



Ministry in the Older Suburbs: A Special Problem

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The church has long been concerned with some areas of ministry that require special attention: inner city, rural, and specialized ministries. They present difficulties that require some special thinking. I would like to add one more area to that list: ministry in the older suburbs. It, too, is in need of special attention.

A recent study of older suburban congregations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in the Metro Detroit area showed that these congregations have declined by an average of 40% over the past twenty years. An “older suburb” is defined as a suburb that reached its full growth by 1970 and has declined in population since that time. All too often all suburbs are grouped together, and the growth of the congregations in the growing exurbs offsets the losses in the older suburbs. This prevents us from recognizing a distinct area of ministry that is in need of understanding and aid. Certainly this has been true for many denominational leaders and, interestingly enough, for the church growth people. Denominational leaders tend to miss the problem simply because they are not aware of it. Church growth leaders, on the other hand, are aware of the problem and avoid it deliberately.

If I were to follow the principles given at a church growth seminar I attended about a year ago, I would abandon the church which I now serve. Even more important, I should never have wasted my time there for the past twenty-two years. The potential for monumental growth is simply not there. Church growth people are like real estate agents. They work on the basis of “location, location, location.” They know the older suburbs are not a place for great growth potential, so they avoid them.

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Should we avoid them also? Are the church growth leaders of my experience right that we cannot expect great growth here? No and yes. Yes, we cannot expect great growth in these suburbs. But that doesn't mean we have to accept decline or no growth. And no, we should not abandon these places because they are not locations which will afford great growth. They are locations where ministry has gone on, is going on, and should continue. That, of course, is one of the great dangers of the church growth movement: placing a premium on huge growth may overlook the call to ministry.

I. GROWTH IN THE OLDER SUBURBS

The church which I serve (in an older suburb of Detroit) has tripled its membership in the past twenty-two years while, as I indicated, the average church in our area has declined by 40%. That might lead one to suppose that we have some magic formula here that we could bottle and

sell at seminars around the country. We do not. I am convinced that we can and ought to be faithful to the basics of the ministry with which we have been entrusted and that such faithfulness is the formula for growth in the older suburbs. We do need, however, to think carefully about a few things.

The first thing of which we must be reminded is that a declining population does not necessarily mean a declining neighborhood. There may be some realigning of the neighborhood but that change may offer us some wonderful opportunities. We need to be aware of what is going on under our very noses. For example, the housing in our parish's neighborhood is generally priced near the bottom end of housing in the northern suburbs of Detroit. They are ideal homes for senior citizens and for young couples buying their first homes. The drop in population had more to do with the declining birth rate than it had to do with the absence of young couples in the neighborhood. Right now, in fact, there is a mini-baby-boom going on and we find evidence of it right here in our neighborhood. There is much need for ministry here but it will be passed up if we fail to notice what is transpiring and to adjust our programs accordingly.

What is different in the older suburbs is that, in contrast to the boom neighborhoods, churches can't just "meet the incoming boats" anymore. The mind-set of the mainline churches in America has been controlled by the need to "meet the boats" and shepherd the corresponding ethnic groups into the congregations. That mind-set even prevailed as people "migrated" from farm to city and from city to suburb. Greeting people became the chief means of evangelism in parishes. A "warm, friendly church" was simply going to grow.

Much of the same mentality seems to permeate the congregations in the fast growing suburbs today. One evangelism "expert" I heard told a group of us that this is exactly how he saw evangelism. His church was growing because they greeted warmly everyone who came. He told us that he even ventured out to the parking lot at times to greet people. That's wonderful. However, churches in the older suburbs cannot rely on that means any more because the boats are few and far between. One only need look at the numbers to verify this. That's why these

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churches are declining so rapidly. They flourished so long as the neighborhoods were growing. Unfortunately, many of us in these spots still work under the assumptions that were valid when the neighborhood was expanding, and so we have greeters at the door, have a good clear sign and adequate parking, do those extras that make the place warm and cozy, but the people in the neighborhood never come to find out how warm we are!

In the older suburbs we need to learn a new mentality (it might be good for the whole church as well). We have to be there for the Ethiopians on the road and the centurions who wish to be baptized. We have to make our way into familiar places and meet people and find there the opportunity to witness to the gospel (Paul in the synagogues, for example). In short, we have to change from being a "greeting church" to becoming a "witnessing church."

II. A KINGDOM OF PRIESTS

We have a wonderful resource with which to witness: whole congregations full of people who are loved by and love the Lord. They are a kingdom of priests. All of us, not just the staff, are recipients of the gifts of the Spirit. We are all empowered to do what we would otherwise not dream of doing. It is the pastor's task to remind people of this rather than letting them believe

that pastors are the evangelists and that the congregation's role is to support pastors financially in their endeavors. The pastor's role is to nourish the flock and help them in their growth as Christians so that the Spirit working through word and sacrament may empower them for ministry.

Person-to-person evangelism is not a new concept. However, it is a real key to evangelism in the older suburbs. Our congregation is surprised over and over again by the miracles which God has wrought through his people. At our last reception of members, ten people joined our congregation. Not one of them came in by chance, was welcomed, nourished, and joined. All ten came because they were specifically invited by one of our members. If we had been waiting for the boats, the number received would have been zero. If we learn anything at all from church history, we should remember periods such as the great awakening in which people empowered by God's Spirit carried forth the word while the clergy-centered churches sat back and declined.

