

## **Rethink Church: NOW is the Time”**

First UMC Pasadena

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*There was a little church in the suburbs which suddenly stopped buying from its regular office supply dealer. So, the dealer telephoned Reverend Brown to ask why. “I’ll tell you why,” shouted Rev. Brown. “Our church ordered some pencils from you to be used in the pews for visitors to register.”*

*“Well,” interrupted the dealer, “didn’t you receive them yet?”*

*“Oh, we received them all right,” replied Rev. Brown. “However, you sent us some golf pencils...each stamped with the words, ‘Play Golf Next Sunday!’”*

Memorial Day is tomorrow, a MONDAY, and perhaps some of us *are* going out to play golf, but that’s not really the point. Are we taking the time to pause and pray for our Veterans? Do we even take the time to pray daily? Do we *do* church with God on a regular basis, or are we teaching our children that church is only on Sunday mornings? Today, we are posed with the question, “Are we really ready to ‘Rethink Church?’” Beyond the Sunday pews? Beyond a one-service-Sunday-Church to a rejuvenated and revitalized Everyday-Church? What if...just what if we did?

Let us think on these things. Let us pray:

*May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, Our God, Our Rock, and Our Redeemer. Amen.*

This morning, as we meditate on waiting to be baptized by the Holy Spirit and Jesus Ascension into God's heavenly kin-dom, I thought of a story about a church, told by a very wise *young* theologian<sup>1</sup>. Let me retell it to you now:

There once was a Church with long, vibrant legs. Its first steps grew out of little villages and then those legs could span the distance of a town in a single step. It stretched itself from valley to valley to tell the people of the Good News of the Gospel. It talked with strangers and to the poor. It gave shelter to the homeless and to the oppressed. It opened its doors to healing the sick and to comforting the marginalized. With its strong limbs, it would bend over to pick up those who were down. This Church with legs filled communities with the love of God and taught people how to always be full by planting and growing their faith and hope in Christ.

And this Church with legs did not stay put. It got on a boat and sailed over oceans and crossed country-sides. Sometimes those legs rode on the saddles of horses and some by the latest up and coming transportation. And this Church with legs grew in numbers, in believers, in people of the faith. The Church with legs was thriving.

One day the Church looked around, and saw that things were good. So it decided that it could get a little comfortable—*too bad we didn't keep the bed out from Youth Sunday last week!* The Church with legs was a little tired anyway, after all, it had been running for the past, oh, 2000 years or so. It was content at where it was, so the Church with legs decided that it would cross its legs and sit down for a bit... and let the people come to it instead.

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<sup>1</sup> Sandhya Jha, Disciples of Christ pastor.

*Ooh. This is comfortable. I think I'm gonna continue to preach from the pulpit in this robe.*

Where were we...ah yes, what if the Church had legs? What does it mean to be the Body of Christ? We all gather here this morning because we are called to be the Body of Christ. As we reflected a little on Matthew 18:20 with the children this morning, "where two or three are gathered, we are gathered in Christ's name," we are also told today that we are not to look up into the empty sky, but that we come to God for fellowship, for biblical learning, we come for spiritual enlightenment, we come to be commissioned to BE CHURCH with one another. Right now, parts of our Body is gathered together here at First Church and another part is gathered at Camp Sky Meadows for Family Camp. We may be in separate places, but we are gathered together, DOING Church!

In Acts, we are called together by the disciples in several face-to-face meetings with Jesus in the period of forty days. Over lessons, meals, and miracles, we are instructed to wait for what God has promised...the same promise that we heard from Christ earlier before his crucifixion: "*John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.*" Yet, the disciples were a bit antsy. When's God coming? When is he going to restore the kingdom to Israel? Is this the time? Is it? Is it? Huh? Huh? They kind of sounded like impatient children.

And the reply of a wiser, more knowledgeable person, Jesus just rubs his temples and says, "You don't get to know the time. Timing is God's business. But you will get the Holy Spirit...and when it comes to you, you will be able to be my witnesses in Jerusalem, all over Judea and Samaria, even to the ends of the world!" You don't get to know the

time. Time is God's business. The Greek's called that *kairos* time. *In God's time*. In *kairos* time, all will be done when ready by God. Our job? To prepare the way for God's kin-dom.

