

What Altadena Can Learn From “That Church”

by
Gary Roberts

In last month's High Ground, Rev. Joe talked about the unfortunate press being received by Trinity UCC in Chicago and their retiring pastor, Rev. Jeremiah Wright. This month, while Joe is preparing for his next round of D.Min. classes, he invited me to share my personal experience with this church and pastor. I'm delighted, because I have great respect for them both, borne out of first-hand experience when I was in Cleveland. Rev. Wright was the keynote speaker at one church development conference my office hosted, and I also worked with Rev. Wright to provide buildings for three new churches sponsored by Trinity.

There have been people who work in UCC church development that have dismissed Trinity as irrelevant to their context. Early on, the rationale was that they were an afro-centric church, and therefore there were no principles that would translate from Trinity's experience to the rest of the UCC. We've come a long way since then, but judging from the public response to the press reports during this election, we've got miles to go.

More recently, some church people have argued that Trinity is so big they have nothing to teach the rest of us. But of course, that ignores the fact that Trinity was once a small church, and grew to its current size because it did something right. When Rev. Wright arrived 35 years ago, Trinity was about the size Altadena is today. Why wouldn't the rest of the UCC want to think about that, and learn whatever we can from their experience?

The first thing I notice when I look at Trinity is a clear mission statement, easily remembered, that sums up both who they are and who they are not. “Unashamedly black, unapologetically Christian” is short, clear, and definitive. By contrast, most churches mission statements read like they were written by committee, and are designed to offend as few as possible, but in the process, they tell you very little about the church. So I'm proud that the winner of our tag-line contest was, “Come as you are. Become all God would have you be.” It's clear, easy to remember, invites everyone, and if taken seriously, calls for all of us to focus on our own spiritual development, and be supportive of each other.

At that church development conference, Rev. Wright was asked, “How did you do it? How did you grow into such a large church?” He answered, “It all starts with great worship. And great worship has two key elements: great preaching, and great music.” He didn't say other worship elements were unimportant, but from my experience worshiping at Trinity, I have noted a minimum of liturgical reading and a maximum effort to engage both the mind and the heart of the worshipers. And, although the service is longer than we are used to, its pace and drama is high. Few other UCC churches I've visited can make claim to engaging worshipers as completely as happens regularly at Trinity.

Other elements of their worship that I admire include the way in which prayer and offerings are conducted. For prayers, each parishioner is asked to turn to their neighbor and inquire what need the parishioner can pray for personally. I love the way our corporate prayer is conducted at Altadena Community, but the way that is done at Trinity is another example of the way each worshiper is engaged fully in the worship experience.

And then there's the offering. My work has taken me to hundreds of UCC churches. Trinity is the only one where, when time for the offering arrives, the congregation cheers (!) for the opportunity to give back to such a generous God.

In a follow-on question at the meeting, another person asked, "But where do you find leaders to help you. You can't lead a church that size by yourself." Jeremiah's response was similar, ironically, to what I was taught in the Navy: leadership is not a gift. It is taught. I learned later that the adult education program at Trinity is extensive, starting with teaching about scripture and their (our) basic responsibilities as Christians. Beyond that, anyone aspiring to be a Deacon or other significant leader at Trinity completes an extensive additional discipleship training, and must commit to tithing to their church. So both membership and leadership require high commitment. That's a far cry from thinking of church service as a kind of volunteerism that needs to be fit into the rest of our busy lives, and compete with other calls for our free time. Or our offering as a form of charity, as it's labeled on our 1040 forms.

Someone at this meeting asked Jeremiah how he went about teaching stewardship. The answer was impressive in several ways. First, he launched into what was part paraphrase, part reciting from memory the entire 11th through 15th chapters of 1 Corinthians, sometimes called the synoptic gospel, with great passion and drama. As he got to the end of chapter 15, he recited, "Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is thy victory, where, oh death, is thy sting. Beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain" And then he asked, "Do you know what it says at the start of Chapter 16?" Of course, no one did, so he answered, "It says, 'Now, for everyone who understands all that, let's talk about the offering.'" I think he was making two points: (1) before becoming a faithful steward of a church's (or Christ's) ministry, one must fully understand what Christ has done for us, and (2) with that understanding of Christ's sacrifice, people can be counted on to be faithful in response, including being faithful titheers.

But it also implies another key to Trinity's success: they take their bible seriously. They bring their bibles to church. Scripture is read together, not to the congregation by a reader. And that's just the superficial difference. More basic is that people are expected to read, study, think about scripture. They are literate in the subject matter. At Altadena, I really enjoyed the time we spent with Peter Gomes' book, The Good Book. Attendance implied for me that, at least for some people, the subject was engaging. But it did not have the same energy, passion, and centrality to the church culture that I see at Trinity.

I'd like to end with the way Jeremiah introduced the subject of church development to that group of pastors and lay leaders. It's been several years, but I still remember his opening story. He said he was traveling, as he did regularly, and at the end of one evening, was checking into his hotel for that evening. He put the key card in the door, but the door didn't open! So, he picked up his bags, went back down to the desk, stood in line, and when his turn came, laid the key on the counter and, with all the restraint he could muster, said "This key doesn't work." In an equally restrained voice, the desk clerk responded, "Sir, that's not our key." What he had done was try to open today's door with yesterday's key. And Jeremiah said, "That's what we do in church development. We try to open today's doors with yesterday's keys." And I say, "Amen."