How to train these witnesses? I would argue against a specific program since this again sets up a professional staff of witnesses. We are all witnesses. Our training comes in the worship and education in which we are regularly involved. Worship, of course, is the central act of the church. Our worship services need to enrich people through word and sacrament and encourage them to be witnesses to the grace which has saved them. We create a classic situation of "compassion fatigue" if we do not nourish ourselves before we attempt to serve. Worship renews and recreates us to serve faithfully.

In-depth Christian instruction can also be a powerful means for enabling evangelists. When people have completed a program like Bethel, Word and Witness, or Search, they are more confident in sharing the good news with others. Our

emphasis upon adult education in the church has had, I believe, a major impact on our growth in the past years.

I have found, by the way, that person-to-person evangelism acts to expand the neighborhood. The witnessing of our people often occurs in work situations. Those to whom they witness do not necessarily live in our immediate neighborhood. One young couple comes to our church from about 20 miles away. They first came because a member of our congregation witnessed to them at work. They like it here and come regularly. In urban areas we drive long miles to work and play and shop. Many find it equally easy to drive long miles to worship.

III. BUILDING BRIDGES

We also need to learn to build bridges to the neighborhood. These bridges need to be two-way streets, not one-way. One-way bridges, typical of churches, prevent traffic from either going out or coming in. The two-way bridges need to cross the "moats" that surround our churches. I have found that our buildings are indeed "mighty fortresses" to the unchurched. We need bridges over the moats so that the community can see us as a place of love.

How do we build bridges? The possibilities are endless. Much depends upon those who are in the neighborhood and in the churches. We have found that our pre-school and senior programs are two very important bridges since our neighborhood has a concentration of young people and seniors. We own and subsidize our pre-school. It provides quality education at

minimal prices. It introduces people to our church. We can now “greet” them because they are here. This year we added a one-to-one program for two-year-olds and their mothers. We added it because the need became obvious. There is a trend in society for mothers to stay home with their small children. It reverses a trend that has been going in the opposite direction for years. We noticed the trend and tried to adapt to it. The new program has proven to be another effective bridge to our community.

Our program for seniors, including not only fellowship but also study and worship, has been another effective bridge. So also has been our participation in Stephen Ministry. We train people in this program not so much for the formal ministry which goes on within the parish but instead for the informal ministry which transpires regularly in their lives. Stephen Ministry has helped our priesthood of believers carry out their special ministries in daily life in a more in-depth manner.

Another effective bridge is “being there” when there is a crisis or time of passage. We are willing to conduct funerals, have marriages or baptisms, or accept young people into confirmation when there has been no past history of active church attendance. Many present members first came to our parish under these circumstances. Of course, the great majority of the people to whom we minister under these circumstances never see us again until the next event of passage; however, we never give up. This is a bridge that may be a means for the Lord to find one more lost sheep.

IV. MAINTENANCE

One of the most necessary parts of ministry in the older suburbs is “maintenance” ministry. A fast growing ministry in an exurb knows that it can sometimes ignore people who are slipping from the congregation because there will be many new people to replace them. This is like the investor who can afford to lose money since there is a ready supply to replace the losses. Fortunately, this type of luxury is not available to us in the older suburbs.

What does this mean for us? It means that we have to take the time actually to deal with the people in our congregation. One of the things we have done is to make certain that everyone in the congregation is visited yearly and that we take the time to listen to them. It also means that we work to help each person find a support community within the congregation. Our parish worker has this task as a major part of her job description. The large number of Stephen Ministers we have is a great reservoir from which to draw in this task.

It needs to be said, however, that a maintenance ministry is not adequate for growth. We must always be looking for additions to our program when those additions become necessary because of the demographics of our congregation or neighborhood. Congregations change almost every ten years. Even if we had exactly the same membership for that period, think of the difference that ten years makes in the lives of everyone in the congregation.

We need to have the confidence in the gospel necessary to accept these changes. Too often we seem to try to ignore the very data that will help us grow in our ministry. When we have accepted the changes, we then need to take time each year to think about where we are and what needs to be updated and what needs to be added and what perhaps should be junked because it is no longer useful. We had to drop our junior choir last year because no one among the few in that age group wanted to sing. However, we are starting a cherub choir this year because we have a

lot of little ones, and many of them love to sing!

V. FAITHFULNESS

The most important methodological consideration is faithfulness. We must be faithful to the call to serve and witness. We must be faithful to the Lord we serve and not rely on gimmicks that lead us astray from the gospel message. The gimmicks may be incredibly effective; yet, if they are not a part of our faithful ministry, they must be rejected.

This means that in our worship we must be involved in worship of the Lord and not in entertainment. This means that our Christian education must center on encountering the gospel in depth. We insult the laity when we assume that they are incapable of or uninterested in studying the good news in depth. This means that our witness must be just that and not a membership recruitment drive.

Faithfulness is what keeps us in the older suburbs and motivates us to minister where some church growth people say there is no reason to minister. We need to be faithful to our calls to be servants wherever the Lord leads us and learn

to rely on God's grace and power. We need to learn patience so that the stories of unheard-of growth in other exurban churches do not discourage us. We need to thank the Lord for every person who is captured by that grace and becomes a recipient of the gift of life.

VI. CONCLUSION

Ministry in the older suburbs is at a crisis point. We are suffering alarming losses there. Yet, we should not be alarmed. It is a time to turn to the Spirit for empowerment. We should not seek antidotes that might be useful in the exurbs or that demand some type of dynamic, charismatic leader. We need, instead, to be faithful to the call to which we have been called. We need faithfully to serve the Lord through worship, study, witness, and service. The Lord will lead us in ways in which we have yet to imagine.