

***Oak Meadow
United Methodist Church***

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Laity Notes

*by
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CHURCH SHOPPING

Earlier this week, while sitting in the office of a client anticipating a conference call before pricing a bond issue, I struck up a conversation with a friend and client. Our conference call was scheduled for 7:30 in the morning and both of us had arrived early from different directions. He mentioned that he had been reading the night before as he lay in bed, and I could not resist asking what he had been reading. He told me that it was book about the DNA of relationships, and then almost in a hushed voice told me that he was reading it for a group discussion in a church class. Church talk can be touchy in a business setting. He told me that since Christmas of 2003 he, his wife and their teenage daughter had been attending the Community Bible Church which is but a stone's throw from where I live. I asked him how it was that a Catholic wound up in the Community Bible Church. He said that he had been falling asleep during Mass and his sleep had caused anger in his wife and questions with his daughter. Determined to remedy the situation they set about looking for a church, or "church shopping" in contemporary parlance. His wife had been looking for a combination that would keep her husband awake and her daughter interested, and this she found at Community Bible Church.

Community Bible Church began in 1990 and moved to its current location close to 1604 and 281 some three years ago. In 2003 they began construction on a new \$15 million worship

center with a seating capacity of 3,500 and a new \$4 million children's center/administration building with a capacity for 1,000 children. In order to accommodate their congregation for Easter Sunday last year, they held services in the Alamo Dome.

Later as I thought about our conversation I was struck by how my friend and his family had set out to find a church and how they probably would have not settled for Oak Meadow had they visited. Oak Meadow might have kept awake my friend, but I suspect that their older teenage daughter would have found little of interest. By that I am not discouraged. Our pool is large and our goal modest. We live in a city with a population in excess of a million people (1,214,725 estimated in 2003) and a metropolitan statistical area of 1,695,000. A small percentage of that population in search for a church translates into a large number of people. Many fish are swimming about looking for bait, and our church's long range planning committee is currently taking fishing lessons. Jesus did say something about teaching his disciples to be fishers of men.

Our long range planning committee of seven met first on February 7 and will have its fourth meeting on March 9. We are becoming more serious about addressing the problem of our church demographics. Efforts by the long range planning committee will soon be spilling over into the church at large. If we are to succeed, this must truly be a congregational effort. A committee may guide, but it takes a church to tackle an issue this important. Stay tuned and be ready to set your shoulder to the load.

In the meantime, the one thing everyone could do is attend Sunday Worship, or as in an older parlance, "remember the Sabbath and keep it holy." The most recent statistics show that the San Antonio District of the Methodist Church had 36,650 members in 2004. That is a decline of 148 members over the previous year. Of those 36,650 members only 15,212 bothered to attend church services, and that is a decline of 498 over the previous year. In short, church attendance declined more than church membership, and both forms of decline occurred in a city with a growing population. Each of us has a choice about our own contribution to these statistics every Sunday morning. During the past four years of Bible study our Sunday school class has yet to find a footnote to keeping the

Sabbath holy that says unless you are tired, or unless you have something better to do. God spoke plainly about this matter and each Sunday morning we make a choice about our response. It is not a matter for statisticians; it is a matter for each of us.

BIBLE TRANSLATIONS

The Hebrew Bible is the first known work in history to have been translated into more than one language. Earlier Sumerian narrative poems were translated, but not into more than one language. The first translation of the Hebrew Bible was the Septuagint, the third-century B.C. Greek version made necessary by the earlier success of Alexander the Great. This translation was carried out in Alexandria Egypt, a city named after the Greek conqueror, and made necessary by a huge Greek-speaking population. The next translation was into Aramaic in the second century A.D., and that was followed two centuries later by the Latin translation of Jerome, a church father. Ultimately the Bible was translated into more languages than any other book. With respect to English, there have been two great ages of translation activity, the 16th century and the 20th, with little in between.

The first age was triggered by the Protestant Reformation which sought to break the Catholic Church's monopoly on Scripture by making it available to every Christian in the vernacular. This effort was made possible by Gutenberg's earlier invention of moveable type. Gutenberg's technological innovations turned the Protestant Reformation, at least in its early stage, into a war of pamphlets. It also created a burst of English translations of the Bible. Within a century the Tyndale Bible, the Coverdale Bible, the Matthews Bible, the Geneva Bible, the Douay-Rheims Bible, and the Bishops' Bible were produced. This spate of English translations was completed in 1611 with the production of the magisterial Kings James Version.

As pointed out by Hillel Halkin in an article entitled "Doing Justice to the Bible," which appeared in the February 2005 issue of *Commentary*, this initial burst of vernacular translations, of which the English was but one version, was inspired "by an ardent faith in the divine authorship of Scripture."

The second age was triggered by the publication in 1885 of the Revised Standard Version, the

first English Bible to challenge the King James Version in nearly three centuries. Unlike the first age of translations, the second was prompted "because, for many people, the Bible had ceased to be the word of God." This time around the motivation was "to apply to Bible translation the new philological, archeological, and historical knowledge that modern scholarship had made available." This time around the Bible was approached much more as "a Hebrew and Greek text no longer considered the revealed Truth but rather, in the spirit of the 20th century, a great cultural and spiritual document composed by different authors in different periods and best approached with the flexibility that any good literary translation should have." This is the general process known as secularization.

Faith or no, an author who sits down to translate the Bible has before him no easy task. Not one original manuscript in any language remains, so the author must rely upon copies of the original document. The best Hebrew copies are known as the Masoretic Text (MS) which was produced by Jewish copyist of the Hebrew text over a period of centuries. The oldest complete texts come from the 10th and 11th centuries A.D. The purest copy of the Septuagint (LXX), or Greek version, is the "Codex Vaticanus," a document dating to the 4th century A.D. As with the Masoretic Text, there is more than one version of the Septuagint. The conscientious translator would consult each version along with copies of the Aramaic translation and Jerome's Latin translation. For the better part of two millennium this corpus was the bedrock of any translation. One of the most heated quarrels among scholars was about the accuracy of the Greek translation (Septuagint) of the Hebrew Text (MS). With the 1947 discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, modern scholars for the first time had available bits and pieces of the Hebrew Text which predated the time of Jesus. This is why you read about the Dead Sea Scrolls as the most significant discovery of ancient Biblical texts in the 20th century. This discovery did not solve all translation problems, but it helped with many and vividly demonstrated the remarkable accuracy of copying fingers over the centuries.

COMMENTS AND SUGGESTIONS

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