

"A WINDOW AND A DOOR: WHOSE CHURCH IS THIS?"

Rev. Don Rollins

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Introduction: From a Distance

Amazing, isn't it, that one can now go to the Internet and use satellite imagery to pinpoint almost any given address, anywhere in the world? Just this week I used a map program to see images of "The Hill" and its surrounding environs: Linden Lake; John and Ingrid Bode's immaculate farm; the parsonage, museum and cemetery; even this sanctuary. Amazing stuff, really.

Better yet, these computer programs allow for distance – from the relatively blurry close-up to the edge-of-the-upper-atmospheric panorama. Simply dial up the ball on a computer mouse, and you can identify (in rough terms) the gazebo; dial back, and you can see Nora Church in the context of a goodly portion of three counties.

In preparation for today's Annual Meeting, I'm asking you to roll the ball backward – to view this stubborn little liberal congregation through the bird's eye view, the one that is the polar opposite of all the history and tradition and individual likes and dislikes. As a segue to the story I want to use as my text, I'm asking you to look at Nora Church, not from inside the doors, but outside the windows. And, as though weren't challenging enough, I'm asking you whose church this really is.

Jacob the Baker: A Window and a Door

This slightly altered story from Noah benShea's book, *Jacob the Baker*.

A man who appeared to be a mason from the crusts of dried cement on his shirt waited patiently one day for a chance to speak with Jacob. The man's voice was gruff – but not his manner.

"Jacob, all my life I have made homes for others. Now I am preparing to build a home for myself. Do you have any suggestions?"

Jacob laughed, "Who is Jacob the baker to mix mortar and make bricks?"

But, then, Jacob raised his left index finger, as if touching an old memory, and waived it in the air, suggesting there was maybe one thought he could offer.

"It says in our books: In order for a house to be a house, it must have a window and a door."

A smile climbed the man's face. "Jacob, this much even I know." Those behind the man chuckled as well.

"But," Jacob continued, as if he did not hear their laughter, "do you know why I think a house must have a window and a door?"

Suddenly, it became very quiet again. Humility held over the crowd. People craned their necks to hear. And Jacob began again. "My house must have a door so I can enter myself, and a window so I can see beyond myself!"

"And if it doesn't?" asked the man.

A great sadness rolled its shadows across Jacob. The words came slowly.

"We must remember," said Jacob, "the only difference between a house and a coffin is a [window]."

Strong story, especially prior to Annual Meeting.

UU Grammar Police Types, get out your pen or Blackberry, because I'm about to inject into this sermon a long, awkward, run-on sentence. I'm guessing in advance that some of you will receive it as "church talk", you know, the kind of stuff that sooner or later ends up in some bone-dry, egg-headed discussion about mission statements or governance models or strategic planning. Let me say right now that I'm no fan of fancy theory that resembles nothing close to the nuts and bolts of real church life, but neither do I hold much regard for organizations that try to steer without a rudder. So, here we go:

A religious community – whatever else it is – is an institution, and an institution is the residual incarnation of the priorities of those who have shaped its past, as interpreted, then adopted, adapted or rejected by those who make up its present.

In straight talk, I'm saying that when it comes to such things as planning and budgeting and organizational health, Nora Church is on par with the local food shelf, homeless shelter or school district:

1. Those who in the past (be it distant or recent) served in leadership positions made value judgments about what was most important and what would be left out.
2. Those who currently serve in leadership (lay and ordained) form their own opinions about those value judgments, and then decide to do one of three things: stick with them; tweak them; or discard them.

A quick example of each:

- Smorgasbord, the longstanding tradition of fundraising and meatball frenzy, continues in much the same way as it has for generations. We've stuck with it.
- Ladies' Aid, the most historically active of all Nora's subgroups, had dwindled in numbers and energy. With the help of both long-timers and some younger women, Ladies' Aid has emerged as Nora Women's Society – renewed and active once again. We tweaked it.
- The Syttendai Mai Dinner, once a staple of our fundraising efforts and *piece of our identity*, was discontinued as of a couple of years ago. Despite the same

good food, service and atmosphere, attendance had been slipping for some time; the income no longer justified the effort. We discarded it.

