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Connecting with “Those People”

By Lee A. Schott

For four years, I’ve been the pastor of Women at the Well, a congregation within a women’s prison in Mitchellville, Iowa. I meet some amazing women there. When I hear their stories, I can’t help thinking that I haven’t met many women like them in the churches I’ve known and pastored. It’s not because they aren’t in our communities. I used to think that drug abuse, domestic violence, economic hardship, and incarceration are problems that exist somewhere else. I know better today. Our neighbors suffer with concerns like these, down the street and right next door, no matter what our town looks like.

Our churches, in turn, sometimes shield us from the true diversity of our communities. In subtle ways, they can seem like fortresses that tell those outside that they are unworthy and unwelcome. Think about it: If you were coming out of prison, or if someone in your family was struggling with addiction, would the church feel open to you? If no one has yet believed your stories of abuse, would you see the church as a potential haven? If one of “those people” walked into your church, would they be welcomed?

I tell our women they’ll find a church that longs to be gracious to them. Here are some ways:

Watch. In your church and on your street, keep your eyes open. Make it a spiritual discipline to be watchful and open to what you see, and resist becoming walled-off from those who look “different.” Be curious.

Wonder. Suspend the part of you that would rush to judgment. Compassion increases when you take the time to ask yourself: “What might have happened to this person to make her behave this way?” Many persons deal with challenges that you can’t see. What would be different if you gave them the benefit of the doubt, and simply loved them?

Be a safe listener. Make yourself into someone in whom others can confide. If a person or their family member or neighbor wants to talk about prison, or a history of drug use, or suicidal feelings, learn to hear what is being said without becoming anxious and judgmental. Practice. Look for the shared humanity that connects you with this person.

Reduce your church’s barriers. Look critically at your church and the ways it may communicate that it’s only for certain people. Consider signage, the use of jargon, how guests are welcomed, who sits where, and

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the like. Notice who is left out when The Peace is passed, or when people are invited to something. Stand in the gap for the “outsiders.”

Watch your language. Pay attention to how you talk about “those people.” Ask: Would you say it that way if you thought they were sitting next to you? Using words like “neighbors,” “friends,” and “brothers and sisters” changes the way we think.

Reach across the walls. Dare to reach out. Wave. Speak first to that neighbor who may look or live differently from you. Invite her to your neighborhood

cookout or to your worship service. Push past any reluctance based on your perception of his lifestyle, and get to know this precious child of God.

Don't just "do mission." Build relationships. Move beyond projects where "good church people" simply take something we have (clothes, food, money, expertise, faith) to "those people" that we think need it. Strive for opportunities to build relationships and to work *with* — not *for* — others. Are you learning people's names and hearing their stories? Better yet, are they also hearing yours? Keep pushing toward actual relationship, not just serving from a place of safety.

Maintain boundaries. You are not here to save everyone. When you offer care and connection, do so out of your own love and character, not to receive anything back, including appreciation, from that family. Allow others to make their own mistakes, but maintain connection and encouragement where possible. If more specific boundaries are necessary for your safety or theirs, seek help in establishing and maintaining those.

Pray. Hold your neighbors and newfound friends in prayer. If you haven't met them yet, pray for those you don't know. Ask God to help you notice and connect with persons near whom God has placed you. ✝

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The Right Question

Leaders do not need answers.

Leaders must have the right questions.

There are always more good ideas than any church can implement, so deciding among good options is a regular challenge. One question that may help before embarking on a new program is:

What is the need this program addresses and to what extent is it felt by those we are seeking to reach?



The Power of Laity in Connecting to the Community

by Randy Scrivener

For much of my ministry, I had a recurring fantasy each time I was moving to a new church as

pastor. I would imagine myself going ahead of time to the new community, finding a popular local hang out, and spending time there. I would listen and learn some of the news and ways of the town from the perspective of the locals. Eventually, I would move there and become known to the community — but not before I had earned the respect of a group of people who had come to know me as a no-nonsense, regular person.

I had the same fantasy when I moved to my current church five years ago. Once people knew of my authenticity as pastor, suddenly the church would have more credibility and more appeal to outsiders. If I could just be more faithful and creative, I could inspire my parishioners, whom I judgmentally regarded as sluggish, to a higher degree of faith and practice. But I eventually realized how self-centered this idea was. I had made myself the hero of the fantasy. And it revealed my tendency to practice leadership as a Lone Ranger.

I came to this church determined to change that comfortable but lonely model. And I began to see the obvious. The laity of the church are already in the hang outs, schools, businesses, parks, and all other community groups. Their faithful lives bear witness each day to far more people than I could ever encounter.

I still thought there was some value to my plan to visit local hang outs, but now with a big difference. After a few years, I shared my fantasy in a sermon and extended the invitation to anyone who was interested to come with me to Papa Joe's Texas Saloon, a small local bar about five minutes away from the church. My only stipulation was that I would not go by myself.

While the numbers aren't large, I do have a few takers, mostly women, who meet at the church parking lot once a month to go to Papa Joe's. We do not take our Bibles, but we are now known and have established a relationship with the owner and her daughter. I'm not sure what, if anything, will come of these outings and the people we meet. But the real impact is what it has done for me. As I see the courage and witness of church members in this non-church setting, I move further and further from being the Lone Ranger pastor who overlooks the powerful potential for witness by laity every day. That's where the church's potential lies. ✦

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Quotable Leadership

Since the dawn of human history, most people's immediate reaction when meeting someone new has been to judge that person. Organizations cannot afford to take this approach.

Judith H. Katz and Frederick A. Miller

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