

Thoughts from Your Lay Leader

Chuck Hall

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AN IDEA CAME TO MIND

For some years I have subscribed to the monthly journal *First Things*, edited by Father Richard John Neuhaus. Each month after a quick glance at the book reviews, I turn to the last part of the journal that contains a lengthy commentary by the editor entitled, "The Public Square: A Continuous Survey of Religion and Public Life." Father Neuhaus is a learned man who writes with vigor and clarity, and in this section of his journal he comments on a wide variety of current topics pertaining to religion in public life. I enjoy reading this lengthy column and often find valuable tips for reading.

Last night I was sitting with one eye on the final four basketball tournament and the other eye on the twelfth chapter of Exodus preparing for a Sunday School class about the origin of Passover. In the middle of that combination, the idea came to mind that I might borrow a practice and format from Father Neuhaus and bring it to Oak Meadow UMC. Since becoming Lay Leader I have often puzzled about how to go about this new job. I wish to take seriously this assignment and to point much of my effort toward the Administrative Board's official policy for the remainder of this year to attract and retain ten new families to our church. At the same time, I do not want to overlook our present congregation. Given that combination, I have decided to write occasional columns about our church and to make them available to all members. I will leave it to you to determine whether or not my effort is worthwhile. I have not given thought to how often I might do this or to precisely what I might decide to cover in a column such as this. For the time being, I am more interested in pursuing the idea while it is fresh, and to be satisfied initially by the simple restraint of good taste. Where this might lead I have no earthly idea. "Who knows?"

AN INITIAL CONFESSION

For some reason unknown to me, I woke on the morning of November 20, 2002 with the distinct thought that "our congregation does not have sufficient information to make an informed choice about whether or not to merge with University UMC. In short order, I narrowed that thought to "I do not have sufficient information to make an informed choice." Within the hour, I sat out on a venture to cure my own ignorance and to share what I learned in the process with the congregation at large.

I was not very far into that journey when it became clear that much work would be required regardless of our final merger decision. Were we to merge with University UMC then much work would be necessary to protect a mouse from the dancing feet of an elephant. Were we not to merge then much work would be necessary to revitalize our church.

As I got off my own backside and began to put my shoulder to the load, I quickly discovered how many of our members had for long quietly been working. Each Sunday we listen to music from a piano and voices from a choir directed by one of our own. Each Sunday we lay our offerings in the plate. That money gets counted, recorded, and deposited into a bank account. Checks are written against that account to keep our church afloat. Our lawn gets mowed. When things break they are fixed. In these efforts as well as others, many hands are involved. Suddenly I found myself much quicker to offer a "thank you," and much slower to point out that "this needs to be done." There came to mind an echo of my mother's voice: "If the floor is dirty, then pick up a broom."

Many hands have for long been quietly at work. We all should be grateful. God has blessed us with many helpful hands.

Since the vote to table the merger, our activity has dramatically increased. There is a new vitality within the walls of our church. It is quite noticeable and refreshing. Our renewed energy is apparent not only to us, but also to those who happen by our church. As we approach the end of our third month since that January vote, much remains to be done. Yet all we have to do is to ask ourselves where were one year ago today, and the comparison is striking. I am convinced that an active church is an attractive church.

SIGNS OF MOVEMENT

We have definite signs of movement. Just look at our new church directory. Isn't it splendid? Full of names, numbers and email. In addition committees are named, members listed and duties enumerated. Do you want to know what a given committee is supposed to do? Just have a look in our new directory.

And to top matters off, the cover is graced by the work of one of our resident artists. How many church directories have covers adorned by the work of local artistic hands? We do!

Many thanks are owed to those who produced this fine work. We can best offer our thanks to them by using the directory. How much change could be brought about if each of us began faithfully to call one other member of our church each week? One telephone call each week. A few minutes of our time, taken to offer a cheerful word. Nothing complicated, expensive or outside our reach. How much change might this effect?

Then there are those new nametags, which are well done and helpful. I am embarrassed to admit how many names I didn't know until after November 20. Am I alone? Thanks to those responsible. We have all benefited from your effort.

On Wednesday evenings we now see children playing games. Maybe there are not always very many children, but what a beginning. Have we planted a seed?

SPAGHETTI SUCCESS

God bless those wonderful ladies who came up with the idea of a spaghetti dinner, and who then followed through with that idea. They fed seventy-three people and had to turn away about fifteen. How long has it been since we have seen such a variety of new faces in our church?

How did it come about? After a Wednesday luncheon some went to church to pray for peace. Somewhere between eating and praying the idea emerged. The next Sunday it was announced in church that the dinner would be held the coming Wednesday. Early on Monday a message about the meal was put in our church marquee. By

Wednesday evening there were more people than available spaghetti.

On top of everything else, this effort netted the church about \$275. Their effort brought many of our people as well as many new faces to our church, children played outside while parents visited at tables, more people than expected showed up, and they turned a profit. We might not have much money, but there is no lack of imagination in our congregation. We might press our imagination a little further.

SPAGHETTI LESSONS

One key lesson was that people read our church marquee. Our marquee is there and paid for, and now we know that people read it. Why not use our new knowledge?

We did not fare as well with our second church dinner as we did with the first. We fed about sixty people enchiladas last Wednesday night.

What about combining these two facts for our next dinner? Let us return to spaghetti for the next meal, and this time be more active with our sign. On Monday morning we put out the message: "Ran out of spaghetti; had leftover enchiladas. We get the hint." On Tuesday morning we put out a new message: "Come get your spaghetti tomorrow night. \$5 a plate." Wednesday morning a new sign reads: "Better come early, spaghetti goes quickly." Thursday morning our sign might read: "We fed 95 people last night. Thanks!"

Something along these lines would engage people to pay close attention to our church marquee. We could develop new themes each week and make people laugh on their way to work and pique their interest in our church. We could even go so far as to invite people to come on Sunday to visit us in worship. We could let them know that we are trying to build up our membership.

This could be done without any cost. It would involve nothing more than our imagination. Who knows what might result?

COMMENTS AND SUGGESTIONS

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