Show me an institution that has survived for 122 years, and I'll show you an institution that has been confronted with all manner of decisions, some, minor and some, major. Even a cursory read of the history of Nora Church tells us that some of its ancestors' priorities have been kept intact, some have been adapted and some let go. *This is the nature of healthy institutions.* And, thanks mostly to you, Nora Church is a healthy institution.

Back to the story of Jacob the Baker and his mason friend, institutions as old as this one do not survive without prioritizing both their own needs (a door) and those of others (a window). Follow, adapt or reject their inherited traditions, most institutions – especially religious institutions – have both an internal and external focus. Let me repeat an illustration from one of my early services with you. It's the one about how good congregations become great congregations, and friendly congregations becoming hospitable congregations:

Arrange 6 chairs in a circle, with every other chair facing outward. Ask for volunteers of two basic orientations: those for whom community is the primary reason to be at Nora, and those for whom service to others is paramount. "Community" folks sit facing inward, "service" folks, outward. (Explain that both orientations exist in most of us, but that one may be considerably stronger.)

Next, place two chairs at a considerable distance from the circle, but opposite one another. Ask for volunteers to represent those who might be interested in liberal religion, but are yet to find and/or join us.

The point? That, in order to attract, minister to and retain newcomers, hospitality, not familiarity, must be our guide. So says the research. So says our own intuition. So says the heart.

Mission and Discipline

All that is to say this: I believe this church that we love is too much door and not enough window – that some critical mass of us has yet to come to terms with the fact that *modern religious institutions rise or fall according to their willingness to look at everything they do in light of their stated purpose as seen through the eyes of the stranger.* At the risk of oversimplifying things, here's my homegrown, cornpone formula for great, hospitable church: 1. *Clarify the Mission;* and, 2. *Submit to the Discipline.*

Those of you who were here before I arrived four years ago had recently gone through the process of drafting the mission statement we recited earlier in the service. With the cooperation of our elected leaders, I've been advocating this shorthand version of that statement for as long as I've been with you.

*Our job is to promote religious freedom, religious community and religious activism.
We promote these things as our contribution
to the measure of love in the world.*

What's our mission? To live and promote the still radical idea that people must be free and *responsible* in their search for truth. To live and promote the idea that the best way to conduct that holy search is right alongside folks who share that core value. And to be engaged in sharing with others the abundance of our time, energy and resources.

So why are we still here? Because, like the Jansons and the Normans and the Moes and the Bakkens and the Beckens and the Ourens and the Jorgensens we believe in freedom, community and justice. To put it in the words of Arlene Schmiesing, from her prolific 100th Anniversary Booklet, "The mission of this church has always been to teach liberal religion and help educate its members, old and young, lead our lives as good and true men and women, do the best we can and make the most out of this life for the betterment and happiness of ourselves and our fellow men."

Our mission is to promote freedom, community and justice in the service of love.

And what about the "d" word, discipline? I'm talking about what I believe is at once the most difficult, yet most important characteristic of spiritually mature living. Little wonder then, it shows up – without exception –in every study of growing congregations, including our own: the discipline to transcend the self in the service of others. In other words, what appears to separate good congregations from the great ones is the willingness on the part of lay and ordained leaders to lead from the premise that their church is not *their* church: it belongs to people that are yet to step inside the door, people who are seen through the congregation's "window". In these congregations, folks retain all or most of their ancestors' sense of mission, adapt their methods according to the best available practices and let go of what is not central to their reason for being. Bottom line: church life has become as measurable as any other social phenomenon, and all the reliable measurements tell us that growth requires the discipline to look at church from the outside-in, not inside-out.

Clarify the mission. Submit to the discipline.

Straight Talk

If I'm not already in trouble, this last part will surely land me there. Let me start off by saying that I don't know a minister who doesn't want to be liked, or at least respected by her or his congregants. (I know some who work hard to make their folks wonder about that observation, but, trust me, even the hard-shell types aren't mean all the time.) The kicker is that, liberal ministry, especially over the course of the last two decades, has evolved into more administration (leadership development and governance, in particular) and less pastoral care, counseling and social interaction. Fewer house calls, more service to the community. Less hanging out with parishioners, more time spent on organizational matters. Some lay folks understand and appreciate that shift, some don't. But in the world of church studies, tradition cannot shield even the smallest congregations from the reality that ministers are now trained (and retrained) to pay attention to the *institution*, not just the people. So, despite the human impulse to be liked, liberal ministers, perhaps more than ever, must monitor the urge to make their church "their" church.

