

Sermon: “*Looking for Guidance*”

Larry Roeming

July 8, 2012

+ *We seek to be a growing community of service and caring.*

+ *Opening our buildings to ministry and sanctuary, we embrace the diversity of the city in all its richness of human expression.*

+ *As an open community, we seek to connect with people through worship and outreach. Honoring our heritage of responding to the challenging needs of the city of Hartford, we celebrate God's presence among us.*

For those of you who don't know, these four sentences are Center Church's Guiding Principles. On Saturday, October 1st of last year, about 35 members of Center Church, including some of you who are sitting here today, got together at the Northwest Park and Nature Center in Windsor. We spent the morning and into the afternoon discussing Center Church's identity and how best to describe that identity --- to ourselves --- and to those unfamiliar with Center Church.

Later, at the February Prudential Committee meeting the Growth and Vitality Ministry facilitated a discussion around a U.C.C. publication called “FACT's on Growth.” One of the characteristics of growing churches identified in the report, is “clarity of identity and mission” and the group assembled that evening made it one of Center Church's priorities as well. So if we're truly committed to growth, it's worthwhile to take a closer look at our Guiding Principles.

We seek to be a growing community of service and caring. Do we do that? We help to serve Community Meals at Christ Church Cathedral. Twice a month, we coordinate a Saturday morning breakfast program which provides food for those who need it AND an

opportunity for other churches and organizations to serve the Hartford community. We participate in the Walk Against Hunger every year and we collect food donations every Sunday for the Hands On Hartford Food Pantry. We give not “a cup of cold water” in Christ’s name, but a cup of hot coffee (or hot chocolate, or tea) as a small measure of hospitality to anyone passing the Meeting House on Sunday morning before worship begins. Obviously, we can always do better, but I think that we do understand “service and caring.”

On the other hand, we sometimes forget that involving others in our service activities is a great way for Center Church to grow. We often think that our invitation needs to be to a dinner, concert or some other “fun” activity. But research indicates that many people, especially young people, are searching for ways to make a difference. The reality is that we may be more likely to get a positive response if we invite a friend, neighbor or co-worker to help us serve a meal or join us at the Walk Against Hunger. Most people really do want to make the world a better place and we are in a position to provide an opportunity for them to do so.

Opening our buildings to ministry and sanctuary, we embrace the diversity of the city in all its richness of human expression. Are we doing that? I hope that we are. First, how do we define “ministry and sanctuary?” Certainly, ministry includes the kind of service projects I’ve already talked about. But we also minister to and with the citizens of Hartford by offering our facilities for use by other organizations. Our buildings are regularly used for meetings ranging from Alcoholics Anonymous to some of Hartford’s cultural organizations. And we have provided venues for performances by city musicians, dance and theatre troops, and art shows.

However, I think that “embracing the diversity of the city” suggests more than just responding when a group or individual approaches us. It also means seeking out interesting persons and organizations in our community and building relationships with them.

The passage from Luke that I chose as our Gospel reading has been a familiar scripture since my childhood --- probably because I recall singing a song in “Daily

Vacation Bible School” based upon this parable. It’s called “I Cannot Come to the Banquet” and won’t ruin your morning by attempting to sing it, but surprisingly, I found several versions of the song on YouTube.

In this Parable, Jesus tells us that “Someone gave a great dinner and invited many.” However, when the invited guests find excuses not to attend, the host sends his slave out into the community to find other guests for his feast. The host has something wonderful to offer and he won’t be satisfied unless his banquet hall is overflowing --- even if not with his original invited guests.

These verses describe what the U.C.C. calls radical hospitality --- an openness and inclusiveness that flies in the face of normal social traditions. I believe that we need to make this kind of radical hospitality the hallmark of our activities at Center Church as well.

We as individuals and as a church, grow most and best through experiences that are new and different --- and yes, even challenging. As we continue to find ways to “embrace the diversity of the city in all its richness of human expression,” we will be better able to offer a diversity of events and programs back to the greater Hartford community.

As an open community, we seek to connect with people through worship and outreach. Honoring our heritage of responding to the challenging needs of the city of Hartford, we celebrate God's presence among us. Does this describe us well? Are we an “open community?” For that matter, what is an open community?

