

It has been 6 months since my first 'official' day as the pastor of St. Paul's. As a reminder, ordained UM clergy begin our appointment year every year on July 1. We are itinerant, which means that we serve year-to-year at the pleasure of our Bishop. Since I was assigned here by Bishop Carcaño, we've had an episcopal change in our area. It is my understanding that our new Bishop, the Rev. Dr. Grant Hagiya, is not as 'trigger happy' about moving clergy as our previous Bishop. (Now I'm not complaining, Bishop Carcaño sent us here, and I am not going to complain if Bishop Hagiya keeps us here!)

In our high-speed culture, 6 months may feel like a good bit of time, but most church consultants agree that we (the congregation and the pastoral family) are still in the 'entry' phase of this pastoral transition. According to these wise consultants, this 'start-up' phase will take another 6 to 12 months. So the advice for pastors in this early phase is that we avoid making any significant ministry changes. Since I'm following a pastor who served St. Paul's for 20 years, my intention has always been to consider myself the 'new guy' for a full 18 months...

But I must say that you are making this difficult! What I mean is this. From the very beginning, all of our experiences as a family have been so positive. Even before we arrived, we were on the receiving end of such genuine hospitality; far more gracious than we could've hoped. What I said on my first Sunday remains true. "Every experience [with this congregation] so far is better than we could've hoped." We have not been treated as strangers or outsiders, but as friends. As I remarked on that first Sunday, "Not only is that more rare than you might imagine for pastors and our families; it's not something we take for granted." This makes it hard for me to keep thinking of myself as 'new' and to not lay out some new ideas!

I do want to add one thing here, and it is a word of gratitude for our staff. Christmas Eve services were a fantastic demonstration of how our staff makes every effort to collaborate and invest themselves in the success of St. Paul's. There wasn't one single base that I asked the staff to cover (even during the service – which you didn't

see), where they even hesitated for a moment. If you experienced some new wonder and joy and magic on Christmas Eve, one factor was certainly the willingness of every staff member to play their parts with a Luke 1:38 spirit!

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Because of all of this, and in spite of the advice to not make changes during an early transition, I do want to articulate an intention for the year ahead. You might call this a New Year's resolution for our congregation because it is one that I hope we will share together for 2017. And frankly, I don't see this as a big change because my hope for St. Paul's next year is that we will leverage the spiritual gift of hospitality that is already so abundant in this congregation. My hope is that all of our committees and groups, and each of us individually, will think about ways to expand and enhance our hospitality and so welcome those who are not yet a part of St. Paul's. While the call to demonstrate radical hospitality is a theme that runs throughout scripture, the keystone verse for this 2017 resolution would be Hebrews 13:2, which reminds us to 'not neglect showing hospitality to strangers, for by doing so some have entertained angels without knowing it.'

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While there are multiple ways we might engage this resolution, let me offer three points as a beginning on how we can embrace this resolution for the year ahead...

First, we need to know that not all churches are as 'warm and friendly' as they think. In fact, I'd testify that St. Paul's, and only one other of the four other churches I've served, has actually been as warm and friendly as they think. (I can share stories some other time...) But I believe this is true of St. Paul's because we've had lots of people visit who tell me that they've been greeted by 3 or 4 different people before anyone knew they were friends of the pastor's family!

This is truly good news because church growth folks will tell you that a first-time guest to a church will make up their mind to return or not in their first 7 to 10 minutes on a church campus. This means that a decision to return or not has little or nothing to do with the pastor, the sermon, or the choir anthem and everything to do with the initial warmth of the congregation. (What I'm

saying is, it’s your fault, not mine or the choir’s, if people don’t come back. I say that teasingly...)

But here’s an important caveat about this first point, shared by Bishop Robert Schnase: “Sometimes the greatest strength of churches and classes and choirs is also their greatest weakness. Church members love each other so much that their lives are so intertwined and their interests so interwoven that church groups become impenetrable to new people.” My point in sharing this is simply to say that as warm and friendly as our church is on Sunday mornings, we also need to consider how our smaller church networks do not neglect to show ‘hospitality to strangers’.

Secondly, if you are a member of St. Paul’s, or consider St. Paul’s your church home, I want to invite you to consider yourself part of the ‘staff’. Now, as I said earlier, our staff bent over backwards on Christmas Eve, giving up their seats, fixing candles, getting extra chairs, etc... so that guests to our worship services would be well taken care of. And, as a mentor pastor of mine says, ‘the minute you join the church, roll up your sleeves, because you’re no longer here to be served; you’re on staff.’ As a staff member, the number one question is, “how am I supporting new-comers and guests to become part of our church family? And how can I improve our hospitality?”

Just this week I was contacted by a couple of people in the church. They were concerned about our pew pencils and asked if they might buy pens for attendance pads. Notice, they did not go to a staff member complaining about a problem with our pencils and asking a staff person to fix it. These two people simply saw a concern they felt they might fix, and they volunteered their time and resources to fix it. They simply sought permission before moving forward. This is radical hospitality at its best. Seeing a need and taking the initiative to reach out to help.

Will pens work better? I don’t know! But the effort of these two people reflects a hope that anyone visiting the church will have the best experience possible, even with our attendance pads! (And, by the way, the pens will have Methodism 3 Simple Rules printed on them: “Do

No Harm. Do Good. Love God.”) That is a staff member like attention to detail.

My third and final thought on hospitality is this: To truly reflect God’s hospitality, we need to be ready to welcome people who are not like us. Different races, different ages, different backgrounds, even different theological perspectives... (And yes, I’ve said this in a couple different ways over the past couple of months.)

The story of Simeon greeting Mary and Joseph and the infant Jesus at the Temple is a great illustration for us. Whatever else we know, Simeon is very aged and a devout and learned religious man, and yet he is ready to welcome and bless a young family from ‘across the tracks’ at the Jerusalem Temple. He doesn’t take time to inquire whether this young couple is actually married before sweeping Jesus into his arms to bestow a blessing...

In mentioning this today, I am thinking about a new book: *Growing Young: 6 Essential Strategies to Help Young People Discover and Love Your Church*. One of the 6 essential strategies is “Fueling a Warm Community.” After investigating churches that are growing ‘younger’, the researchers concluded that more than an ‘off the charts cool quotient’ young people today are attracted to churches that demonstrate relational warmth. Most often this happens by finding ways to include and incorporate young people into the worshipping life of a congregation.

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So, if you are game, I ask you to consider radical hospitality as your New Years resolution by finding ways to be warm and friendly in worship and beyond, by thinking of yourself as a staff member (seeking ways to serve rather than to be served), and by being ready to welcome and embrace people who different than you – especially those who are young. Prayerfully consider this as we Reaffirm our Baptismal Covenant.