**THE WORD FROM RICK**

Every week, my e-mail inboxes (you read it correctly inboxes – I have five that I need to keep up with) are filled with electronic newsletters and articles that relate to life and ministry. I can’t say that I read each one every week – sometimes I skim through the articles and then file them, or occasionally print them out, thinking that I will read them when I have a moment, or share them at the appropriate moment. Unfortunately, many of those articles never get read, or shared; they often end up deleted or shredded.

A few weeks ago, the Alban Weekly posted an article entitled “Five Tips for Achieving Lasting Change in Congregations,” by Edie Gross. Rather than deleting or shredding it, I thought that it was worth sharing with you all, as I believe that it holds some important insights for our congregations to ponder.

In 2013, the Union for Reformed Judaism, seeking to revitalize their synagogues, initiated experiments across the movement with “Communities of Practice.” In the course of these experiments a list of “best principles” for achieving lasting, meaningful change within a congregation began to take shape; and while these principles emerged from Jewish congregations, I think that they bear consideration by our congregations as well.

*Principle #1 – Empower Lay Leaders* – “Staff (Pastors) can’t, and shouldn’t do it all.” It is important to establish trusted and trained (this is vital – and too often overlooked) core of leaders within our congregations and empower them to be able to take ownership of the ministries of our congregations. We were not intended to be a clergy-dominated denomination. We work best when we work together and the leadership is shared.

*Principle #2 – Play the Long Game* – Experiments don’t often yield immediate results. We must be willing to invest time and patience. As you all try new or different things, give those things time to take shape. As the author of the article said, “nothing about this is ‘set it and forget it’ . . . you constantly have to stoke the fires.” Every new thing, every new change needs to be nurtured and tweaked. New ideas and new plans are like an infant that needs some time to grow and become what it is intended to be.

*Principle #3 – Don’t get caught up in numbers* – Congregations tend to rely on quantitative measures – membership, worship attendance, budgets in the black -- to determine the degrees of their successes and failures. We forget that we have been called, “not to be successful, but faithful.” As we look at our ministries, the more important questions to be answered might well be: “Are our people learning – and practicing – meaningful ways to take their faith, their Christian perspective, out into the world?” or “What are we, as the body of Christ, doing to transform the world – are we making a difference?”

*Principle #4 – Be Authentic* – In order to attract the people that every congregation wants to attract – young families with at least two children, or the 20’s and 30’s crowd – we assume that we have to create certain kinds of experiences that will appeal to their generation and lifestyle. We try to re-make ourselves into something we are not and can never become, oftentimes without engaging them and asking this new generation of seekers what it is they are seeking, and how we can journey with them in that search. What we end up creating is the same kind of experience they can find at Starbucks, the local microbrewery, or fitness center.

*“Principle #5 – Take programming beyond the walls . . .”* – The time has passed when we think all we have to do is open the doors and people will come to us. Life no longer revolves around the church, or even Sunday morning. Our congregations – not just the pastoral leader, but everyone – must be committed to engage people where they are at, and when they are available. We must work to make our presence and our message know! As much, if not more of our ministry, may need to be happening beyond our walls and at unusual times, if we are to reach people with the Gospel and transform the world around us. The church does not exist for itself -- it exists for the world -- and our congregations need to be engaging the world every day.

Five principles have been offered. Most likely we can think of many more. However, they are the ones that Edie Gross lifted up, and what it was that I heard her saying. I share them with you in the hopes that they will stir some thoughts and conversations in the pews and around the tables of our congregations.

May you have a wonderful and blessed week!

Grace and Peace,

**Rick**