“Better Together: Restoring the American Community” by Robert Putnam and Lewis Feldstein is a follow-up to Putnam’s book “Bowling Alone.” Some of you may be familiar with it. “Bowling Alone,” explores why fewer and fewer people are involving themselves in community clubs and organizations --- rather than joining bowling leagues, we’re “bowling alone.”

In “Better Together,” the authors point out the importance of “social capital,” in creating vibrant, effective organizations --- churches included. They make the distinction between “bonding social capital” (ties that link individuals or groups with a lot in common) and “bridging social capital” (ties that link individuals or groups across a greater

social distance). How is Center Church doing at building connections across those differences of race, income, language, etc.?

When someone walks into worship on a Sunday morning, I think we do a pretty good job of making them feel welcome, but what happens after that?. Do we really invite them to share themselves with us? What are their struggles? What are their joys? How do they see the world? What do they do to build a life for themselves?

Putnam and Feldstein have a suggestion: “Eliciting personal narratives can be an ‘easy on-ramp’ for recruiting or integrating new members into an organization. By revealing vulnerabilities and creating empathy, “I” stories build trust.” Can we create more avenues for real dialog among our members and potential members --- opportunities to share our “I” stories with one another?

One of the lines in the hymn that we will sing in a few minutes says: “Joined in community, treasured and fed, may we discover gifts in each other, willing to lead and be led.” If we are truly “an open community,” we know that each new person we welcome CHANGES who we were before his or her arrival. Their ideas and points of view begin to mix with ours.

This can be frightening. Change is difficult. We like the way we do things. We’re convinced that we are doing things the “right” way. But we would do well to remember that the “right” way to do things seldom remains “the right way” for an extended period.

I found some interesting statistics from the 1930 census. This is slightly after the iconic Rev. Rockwell Harmon Potter’s pastorate at Center Church ended. Then, as now, Hartford was an immigrant city, with about 21% of the population foreign-born. Perhaps surprisingly, the total population of Hartford was larger than at slightly more than 164,000. It has since decreased by almost 25% and now stands at 125,000.

Perhaps the biggest change is that in Hartford today, I am representative of the minority. In 1930, the population was 96% white, 4% black, and a tenth of a percent other races. Today, Blacks and Latinos make up 70% of the population. Dr. Potter led a church in a very different Hartford than the one in which Center Church is located today.

The final sentence of our Guiding Principles begins: “*Honoring our heritage of responding to the challenging needs of the city of Hartford . . .*” The statement reminds

us that our tradition is responding to the needs we find around us --- needs that are changing as the city is changing and as we ourselves are changing. It doesn't say that we will respond to each NEW problem with "traditional," but ultimately ineffective, solutions.

Dr. Potter himself recognized the importance of change. In "Hartford's First Church," published in 1932, he wrote, "If the activities of a modern church would seem bewildering to men and women of three generations ago --- even one generation ago --- if they would be confused and distracted by the number and variety of the things that are being done in the church of today, that is not because the central purpose of the Church has been changed. It is because the Church has learned that the business of conversion can be truly accomplished only when it becomes indeed the real building of character after the pattern that is seen in the life of Jesus."

Center Church has a lot going for it. We have a long and storied history, beautiful buildings in the heart of the city, and a congregation of dedicated and loving Christians. So when we are "looking for guidance," of course we will draw upon our heritage and the wisdom of our members. But foremost in our minds should be our Guiding Principles. We need to keep them in mind at every church meeting, before launching any new initiative, and anytime we talk about Center Church to anyone --- member or non-member.

Finally, the Growth and Vitality Ministry recognizes that our members need to be more familiar with our Guiding Principles. SO expect to see and hear more about them in the coming months and as the new church year begins. I also want to tell you that last Sunday a small group assembled by the Growth and Vitality ministry spent some time looking at our Guiding Principles. We wanted to see if there was a way to highlight the most important themes in a way that would be easier to remember --- a sort of introduction to the Guiding Principles --- and perhaps something we can take with us when we talk about Center Church outside of these walls.

So we humbly offer the following: "Embracing God's Presence, Serving the City, Building Upon Our Heritage"

May our Guiding Principles, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, lead us boldly into a challenging and rewarding future. Amen.