

Message: Welcoming Others¹

I invite you to embrace the vision of Corona UMC as we begin 2018 in worship. It’s found on the front of the program and on-screen:

We are a church of blessings, changing the world through words and deeds of grace, showing others how to follow Jesus.

This is our strategy for changing the world. It’s how we make disciples who make disciples. Living out our vision, we become:

Intergenerational, multi-ethnic, diverse, passionate and committed followers of Christ who:

- Reach beyond the walls of the sanctuary, inviting people to know God’s love and engaging all people where they are in life.
- Serve the needs of our community through collaboration with civic groups, churches and other faith-based groups.
- Lead by example with a kingdom-focus, connecting people to God and our church.

We seek to:

- Grow and deepen our faith and the faith of our community through spiritual practices; and
- Share our experience of God and seek God’s presence in all we do through traditional means and in new ways.

I lift this vision up as our church family’s New Year resolution.

It was developed by the ministry leaders and me in August 2016 in a retreat. We believe it captures the way we’re called to live by faith in the greater Corona area. I’m not sure how many of you know it, so it’s good to refresh our vision as we begin 2018 together.

Like a good resolution does, our vision stretches us. It calls us to change our lifestyle. We can’t achieve it alone, but when we come together, we accomplish more than we can imagine. And we each have unique, important roles to play.

It’s like being on a baseball team. Each person on the team has a different position, perspective, abilities and experiences. For example,

¹ Material from <http://www.outreachmagazine.com/features/3010-five-practices-of-fruitful-congregations.html>

the pitcher has a different role than the catcher. Yet they need to work together to play well and help the team score runs. And each person on the team has fundamental skills they have to learn – how to catch, throw and bat; where to play and how to react in different situations. No matter how long they’ve been on the team, fundamentals are important. Players spend time practicing. That way, their muscles and minds develop patterns. As an example, you’ve heard about “muscle memory.”

The same is true in our congregation. We each have a role to play. The pastor is one member of the team, but all of the players are needed to do well and help us make disciples. No matter whether you’re on a ministry team, a staff member or an occasional volunteer, each of us contributes to make our community a place where doors are open, minds are open and hearts are open. We are successful and fulfilled when we all work together, helping out where and when there is a need.

We, too, have fundamental skills we learn and rely on. We practice them until they become part of the rhythm and pattern of our lives as persons within a community of faith. Our personal practices are reading Scripture, prayer, serving others and more.

Today, we’re starting a new, 5-part series on Fruitfulness. We’re going to explore five practices of fruitful congregations and fruitful lives. This material is based on UMC Bishop Robert Schnase’s work. The five practices are Radical Hospitality, Passionate Worship, Intentional Faith, Risk-taking Mission and Service and Extravagant Generosity. The five practices – hospitality, worship, faith, service and generosity, are fundamental skills. When we practice them in our lives, we are changed. And the way we treat others changes. That’s what people notice.

That’s how God’s blessing works. God’s blessing isn’t passive. God’s blessing is active. God’s blessing passes from one person to another. God’s blessing passes from one generation to another and another. God’s blessing passes from us to our family and friends and on. God’s blessing passes from us to our neighbors, co-workers and others in our community. God’s blessing passes from our local church to other

churches across our region, state and country. God’s blessing crosses oceans and passes on to others until it reaches every corner of the world and all of creation.

Paul taught us to “welcome one another just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God” (Romans 15:7).

This is the essence of hospitality. Sounds good, but it’s “churchy.” Bishop Schnase defines hospitality this way: “Christian hospitality refers to the active desire to invite, welcome, receive, and care for those who are strangers so they find a spiritual home and discover for themselves the unending richness of life in Christ.”² That’s better, but it’s still a bit heavy. Here’s a simpler version: *we’re willing to accommodate the needs and receive the gifts of others.* That’s hospitality. So what’s radical hospitality. Radical hospitality isn’t off-the-wall or crazy. Radical hospitality means we care for others, especially those we don’t know, in a passionate, loving, outside-the-comfort-zone way.

