

Remembering our First Love

By Leah Hidde-Gregory – February 28, 2020

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“But you walked away from your first love—why?”
Revelation 2:4 (The Message)

Several weeks ago at a gathering of district superintendents, a colleague asked what I thought the biggest issue was facing The United Methodist Church. Without hesitation, I ticked off one issue I did not think was our biggest problem: our dispute over our sexual ethics. Instead, I said I thought our biggest issue is *we have lost our first love*.

Five years before his death, John Wesley wrote a brief essay entitled, “Thoughts upon Methodism.” It opens with a much-quoted, but still very powerful statement:

“I am not afraid that the people called Methodists should ever cease to exist either in Europe or America. But I am afraid lest they should only exist as a dead sect, having the form of religion without the power. And this undoubtedly will be the case unless they hold fast both the doctrine, spirit, and discipline with which they first set out.”

Clearly, Wesley was worried the people called Methodist might lose their first love.

Centuries before Wesley, John the Elder writes in Revelation 2, that the people in the church in Ephesus *were guilty of losing their first love*. The love they had when they first came to believe in Christ and when they had first gathered as a community of faith, that love had grown cold.

Our struggles in the UM Church have led us to this time of possible separation. And I fear, in the midst of the struggles, we traditionalists have lost sight of our mission and purpose. Like a stale marriage, perhaps we too have lost our first love.

A new Methodist movement must find ways to rekindle the fire of that first love. As a district superintendent, who sees herself more as a missional strategist than an administrator, every church I consult with – no matter its size or location – wants to know how to grow and become a vital and faithful witness to Jesus Christ. We are a resurrection people so we at least have the hope that dry bones really can live again.

I believe our local churches are hungry for revival and revitalization. They long for their first love of Christ and community, when they burned with a desire to introduce people to the

transforming grace of Christ's cross. Revitalization can occur in churches of every size and location through the power of the Holy Spirit leading both lay and clergy leadership in seasons of renewal.

The Wesleyan Covenant Association's Church Revitalization Taskforce is dedicated to creating a list of best practices that will help fuel the fire of our first love. The task force will be focused on discerning foundational principles for church revitalization and helping local churches of all sizes build on the principles for effective and fruitful ministry in their communities.

As a member of the cabinet in the Central Texas Annual Conference, I have joined with my colleagues as we have focused on revitalizing our local churches through keeping our mission-centered in Christ, developing clergy and lay leadership, and keeping all that we do focused on the local church's mission field. Over half of the churches from across the conference (smallest to largest) have experienced growth for 24 months in a row.

Within my district, one success story is Mart UM Church in Mart, Texas, a rural community with a population of 2,240. Like many small rural towns, Mart is a community of farmers, teachers, small business owners, *and* intense poverty. In 2016, the attendance at the church was averaging around 60. Their lay leader said they had lost their first love. They had grown stale as a church, doing the same thing over and over again each year without remembering why they were doing it.

But under the leadership of their pastor, Rev. Amy Anderson, they began praying for a vision. For six months the leadership prayed for God to give them a vision for their church and their community. Pastor Anderson came to the final vision meeting with what she believed God had laid on her heart: a fellowship hall full of children. One by one, as the congregation discussed the needs of the community and the vision God had placed on their hearts, they kept coming back to ministry with children. They wanted to minister the love of Christ to them by teaching them to read, helping them to avoid the cycle of drug abuse, and providing them a place where they could feel genuine love, rather than the alienation of afternoons spent on the streets.

So the people at Mart UM Church boldly decided to start an after-school ministry one day a week. They did not want their ministry to just be an after-school babysitting service. For years, the church had been known as having the best vacation Bible school in town, so they ambitiously decided they would offer a VBS style ministry every single week for the children in their community. In their planning, they anticipated they could handle up to 40 children. Pastor Anderson went to the local school and asked if the church could advertise its new ministry by leaving a few applications for the principal to distribute. She was surprised when she returned to pick up the applications and learned 140 children had signed up! Despite the overwhelming numbers, the people at Mart UM Church pulled together to find a way to minister to all the children. Today, twenty-five people – mostly retirees – make the ministry happen two days per week so every child is included in the program.

In the last three years, 104 people within the community have professed their faith in Christ. Worship attendance at Mart UM Church has grown from 60 to 277 per week. Each Sunday, a church that was once older and homogeneous has become a congregation of all ages, and one that reflects the racial and ethnic diversity of its community. Community leaders report the city of Mart is a different place because of Mart UM Church. This is what a revitalized congregation that has rekindled its first love for Christ looks like!

I believe God is waiting for our local churches to turn to Him and recall the fire of their first love for bearing witness to the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

Beyond just best practices and practical application, the WCA's Church Revitalization Task Force will pray and discern how we can remember our first love so that God, through the power of the Holy Spirit, can truly transform our communities and the world.

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