Here's another random barnyard observation: I'm a recovering control freak. Worse yet, doggone near everybody I know is a recovering control freak. My mamma – both mamas, in my case: control freaks. The President's a control freak. So is the

Governor. Baseball umpires and basketball referees are control freaks. Shoot, *my cat's a control freak!* And, Nora friends, don't think for a minute that we don't bring that stuff with us wherever we go. Even here.

Harkening back to my observation that transcending the self in the service of others is important, but difficult stuff, what I'm trying to say here is that you pay me to keep one foot inside Nora Church and the other outside. As I balance those two, I have the gnawing conviction that the key to the great church I keep talking about is the shift from looking at what we do from inside the door to what we do outside these windows. *To be blunt, it means going deeper into the threatening reality that this is not your church and it's not my church. This church belongs to those who are yet to come.*

What in the heck does that mean? It means that you and I start asking the question, What does this have to do with our mission? followed by the question, Is this the *hospitable* thing to do? It means that you and I begin thinking of growth as a *sacrificial act* – an act of personal and corporate transcendence. It means that our elected leaders and I take even more seriously our responsibility to clarify the mission and submit to the discipline.

Yada, yada, yada. So, what would all this 'selling out to hospitality as our mission' look like? Factoring for my own control issues, here's my best counsel for how to become a truly great congregation:

- Direct the Committee on Ministry, with the support of the Board, to take leadership in the strategic planning we've begun
- Draw on the staff and resources of the Prairie Star District to train the Board, Committee on Ministry and me in emerging leadership styles for small congregations
- Draw on the PSD for help in the key areas of church life: RE (children, youth and adults); membership; care-giving; finance; administration; social justice/service; worship; advertising; and community involvement.
- Continue, but rethink, our New Ulm outreach program, "UU & You"
- Rethink the sanctuary: alternative to the curtains; new furniture (chalice table, flower stands, portable lighting; chairs, stools, etc.); explore seating options before purchasing pew cushions; repaint the walls; install a lockable sound cabinet; air-conditioning; brainstorm energy-efficient options for the windows; install audio-visual equipment; revisit the nursery space.
- Consider a sermon discussion *after* the service, complete with coffee and treats

As if that's not enough to get me tarred and feathered, I've got some other ideas, too, but before you have a coronary, let me say *that there are always – always – things I'm suggesting to you that I don't want to do, either!* I'd much rather that the boat didn't need rocked, but I don't think we can let go of control, you and me, without some intentional, prolonged boat-rocking.

I can't know for sure what it is to have some preacher poke around in what you may consider to be non-negotiable or simply not worthwhile endeavors. Understood. It's not my church, but neither is it yours, not if we're to reach those two people who were on the outside of my little circle example. What I want for them is a community that anticipates most of their spiritual needs and some of their practical wants – where ample funding is available for lifespan religious education, ministerial quality, a comfortable, beautiful and

versatile worship space, small group ministry and justice work. Yes, I envision the occasional Saturday night grunge band in this very space. Yes, I envision modern media resources that allow us to explore new options for worship, community presentations and small group ministry. Yes, all this requires resources, but first it requires us to look from outside the window rather than from inside the door. As one UU minister recently wrote about these kinds of paradigm shifts, this stuff is hard; our lives depend on it.

If this seems like scolding, that's certainly not the goal. Fact is, I've never loved nor felt loved by a congregation so much as this one. I am, at all times, proud to be associated with such people. (As I once joked with a Lutheran colleague, I may be bound for hell but I couldn't ask for better company!)

So, let's review:

- A door is not a window.
- A church is an institution, and ministers are called to look after 'em.
- Mission must be clear, discipline matters.
- Hospitality is good for the soul and great for growing a church.
- Nora is not my church, nor is it your church; it belongs to souls we don't yet know.
- The boat may well need to be rocked a bit.

We've got some difficult stuff to talk about, beginning with today's Annual Meeting. But, we'll figure it out. Keep things in perspective – this country is waging two armed conflicts, children are starving due to natural disasters and civil war, people are losing their jobs. From where I stand, I'll still be one mighty lucky preacher, even if you don't like me much right now.

Remember, I love ya.