Two different scenarios illustrates this.

A young, single mom stands awkwardly in the entryway with her toddler, looking around at all the people she doesn’t know on her first visit to a church. An acquaintance at work casually mentioned how she loved the church and invited her to visit, but now she’s not so sure this was a good idea. She is wondering about child care, self-conscious about the fussiness of her little one, unsure where the bathroom is, too timid to ask for directions, doubting whether this is the right worship service for her, or whether this is even the right church. She isn’t sure where to sit, what it will feel like to sit alone with her child or what to do if her little one makes too much noise. She feels the need for prayer, for some connection to others; and for something to lift her above the daily grind of her job, the unending bills, the conflicts with her ex-husband, and her worries for her child.

Imagine what would happen if we took Jesus seriously. We would look at this woman and see the whole bundle – hope and anxieties, desires and discomforts. And we would think “here is a child of God.”

² Abingdon Press, 2007; p. 11.

Can you imagine how would we respond?

Another person was going through a rough time in their personal and professional life. In their search for connections, hope and direction, they began to visit a few churches. After their first two worship experiences, when they came alone, sat alone and left alone without anyone speaking to them or asking their name, their prayer for here next visit to another church service was simple, “I only pray that someone speaks to me today.”

Could it really happen to visitors in our congregation? Sadly, yes.

Bishop Schnase had that experience himself. He’s gone to a church and starting looking for the office. Sometimes he’ll pass by 40-50 people with no one offering to help him find his way, despite the fact he’s obviously lost and searching for signs. There are churches where greeters, ushers and others don’t look someone in the eye or engage with any personal connection or warmth. As Bishop Sally Dyck reminds us, for the person who is searching for spiritual help, “This Sunday is the only Sunday that counts.”

The truth is each of us has the capacity to be warm and welcoming to others or not. We all know how to be friendly. You don’t need special training. You just have to be yourself. We have within us the ability to be radically hospitable to those for whom church - Christianity - is foreign and strange, even when their values or thoughts about church are different from our own. We also have within us the ability to withhold hospitality in order to protect what we falsely imagine to be “our own” - our own church, our own class, our own seat, our own truth.”³

“Churches that practice hospitality are welcoming on Sunday morning and every day - not only to the people they know, but especially those who are visiting, who are strangers. Experts say 70-80% of people visiting a church for the first time will make up their mind in the first 15 minutes whether they’ll return next week or not.

³ *Opening the Circle*, Melissa Bailey-Kirk, Melissa Bailey-Kirk, UMC of Green Trails Chesterfield, MO

Before they’ve heard the choir or the sermon, they’ve already decided whether to attend again or to try another church.

Wonderful music and great preaching will not overcome a lack of hospitality, a lack of friendliness and warmth. What often happens in the church on Sunday morning isn’t that people are unfriendly. What happens is too many people think hospitality is someone else’s job, to be taken care of by the people with titles, like the ushers, greeters or pastor. And that’s what visitors expect - certain people will welcome them because it’s their job.

People know they’re in a hospitable place when those who aren’t obligated turn, shake hands and greet them. When we invite a visitor or someone we don’t know well to join us for coffee after the service, or lunch or to talk during the week, people know they’re in a hospitable place. I realize this takes some of us out of our comfort zone, but that’s why it’s called Radical Hospitality. If we want to be a vital place that attracts people, that’s the kind of hospitality to embrace. Bishop Schnase writes, “People are searching for churches that make them feel welcomed and loved, needed and accepted.”⁴

The contemporary Christian music group Casting Crowns sings a song “We Are the Body.” It’s one of my favorites. It calls for Radical Hospitality. A young woman tries to slip into a worship service unnoticed, but girls tease her and laugh at her. A traveler sits on the back row and is “greeted” by judgmental glances. Then comes the piercing question of the chorus:

But if we are the Body, why aren’t His arms reaching?

