny the history of the church, but we can seize the opportunity to be more faithful to our calling to witness to the love and grace of Jesus Christ today. Although we cannot change history, we can repent of ungodly patterns and reclaim the primary calling of the faith community. That calling is dual. John Wesley called it personal piety and social holiness. Elizabeth O'Conner called it the journey inward and the journey outward. Diana Butler Bass calls it devotion and ethics, devotion being prayer, worship, and theological reflection on life, with ethics being Christian social justice. Jesus called it love of God and love of neighbor.

Rethink Church addresses young adults, asking them to take another look at the church, to seek the true mission of the church, in spite of its many mistakes along the way.

The other audience the campaign addresses is the church, you and me. It is asking us to do some self-examination, to make sure that we indeed are living up to our calling. In an interview in *Christianity Today*, Eugene Peterson responded to critique of the church and its flaws. "Frederick von Hugel said the institution of the church is like the bark on the tree. There's no life in the bark. It's dead wood. But it protects the life of the tree within. And the tree grows and grows and grows and grows. If you take the bark off, it's prone to disease, dehydration, death.

"So, yes, the church is dead but it protects something alive. And when you try to have church without bark, it doesn't last long. It disappears, gets sick, and it's prone to all kinds of disease, heresy and narcissism."^{iv}

I appreciate the image of the church being the bark on a tree. The bark may be marred by flaws, bugs, diseases, even dead wood. But its goal is to hold within

it something that is alive, growing, and life-giving. That's the faith we seek to impart. If the bark, the container in which the faith is held, is turning people away from the church, we need to pay attention to that warning. If the church has become stale, irrelevant, dumbed down, we're not going to reach people with the good news of Jesus Christ.

The Morris Antique Mall is in Hot Springs, Arkansas. Nothing on the inside distinguishes this antique store from dozens like it in Hot Springs. There is a musty smell along with dusty relics from the past. But if you look closely at the outside of the Morris Antique Mall, you see something that makes it distinct: before it was an antique store, it was a church. In order to prevent a church from becoming a resting place for rusty relics, we must always be focused more on the present moment and the future, and less on the past.

Across the centuries God has called upon leaders to rethink what it means to be the church in ministry with the changing world around us. Martin Luther boldly asked his generation to rethink church, as did John and Charles Wesley in the 18th century. At the midpoint of the 20th century, Billy Graham challenged us with regard to offering and accepting a personal relationship with Jesus.

As we close the first decade of the 21st century, the United Methodist Church is rethinking church as an action verb. What if church were not a static institution, but a movement of people empowered to take ministry out into the world? Jesus gave the Great Commission, challenging us to "Go into the world" doing the things that he did: teaching, healing, feeding hungry people, speaking out about injustice, and calling the church to more faithful living. Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to empower the disciples to begin a movement.

The economic crisis confronting our state and the threatened cuts to social service programs may be calling us to rethink church in radical ways for our present moment. As the social safety nets are torn to shreds, how are disciples of Jesus Christ called to move in to fill the vacuum of support services? The question is overwhelming and requires a communal response. How are we called to be church in California in the year of our Lord 2009? Younger generations are oriented toward community service. Perhaps this is our opportunity to both reach out to young adults and engage in meaningful forms of service that meet the needs of the most vulnerable. If the church were not just a building, but an active force of help, hope, and service, we might find ourselves in the midst of the next revival in the story of the people who claim the name of Jesus Christ. That's the central question of the Rethink Church campaign: what if the church were not a building, but thousands of doors, each opening to a different concept or experience of church?

What will it mean for Lafayette UMC to Rethink Church? We are already reaching out beyond ourselves in various ways. This week we are serving meals at

the Mountain View Shelter, offering warm hospitality as well as food. Many of you are serving the community at large in a multitude of ways. We can never let ourselves become complacent. We always need to be discerning how God is calling us to serve. I invite you to take that question to God in prayer. How is God calling us to rethink church at this moment in this congregation's history? Let me know what you hear as you listen to God's call.

The reason that we have a denomination called Methodist is that John Wesley was banned from preaching in the pulpits of the Church of England. Do you know why the Church of England banned him? It was on the basis of a single charge: enthusiasm!

John Wesley had enthusiasm! To be enthusiastic is to be inspired, to be possessed by a god. John Wesley was inspired by the teachings of Jesus Christ and possessed by the Spirit of our living God. With his enthusiasm he rethought church in the eighteenth century and created a movement that reached out to those who had been neglected by the established church.

Following in the tradition of Wesley, we need to reclaim that enthusiasm, to be possessed by the Spirit of our living God and share it with those who are thirsting for it today.

William Sloane Coffin was a preacher who helped us rethink church in the 1970's. He said, "Most church boats don't like to be rocked; they prefer to lie at anchor rather than go places in stormy seas. That's because we view the church as the object of our love instead of the instrument of God's love."

Let us be bold to consider the church, not the object of our love, but the instrument of God's love. Let us open our hearts, minds, and doors to the fresh winds of the Holy Spirit and to the flaming fire of enthusiasm. Let us dare to rethink church that the love and teachings of Jesus Christ might be known today and in the future to come.

ⁱ Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies* (New York: Anchor Books, 1999), p. 100.

ⁱⁱ Diana Butler Bass, *A People's History of Christianity: The Other Side of the Story* (New York: HarperOne, 2009), p. 317.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid, pp. 1-2.

^{iv} Eugene Peterson, "Spirituality for all the Wrong Reasons," *Christianity Today*, March 2005, p. 45.

Rev. Lori Best Sawdon
Lafayette United Methodist Church
Lafayette, CA