

***Oak Meadow
United Methodist Church***

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Laity Notes

*by
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UMW SUNDAY SCHOOL WITH JAMES

On July 6th we will begin the Sunday School study of the Letter of James with the United Methodist Women. The class will be held on the 6th, 13th, 20th and 27th of July, and it will be combined with our regular adult Sunday School class. For a four-week period the regular Sunday School class will set aside its current study of the Book of Exodus and join the UMW in their study of the Letter of James. Our class begins at 9 a.m., and all are welcome.

The Scandalous Message of James: Faith Without Works Is Dead, by Elsa Tamez has been recommended by the UMW as a study guide. Those wishing to study further might profitably consult two other commentaries on the Letter of James, one by Ralph P. Martin (Word) and the other by D. J. Moo (Eerdmans).

The class will be taught by the same methodology as has been used in the study of Genesis and Exodus. An initial reading of a portion of the text is followed by a more detailed commentary during which class members are invited and encouraged to participate at the level of their choosing. The text serves as the basis of discussion.

A SMALL URBAN CHURCH

I returned home to Nebraska over Memorial Day weekend to spend time with my Mother and my two sisters. Pawnee City is a town of about a

thousand people and over the years it has suffered the same fate as many small towns. As children have grown up, they have moved away and the population has shrunk in size and advanced in average age. Along with population, the economy has also shrunk and a town that used to have three grocery stores and two banks now has only one of each. Two restaurants have been replaced by one. A convenience store has appeared to compete with older gas stations and the grocery store. The car dealership, men's clothing store and women's clothing store have disappeared. Gone also are the theatre and pool hall.

Attendance at the Methodist Church has also dwindled, and the congregation averages about fifty people each Sunday, or about the same number as Oak Meadow. In size alone, both the Pawnee City United Methodist Church and Oak Meadow United Methodist Church qualify as "small" churches. Beyond this statistical fact the two congregations are quite different. The difference relates primarily to location. Pawnee City UMC is located in a town of a thousand people while Oak Meadow UMC is located in a city of more than a million people.

For the past few months I have been reading books about "small" churches, and during this trip home I sensed something that most of the books leave out. Pawnee City UMC is a community within a community. Oak Meadow UMC is a community within a metropolis. What this difference means became strikingly clear to me while walking about town those few days.

A trip to the grocery store in Pawnee City invariably means running into a church member at work, and more likely than not another member or two shopping along the isles. Visit the bank to cash a check and you will find another church member behind the counter, and not uncommonly another member tending to their account. Take your mother to "Hattie's" (the restaurant) for lunch and you will meet the owner, who sings in the church choir. In short, a community within a community means that members of the Pawnee City UMC do not have to work at becoming a community. They have plenty of other matters with which to contend, but forming a community out of their congregation is not one of them. They already are community members by the sheer fact of living in a small town in rural Nebraska. That is a given.

How different this is from Oak Meadow UMC. In San Antonio, when I go to the grocery store, the bank or a restaurant I virtually never run into a church member. Unless I make a special effort to meet someone from the congregation, during a typical week I go six days without seeing any church member. To be sure, there are exceptions, but for the most part, this is true for the majority of our congregation. Most of the time, most of us meet only once each week and that is at worship on Sunday morning.

This means that we do have to work at building a community even though we are a small church. We are not part of any common community aside from our church. The simple fact is that there is not much time before or after any given church service to socialize and really become acquainted with each other. Without a little extra effort, we may come to recognize faces while remaining relative strangers to each other. My hunch is that any member of the Pawnee City UMC could tell you how many children another member had. How many of us could do that? Pawnee City UMC and Oak Meadow UMC are both small churches, but their location makes them much different in a crucial way. We do not have the luxury of automatically being a community.

This is one reason why we must make an effort to hold regular committee meetings and attend them faithfully, as well as attend as best we can church functions beyond Sunday morning. Committee meetings not only help us to guide our church along a particular path, they also give us the opportunity to get to know a handful of people better. We might give thought to dedicating at least a small portion of committee meetings to strictly social behavior, including a bite to eat and something to drink. Sunday potluck and Wednesday special monthly meals provide the same opportunity. Each of us needs to make an effort to attend. Come early and stay late.

The effort can be rewarding. Not long ago I listened to a member of our congregation tell me about the first time he received mail while overseas in the military. The call for mail was given, the mail handed out, and everyone quickly read what letters they had received. Everyone that is except for one man. After watching all the others read their mail from home, this man approached our congregation member with a request: "Would you read my letter to me?" The

answer was a yes, and our member read this man's letter to him. Having finished reading, there came another request: "Would you write a letter to my wife for me?" The answer was another yes, and for the next two years our member faithfully wrote letters for this man to his wife. One would be hard pressed to find a better example of loving your neighbor as yourself.

The effort to get to our church neighbors better can be rewarding indeed.

GOD AND NEIGHBOR

We have for the past few months been studying the Book of Exodus in our adult Sunday School class. Recently we spent time with the 20th chapter, where God gives Moses the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai. In this study, we discovered that the first four commandments point upward, toward God: No other God before God, no idols representing God, no idle talk using God's name, and honoring God by keeping the Sabbath. The fifth commandment is to honor your father and your mother, and it gives a reason why: that your days may be long. The next three move outside the family and are direct and to the point: Do not murder, commit adultery or steal. They do not speak directly to anyone, but it is obvious that they apply across the board and that their direction is our behavior toward each other. The final two commandments prohibit bearing false witness and coveting, and the word "neighbor" appears five times in commandments nine and ten. You are not supposed to bear false witness against or covet anything possessed by your neighbor. In short, the Ten Commandments begin with an emphasis upon God and end with an emphasis upon neighbor.

In Matthew's Gospel (22:34-40) a Pharisee asked Jesus, "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?" To this question Jesus responded, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets."

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