

Recovering an Evangelical Mandate

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Two years ago the United Church of Christ launched its first national television advertising campaign. First conceived as part of a church-wide identity initiative, the emphasis on advertising moved the initiative from an effort to clarify and make visible the identity of the United Church of Christ in the larger culture, toward an emphasis on reaching out to persons outside of the church with a broad message of inclusive embrace and hospitality. The advertisements, run in two successive years, were deliberately “edgy,” directed not at “church shoppers” in today’s spiritual marketplace, but rather at those who have felt, for a variety of reasons, alienated from church, people who have never been part of a church community, or those who either left the church of their baptism many years ago. The message of the ads was simple: “No matter who you are, or where you are on life’s journey, you’re welcome here.” Accompanying the ads was an intensive training program for local churches in how to welcome those who might respond to the ads and how to reach out into the community rather than simply passively waiting for visitors to come.

The ads created quite a public impression, in large part because the national networks refused to air them, claiming that their message was “controversial.” While the images of welcome and exclusion were broadly represented in the commercials, the clear message that the phrase “all are welcome” included gay and lesbian persons made the networks nervous, particularly in a political environment dominated at the time by the question of same gender marriage. A week of news accounts of the ad’s rejection by the networks provided our church with visibility and our message with a megaphone we could never have purchased!

And people came! They came out of curiosity over a church that would produce these unconventional ads. They came to test whether the extravagant welcome promised in the ads was real. They came, primarily, out of a sense of “spiritual homelessness,” a desire to be part of a community of faith that announces in its identity material, “God is still speaking,” a phrase prompted by a most unconventional theologian, Gracie Allen, who left a note for her husband George at her death, “never place a period where God has placed a comma.” (Gracie was not a member of the United Church of Christ, though she was, at least in the movie, married to God!)

What many of us are beginning to see is that a conversion experience is underway. The conversion is not simply among those who were drawn to a church home

by the commercials and the identity campaign, but perhaps even more significantly among our own members who have begun to reclaim an evangelical mandate after decades of discomfort with evangelism. Indeed, our national evangelism director has suggested that our God is still speaking initiative has “tricked the United Church of Christ into evangelism!”

It's not that we have been indifferent to this Gospel mandate. Throughout our history we have planted new churches and, early in the 19th century, Congregationalist forebears established the American Board for Foreign Mission, the first international mission society in the United States as well as the American Home Mission Society for church extension in the U.S. But, for the most part, at least domestically, evangelism as church planting tended to simply follow the migration patterns of our own members, first as they moved west in the 19th century, and then south and southwest in the 20th century, or as a response to the needs of settlements of ethnic immigrant communities like the German communities in 18th century Pennsylvania or 19th century Missouri. Our tradition has had a strong sense of the Gospel's claim on society, on the challenge of the Gospel to communal and corporate repentance and conversion in relation to great social justice issues. The evangelicalism of the Second Great Awakening that helped to shape our church resulted in numerous mission societies and other cooperative ventures. The emphasis was on curing social ills rather than personal transformation and conversion. Conversion for the individual was primarily seen in terms of sanctification effected by participation in the liturgy and the sacraments, and by the catechesis of Sunday schools and confirmation classes for those already baptized and actively participating in the church.

But this is a new day. The dis-establishment of the church in a post-Christendom environment has become clear. As members of the old Protestant mainline we have been displaced from the center of American religious life. It's more and more clear that the orientation of our ministry cannot simply be to ensure the generational transmission of the faith within our denomination, or to chase our highly mobile members in an increasingly transient society. More positively, our “God is still speaking” campaign, with its identity resources and advertisements, has brought home to us in a compelling way the truth that our communities are not filled with people indifferent or hostile to the faith, but rather with persons seeking a relationship with Christ and a place to belong with the community of Christ's people. The spiritual practice of testimony is beginning to be recovered in our churches. Leaders are being trained for new congregations offering an articulation and experience of the Gospel in our own distinctive accent. It seems that perhaps God has indeed tricked us into evangelism!

Don't expect to see waves of United Church of Christ members unleashed on unsuspecting neighborhoods on Saturday morning with Bible tracts. And don't expect us to relinquish our commitment to a social understanding of the Gospel that lifts up boldly the need for justice as a mark of communal conversion and transformation. But do look for us, by God's grace, to become bolder and more self-assured about sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ with the spiritually homeless among us, and to extending an embrace of extravagant hospitality in our amazingly diverse culture.