

SERMON – 11-27-18

Relationships Build the Community

Good evening! Thank for this opportunity. We had a stimulating conversation at our 4PM seminar.

I come to you today from three traditions that have enriched my life and shaped the work I do with congregations.

The first is the Roman Catholic Church, particularly the Jesuits who taught me in the high school seminary for the Diocese Pittsburgh and at Marquette University in Milwaukee.

The second is the Industrial Areas Foundation, the oldest and largest community organizing network in the country, established in 1940 by Saul Alinsky. I was an organizer for IAF in the 70's and early 80's for 10 years.

The third is that of professional fundraising. For 35 years I have been the co-owner of The James Company, a fundraising consulting firm, which serves congregations and religious non-profits in 26 states across the country. We have served 1800 clients and have helped them raise over \$1.2 billion in new money for their ministries. That's \$1.2 billion in new church resources that was not being given until it was organized and asked for.

In the seminars I teach about **“How to Raise Money for Anything”** I say that there are 3 things, which are needed to increase the revenue of any organization – Leadership, Relationships and a Strategy.

In these few moments we have together tonight let me focus on Relationships. The passage we just heard from Acts 2 describes well what I have experienced in healthy congregations. These early Christians knew each other, ate together, shared together and acted together. They had relationships.

At the beginning of the hundreds of appeals I have personally managed, I ask the church's Steering Team members how long they have been a member and WHY they are a member of their congregation. In 35 years I have never heard anyone answer Transubstantiation or I love Calvinist Theology...

What they say is – my friends are here; my family is here; I love these people; one lady once said – well I sleep with the Pastor. You know who she was!

They are members and they stay members because of the relationships they have built over a period of years with the Pastors, the staff and fellow members. These are also usually some of the financial leaders of the congregation.

So what are these relationships? Meaningful relationships are built on two fundamental things to establish relationships – trust and mutual interests. The best way I have learned to build trust and understand the interests of another person is

one to one face-to-face relational meetings. This is the skill I learned from the late Ed Chambers, former Executive Director of IAF – it's the most radical thing IAF teaches. It is without a doubt the best way to lead and organize other people.

These relational meetings are encounters where people share their personal stories, talk about values, talk about their hopes and dreams for their themselves, their families the world; evaluate religions and the state of spirituality in their own lives and that of the world.

Unfortunately, it takes quite a bit to convince church staff and leaders to do these kinds of meetings and engage other people – particularly people they do not know...

Over the last ten years I cannot tell you the number of church leaders I have met who bemoan the fact that millennials and young people are not joining their church... This drives me crazy, but I try to be nice and I ask them – “in the last three months, how many people under 35 have you had coffee with in order to ask them for their evaluation of congregations in America?” Usually they have not done a single face-to-face, one to one, 40 minutes meeting with these types of folks. I say to them – you cannot organize people you do not understand. Everyone acts on their interests – you cannot organize them to join your congregation if you do not know them and understand their interests.

I have a friend who is a recently retired Lutheran Pastor. In the 20 years she served her congregation she grew it from worshipping 60 to worshipping 800. She understood relationships. She did a face-to-face, one-to-one meeting with every visitor and every new member who came to the congregation. As the congregation grew she trained other leaders to do the same, so she did not kill herself.

Many congregations say they want to grow; say they want new people, but they do not do what it takes to build relationships of trust and mutual interest.

We have a congregation we are working with on a Visioning process. As part of the project we taught them to go out into their community to meet some of the community leaders and to discuss what is happening in their community and to ask for an evaluation of their congregation's ministry. They talked to the Mayor, the School Superintendent, the Police Chief, the head of the Business Alliance – and many others. A team of 6 from the church did 25-30 of these meetings. They were astounded at what they learned. For one thing they learned that 40% of the people in their small suburban Chicago community were now Hispanic!! They were astounded that they did not know this. Now they have to decide what they want to do about that – if anything – but at least they now know their community much better than they did before.

Money follows relationship – where there is a relationship, there will be money. Where there is no relationship, there is usually little if any money. This is easy to prove. Look at your own checkbook. Most of us put our money where are strongest relationships are – we spend our money for our spouse, our family, our children, our grandchildren and hopefully our congregations, etc

You can't organize money outside of a relationship. The mantra I teach folks on how to ask for money is "The right person, asks the right person, at the right time, for the right amount in the right way". But I also tell them if you do not have a relationship do not ask for money - yet.

In the congregations I have served over the years, regardless of denominations about a third of the members are pretty strong givers, a third are so-so givers (that's a technical term) and about a third do not give but are still on the church rolls. Invariably someone will say (usually with a degree of anger) - to get our giving up all we have to do is get these "slacker, non-givers" to give. My response to them is "Why don't these folks give? What do you know about them? How many of them have you met with one-to-one, face to face?"

You can double the size of your congregation if you want. You can double the size of your budget if you want. But you will have to change yourself and your current church culture. You will have to decide if you and your congregational leaders want to act like organizers and leaders and go out and meet lots of new people - people on your rolls now; people who visit or join your church; people who live in your community; people under 35.

You will have to change your schedule; change the way you spend your time; change the way you prioritize what is most important to be done by whom.

You will need to learn to become better listener, a better relater, and a better asker.

Let me conclude.

All of this is possible. Remember the people in ACTS 2 were a very small group and they started to build a worldwide organization. Quite a congregation they built.

AMEN

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Bob has worked with church congregations, schools, and social agencies since 1974. He has managed stewardship and capital fund appeals, conducted leadership-training seminars, and supervised planning processes for a wide variety of non-profit institutions.

Bob and his wife Lynn have two grown children and belong to Gesu Catholic Parish in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Bob is a Board Member of the Pilgrims of Ibillin and a member of Common Ground.