So what does that mean for all of us who are called—"To be a church with legs?" Why do we feel that we are so challenged at being the church that we once were? To be a struggling church of our times? (Why) at this crossroads, between the secular world and the religious and spiritual world? (Why) at this economic time of financial hardships and standstills? When there are more activities that fill our calendars without leaving space for church...for God? Let me start by saying that First United Methodist Church is not a struggling church, as it is quite healthy and has very vital ministries and programs, *but* it is no secret that MAINLINE Christian denominations are all struggling. And hey, we could still use a few more folks to fill up these pews—there's always room to grow!

With a nation full of "church dropouts" as congregational development books and studies are calling them, how do we get folks back into our doors? How do we *RETHINK CHURCH* in new ways that would appeal to the forgotten, marginalized, and un-churched? We can even start by reexamining our own church.

Has the Church become lethargic? Apathetic? Do we let church meetings and committees bog us down from the work that we are truly called to do—to be commissioned as the Gospel of Matthew says; to go *OUT* into the world to be bearers of the Good News of Christ. Do we care more about how straight the banners are in the church rather than whether or not the banners bring people into our church? Are we a relevant church that is

REAL to the people who walk through the doors or are we more unfaltering and unchanging in our ways on issues of today? Instead of inviting folks off the street to join our programs and worship services, do we just sit and wait for the people to come to us? It's so much easier. And it is a tiring job...but man, the church in the beginning was always outbound, active, and spreading the good news—that church was fresh, exciting, and it was also quite radical.

Today we wonder what it means to continue to grow the church, to REvitalize the church, to REboot ourselves to start anew. We're waiting for our REstoration of the kin-dom! We seem to like these RE-words. For the planning of last week's Youth Sunday worship service, we began the conversation with talking about what being the church meant to them. Looking at our church logo and core values of: Dynamic Worship, Spiritual Discipleship, Inviting Community, and Witness and Service, the youth also saw a way of continuing a REcycle of how we can continue to live out these values. Words such as REvitalize, REjuvenate, REjoice, REgenerate, REvive, REsound, REdemption, REnew, and RESurrection came flowing from their mouths. It was as though these Easter People, these children of the Resurrection, *our very own Youth*, understood that the Church has already been these things and WILL BE these things to them, OVER and OVER and OVER again. They want their church to be REvitalized! No one says that we need to start all over again. That's the whole point of the RE-words. We're doing it *again*, just a little differently. I myself am a traditionalist and heart and LOVE church ritual, traditions, and hymns...we just need to find new ways to infuse that same spirit in ALL who enter into our doors.

And as we harken back to the days of John Wesley let's not forget the days of the Circuit Rider who went from community to community to spread the good news that God was reaching out to those literally on the margins, to those far away and forgotten...and Wesley also reminded us about REvival!

On New Year's Eve 1739, John Wesley, George Whitefield, and some of their friends held a "love feast" which became a watch night of prayer to see in the New Year. At about 3am, Wesley wrote, "the power of God come mightily upon us, insomuch that many cried for exceeding joy, and many fell to the ground." Revival always begins with a restoration of the sense of the closeness of God... This morning's text reminds us that the kin-dom shall be restored, but we do need to get ready for it...for whenever God's time comes!

Theological scholar, James Packer says that "Revival is the visitation of God which brings to life Christians who have been sleeping and restores a deep sense of God's near presence and holiness."<sup>2</sup> There's a story of a woman who would seasonally see a road-side Revival tent across the field from where she lived and so one day, out of curiosity, she decided to take a peek. After the service she asked the preacher, "Why do you keep having revivals when it doesn't last?" And he asked her, "Why do you keep taking baths?" We keep taking baths because we need to be REMinded always that Christ, through the Holy Spirit is always with us!

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<sup>2</sup> James Packer, *Your Father Loves You*, Harold Shaw Publishers, 1986.