Radical Hospitality means we don’t get to decide who to welcome. The price Jesus paid on the cross was too high for us to be able to pick and choose who is allowed to come, and reminds us we are the body of Christ. Jesus didn’t give us the option of deciding whom we welcome and whom we ignore. Our neighbor isn’t just the nice person who lives next door to us but also the person we are in conflict with, as well as the

⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 31

individual who doesn't even like us. Jesus defined our neighbor in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37).

When I was a new believer, I had the opportunity to travel to Cocabamba, Bolivia on a mission trip. We spent a week in a barrio community on the outskirts of town. Late one Saturday evening, we rode in our cramped van to the El Norte church. We worshiped with the believers there and then stayed for dinner. We ate, but no one in our group realized our hosts weren't eating with us. Perhaps we were so tired from our trip, and from the long day, that our stomachs were having more of an influence on us at that moment than our minds.

The following morning, we were told by our host missionary that the Bolivian Christians of El Norte church, who were quite poor and generally had only one substantial meal a day, went without food that day in order to feed us. In their poverty, they gave us the wealth of Christ-like hospitality. That's radical!

If we are the body - just as our Christian sisters and brothers in Bolivia are the body - we, too, must be willing to practice radical hospitality. When we do, we're like Jesus, caring for others with love.”⁵

I invite you to share our vision for Corona UMC as a place where all are welcome with love. Let's reach out to others with passionate, radical hospitality. Let's welcome them to our home and to the table of the Lord.

Let us pray...

Dear God, you call us to love those we do not know. That's hard. It makes us uncomfortable. Help us overcome our hesitations to invite other into the life of your church. Help us to make hospitality a vital part of the culture of our church. Teach us how to communicate better with people, always conveying the message that we are open to all. Take away our fear of failure and remind us that a great harvest is promised when we gather in your name. As we practice hospitality, help us to be honest, optimistic and hopeful, remembering that all things are possible with Christ. It is in his name that we pray. Amen.

⁵ *Radical Hospitality Imitates Christ*, Allan R. Bevere, First UMC, Cambridge, OH

Isaiah 60:1-6 (CEB)

Arise! Shine! Your light has come; the LORD's glory has shone upon you. Though darkness covers the earth and gloom the nations, the LORD will shine upon you; God's glory will appear over you. Nations will come to your light and kings to your dawning radiance.

Lift up your eyes and look all around: they are all gathered; they have come to you. Your sons will come from far away, and your daughters on caregivers' hips. Then you will see and be radiant; your heart will tremble and open wide, because the sea's abundance will be turned over to you; the nations' wealth will come to you. Countless camels will cover your land, young camels from Midian and Ephah. They will all come from Sheba, carrying gold and incense, proclaiming the LORD's praises.

Romans 12:9-21 (CEB)

Love should be shown without pretending. Hate evil, and hold on to what is good. Love each other like the members of your family. Be the best at showing honor to each other. Don't hesitate to be enthusiastic - be on fire in the Spirit as you serve the Lord! Be happy in your hope, stand your ground when you're in trouble, and devote yourselves to prayer. Contribute to the needs of God's people, and welcome strangers into your home. Bless people who harass you - bless and don't curse them. Be happy with those who are happy, and cry with those who are crying. Consider everyone as equal, and don't think that you're better than anyone else. Instead, associate with people who have no status. Don't think that you're so smart. Don't pay back anyone for their evil actions with evil actions, but show respect for what everyone else believes is good.

If possible, to the best of your ability, live at peace with all people. Don't try to get revenge for yourselves, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath. It is written, *Revenge belongs to me; I will pay it back, says the Lord.* Instead, *If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him a drink. By doing this, you will pile burning coals of fire upon his head.* Don't be defeated by evil, but defeat evil with good.