



March 6, 2016

“What’ll You Have, What’ll You Have?”

Jeremiah 29:4-7, 11-14a

Dr. Dave Fry

On the worst weekend of their lives, they dialed our number. Their twenty-year-old son had just taken his own life. Could we help?

Within an hour, I met the parents at the funeral home. Our hospitality team went into action. The next day the family gathered in my office. On Tuesday afternoon, almost 300 people gathered for a memorial service to honor his life, to mourn his loss, and to hold the family in support.

You didn’t attend that service because you didn’t know them. They hadn’t been connected to this church for years. Just before the service, someone observed, “It’s so much better to have this here rather than at the funeral home.” They weren’t aware that the funeral home director was standing right next to us. He discreetly made no response until they stepped away; then he said softly, “She’s absolutely right. It is much better to do this here....I don’t say that about anyplace else!” he hastily added.

On the worst week of their lives, they turned to this church. And it was a good call. The presence of God is real here; the compassion of people gets put into action here; this is a safe place for people in a storm.

A new study is out from the Pew Study Research Center that reveals a trend that almost everybody was already aware of: church attendance is dropping; church membership is falling; churches are closing. The fastest-growing religious category in America is: “none”—people with no religion at all. But we’re not wringing our hands over the trends. We’re using our hands to bless people and to serve people. There are so many people who are hungry for good news and dynamic worship and strong community. People who want to learn how to pray, who need a place to bring their whole selves to God, not just their religious, well-behaved selves.

On the same day as that funeral last week, in the other side of this building, people came here to vote in the primary elections. (Reports indicated record numbers of voters.) A steady stream of our neighbors were met not only by poll workers and voting machines. A table filled with cookies and fresh coffee were offered along with warm smiles and cordial greetings of several of our church members. We observed that hardly a voter left without a cookie, a brief conversation...and a smile. We didn't try to convert—neither their soul nor their vote. We just tried to be good neighbor. “This is the best place I've ever voted!” several citizens exclaimed.

There is a warmth here that is palpable. It's conveyed by the décor and color of the carpet, but it thrives in the hearts of the people here. Our neighbors sense it and are drawn to it. Almost every new member who joins reports that the warm welcome from people was the first thing that attracted them. Here is a safe place where a person can relax and let down their guard; here is a holy place where a person can be touched by God; a person can fall apart and come unglued here. Here is an island of sanity in a frenzied world.

So why is our worship attendance dropping? Why is our membership less than it was five years ago? Pleasant Hill is a vital, healthy church; we offer a message of grace to a hurting world. We offer warmth and welcome to an isolated, suspicious world. We offer purpose to a world adrift. “I love this church!” often echoes around these walls. Yet we are not a growing church, not in numbers, membership, or attendance. Why is that?

We are in a massive cultural change. Our culture is shifting seismically. Even in the Bible Belt, church is no longer the default place to be on Sunday mornings; “Christian” is no longer the expected box to check on the religious preference survey.

Part of this is an economic thing. We simply have more money than we used to. During the first ten years of Pleasant Hill Church, I don't recall a single member of our church remodeling their kitchen. Now, almost weekly around our coffee bar, another person complains that their kitchen project costs more, takes more time, and makes more mess than promised. We have more money, so we travel more now, and when people are out of town, they tend to not be in church. I'm not saying this is a bad thing at all, but more affluence provides more options and that affects church attendance.

There's a higher focus on kids' activities. A growing number of kids are playing sports. And more are playing on travel teams that require participation on weekends. Families are choosing sports over church. It's as simple as that. Try saying to a coach, "We can't make the game Sunday, we're going to church." Who wants to deal with that level of peer pressure? (Again, I'm not saying that's a bad thing. But I'm coming pretty close to saying it.)

I don't want to lay a guilt trip on you. Partly because I'm not up to the challenge. Guilt about not being in church has disappeared in our culture. I am definitely not saying this is a bad thing; who need more guilt in their life, anyway? Guilt has always been a poor motivator for faith and churches who relied on guilt needed a new strategy anyway.

If you're not in worship every Sunday, I'm not fussing at you about that. I doubt if fussing about it would change church attendance. Besides, I don't want to pastor a guilt-ridden congregation. Most churches try to get people to attend worship, hoping that will drive engagement. Get people to worship, then try to plug them in to serving. The problem is that this implies that the main thing God wants from your faith is for you to sit still and watch. In the future, that will flip. Engaged people will attend worship, largely because they're already involved. If you think about it, this is a good thing, because engaged people driving attendance is exactly what has fueled the Christian faith in its finest moments throughout history. At Pleasant Hill, worship attendance is down; but the number of people involved in study and serving is up. It's an exciting shift.

Sunday worship isn't going to disappear. Gathered Christians are here to stay. The church has *always* gathered for worship because our faith is essentially communal. Being Christian is a group effort. What Christians can do together to feel God's touch and learn God's desires far surpasses what we can do alone.

In the future, however, Sundays will become more about what we give than what we get. Consumer Christianity will die and a more selfless discipleship will emerge. Consumer Christianity asks "What can I get out of this?" It asks, "What's in it for me?" People leave church because "nothing meets their needs."

This is so not the gospel Jesus offers. Consumer Christianity promises a peaceful life without pain. So many sermons—some of my own, I'm afraid—say struggle is

avoidable and here's my formula for living and loving without discomfort. To which Jesus might respond: "What about the word "cross" do you not get?"

The future of this church is bright; our days ahead are filled with promise. The days of consumer Christianity, on the other hand, are drawing to a close. I believe a more selfless discipleship is emerging. People are looking for a purpose, something they can give themselves to that matters, that makes a difference for good. They need something bigger than themselves to devote themselves to. When you're no longer focused on yourself and meeting your own needs, a new tone emerges. Life takes on a new color. That kind of living is the future of the church and the essence of Pleasant Hill. It is the way of Jesus Christ, who gave himself in love and says, "Follow me."

I don't believe this kind of selfless discipleship will sweep our society. But it will transform our world. It will never become the latest rage that everybody jumps on board. But it will have the power to turn the world upside down. *Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world. It is the only thing that ever has.*

We at Pleasant Hill Church are a counter-culture movement, not only in our nation but in our own faith. Although we are small compared to the mega-churches that surround us, we are a vital, healthy congregation. And we make a huge difference in the lives of people.

Now, in a few compressed minutes, we're going to enact the future of our faith and of our church. We're going to gather, and we are going to be completely inclusive about who is welcome here. We're not going to exclude anybody. We're going to remember the way of Jesus, how he gave himself and poured himself out in love. And we're going to affirm that by personally taking that giving and pouring into our very bodies. We're going to hold on to each other while we pray to God. And then we're going to go into our go into our future to change the world. Amen.