Yet, we still need to REthink Church. We need to go outside of the box to remember that Jesus came to deliver to us the story of Good News—that as we go out of our doors of the church, we are to thing BIG. That “the Church with legs” is actively seeking those who need church. That in our programs we pastor to the Latch Key Kids or At-Risk Youth in our community, to Seniors and Caregivers, and to those who need Social Services. It’s finding the need and going beyond our local church to BE the Church that we are called to be. Seeing new life around us as we outreach to the Boy Scouts and having them join our Mexico Mission Trips. Or let’s look at the college campuses around us and invite young people them to be a part of our own college campus ministry. They want it. They are ready for it. Young people are seeking spirituality, and we are right here!

It’s about being creative and founding Community Institutes and organizations for outsiders to now become insiders. It’s in finding ways to connect to the community needs right in our own backyards. We need to stop waiting for people to come to us, Church is not only for those who are sought after or well-established. From outdoor foot-washings and open-table communions where all are invited, this is RETHINKING CHURCH. It’s when we reach out to the stranger that we spread the Gospel of loving our neighbors as God has given us instructions to do. It’s when we forget and sit on our laurels, that we become the Church withOUT legs...or at least the church that hasn’t exercised those muscles in a long time. But we are a church of hope. We are a LIVING church and here’s how we are living...(so let’s get off our laurels for a bit a see What If the Church had legs...)

And FUMC Pasadena does have legs...with our Covenant for Vital Ministries led by Kara Altice-Montes & Luis Montes, their committees have been discussing what it means to be a vital church. They have visited the many committees of the church and asked the same questions: *What is the Mission of our church.* In the last worship committee meeting, Luis and Kara asked that very question. What I heard in that meeting was that we WANT dynamic worship! That we WANT every Sunday to be like Easter Sunday (or Youth Sunday for that matter!) And we can! Nothing is impossible! It's the energy that we bring, it's Your Spirit that helps us to revive the Holy Spirit! Let's make worship BRILLIANT! (see your front cover of your bulletin, and I think we already did the bed in the sanctuary thing, right Youth?)

Or take our Missions and Evangelism committees who are really reaching out beyond our doors to find ways to engage our community and to invite people into the ministries of First Church? Interested visitors, join our Pastor's parties at Dr. Trotter's house! We are doing it folks. We keep talking about inviting friends to church, let's stop talking and do the inviting! The Beach Baptisms last week of Taylor Altice, Gabi, Nick, & Sami Vogt drew members of our community to do an OUTDOOR baptism which called witness to all of those who were at the Beach. That is RETHINKING Church. At Camp Sky Meadows, we commend the families that invited their neighbors and friends to camp to see what being church means family fellowship. That's RETHINKING Church. Like God, nothing is impossible!

And NOW is the time that ALL churches are being called to RETHINK Church! And how appropriately themed in wondering about how we "RETHINK CHURCH" in that

this May/June edition of the United Methodist Interpreter magazine guides us just that way in “What if we...? RETHINK CHURCH.” And this is not a campaign, it’s a MOVEMENT. A way of getting outside of what is has not been working for us and to be the visionaries that we’ve always known ourselves to be. It inspires us to Rethink everything from Missions to holding our Sunday School classes at the local coffee shops! We are called to be a church with 10,000 doors and to keep our doors open for conversation! What does it mean to Rethink Church the United Methodist way? You’re welcome to check it out at [www.10thousanddoors.org](http://www.10thousanddoors.org) and [www.rethinkchurch.org](http://www.rethinkchurch.org). It’s there, it’s ready...NOW is the time!

We ARE a Church with Legs. We are taking the steps to keep on track. This story of a Church with legs is not a story about age or other limitations. This is a story about each of us as we are the Living Church. We are Easter People. We are the Resurrection People. We are also United Methodists...so let us go out with Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors, and Outstretched Legs, I want you to get out there and walk—better yet, run! On the road that you are all called to travel! Amen and Amen.

## **BENEDICTION**

As you leave these doors, be ready to RETHINK Church for this is YOUR Church.

As you leave these doors, await the baptism of the Holy Spirit’s anointing which calls us to lead the nations.

As you leave these doors, stretch out your legs, get out there and walk! Better yet run!

And may God be with us always on our journeys. Amen.