

Seniors: The Future of the Church?

by Kevin Powell

At the time, it seemed like my worst nightmare. I was a newly ordained pastor, called to a very rural two-point parish in the middle of nowhere. The average age of the congregation was 65 or older. Cows and cornfields dotted the countryside and fueled the local economy. It is one of those places where the same family names kept appearing on the mailboxes. Everyone was related to each other in some way and the families had deep roots in the county. Families toiled side-by-side for generations, working the land, creating a community, and building a life.

But it was a way of life that was slowly dying, and with it, my parish. Like many rural parishes, this one looked like it was on its last legs, and I was called to provide palliative care. This congregation was in decline longer than I had been alive. Being a mission-oriented, evangelistic pastor, serving a congregation on its last lap around the track seemed to be a waste of my gifts and energy. I should be a church planter, I thought, or part of a thriving outreach-centered mission congregation. I shouldn't be stuck way out here in the boondocks. I was probably going to be their last pastor. I was probably going to be remembered as the one who closed one of the oldest congregations in our denomination. I put on a brave face. "Wherever God calls me to serve, I'll serve with joy," I told my bishop, only half-believing my words and myself.

But God had a unique plan for this group of believers.

Like most mainline churches these days, we struggled with the question: "How do we get the young people involved?" They called a young pastor (I was 29 at the time), not only because that was what they could afford, but also so they could reach out to the younger generations. It seemed like a solid argument. A younger pastor could attract a younger crowd.

Or so they thought.

So I settled into my first call, the lone shaved head lost in a sea of white hair. The congregation sneered with envy at the local Christian Reformed Church because of their new building, their large attendance figures and their bursting youth group. "What are they doing that we aren't?" we asked ourselves. "Maybe we can duplicate their program."

I met the Christian Reformed pastor at the coffee shop to pick his brain. "How do you get such faithful response from your congregation?" I asked him.

"Easy," he replied. "We're Dutch. Ours is the only ethnic congregation in the area. People drive an hour and a half to come to church. And they have big families with lots of kids to help out on the farm. Lots of large families equal a large church. But don't be fooled. We have numbers, but this church is more proud of being Dutch than being Christian. Be careful not to equate numbers with faithfulness."

Wise counsel. But Abraham and Sarah notwithstanding, our congregation was too "chronologically challenged" to engage in "reproduction evangelism." Back to square one.

The congregation president called a special meeting to devise a strategy to bring the young people to faith and become active members of the church. Over sandwiches and tea, we began by asking, "Where are all the youth in our community?" Given that the village was 350 strong, we could quickly name all the young people in the township, along with their church affiliation and family history going back to the time the area was settled. We had an epiphany and a problem.

The epiphany: All the young people were spoken for. Between the three churches in our little village, all the young people were members of one congregation or another. Where were their parents? They also regularly attended church.

The problem: The population was dwindling. The connection between the depressed economy and the drop in young people became obvious. When the youth went away to college, they never came back because there were no jobs for them in the village. Their parents sold their farms to the big dairy producers and retired in Florida. The decline in population was equal to that of the drop in church attendance. Go figure.

To make matters more complicated, the reason why the Christian Reformed church was growing was that there were more Dutch people in the village than not. They didn't sell their farms to the big dairy producers, so there were more farms and more families.

So what so we do? Buy back the farms? Do we coax the younger generations who moved away to greener economic pastures to re-embrace an agricultural vocation?

We began to pray for God's guidance and to look at other options. Over a couple pots of black coffee and a dozen donuts, we asked ourselves a different question: Who actually lives in the village?

"What about that new retirement villa that opened a couple years back?" remarked Bill. "There are many older folks who may need a church home."

"But that doesn't solve our problem with the youth," Mary pointed out, "If we reach out to the seniors, how will we replace them when they are gone? We need young blood."

"Do we?" asked George, with a twinkle in his eye. "The retirement villa has a waiting list a mile long. When our beloved members pass on to be with the Lord, there is always someone to replace them. This village is wonderful place to retire. It's quiet. It's clean. And there are many people their own age."

The council hammered out a strategy to reach out to the seniors in our community. We began by asking what they need in worship. How can they best hear the gospel? We dusted off the old hymnals and changed the worship service from a modern style to a very traditional liturgy. No new-fangled postmodern worship here. We pulled out standard hymns and mixed them in with old-time gospel favorites. We began with "A Mighty Fortress is Our God" and closed with "What a Friend We Have in Jesus." The old folks loved it! Traditional does not have to mean boring. The older crowd could rock the sanctuary with a good old-fashioned hymn that could rival any youth rally. Within a year, the 30-year decline was reversed by 18 percent. Giving numbers rose, as well.

But most importantly, the Spirit began to move among the people. Churchgoers became disciples. Mere attendance became authentic worship. Cliques were transformed into a community. We saw many lives touched and changed by the power of the gospel because it was expressed in ways that meant something to the older generation. What was once a historic church on the verge of closing became an energetic mission center with a spiritual vitality on par with many mission congregations. Sometimes being innovative does not mean embracing the latest technological gadgets or Powerpoint sermons. Being innovative also can mean looking back at the expressions of faith that nurtured and sustained previous generations.

Word got out about this congregation that worshiped old-school style. Interestingly enough, we began to attract baby-boomers who wanted to come home. Families would drive an hour and a half to worship with us.

I have to admit, the older hymns and liturgies were not where I was at spiritually. But as a pastor, my primary obligation was to see that my flock was fed, not to have my own needs met. While this congregation may never be a mega-church, it is a group of committed disciples who are faithfully living out their baptismal promises, reaching out to others in need, proclaiming the liberating gospel of Jesus Christ with their lips and with their lives.

I learned a valuable lesson that year: The future of the church is the people of the present.

Kevin Powell and his wife, Rebekah Eckert, pastor the Lutheran Church of the Resurrection in a growing area of downtown Halifax, Nova Scotia.

This article previously ran in the summer 2001 issue of Leadership Journal, which maintains first rights.