

A Safe Passageway

By Erik Grayson – March 10, 2020

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A woman was walking after dark from her job back to her home. She was traveling on one of the narrow side streets parallel to our church when she was accosted by a man at gunpoint, robbed, and then pistol-whipped. After he left, she quickly sought solace from a friend who lived nearby. Norma comforted her distraught friend, and after she had calmed down a bit, told her in the future to cut through the church yard. There is a gate in the back of the church fence, and you can cross through the wide-open soccer field and through the parking lots to the main road. It's well lit, and it's safe. Norma told her, "The church is a safe passageway."

This incident has stayed with me for the past several years. The church is meant to be present in rough neighborhoods. But we are also meant to be present in other rough situations, such as addiction, hunger, and homelessness. We are to be present in the places where all other hope seems lost, such as among the immigrant, the battered woman, and the sexually broken. The church is meant to be an outpost of safety and hope in the midst of a violent and dark world. The church is called to be a safe passageway.

This deep conviction is what has led me to serve on the Wesleyan Covenant Association's Missional Ministry to the Margins Taskforce. The gospel must always be good news to the least and the lost, to those on the margins. It is not enough for us to simply acknowledge the need to care for the needy. We must actively seek to shine a light in the darkness.

My personal interest in missional ministry to the margins stems from the congregation I serve. I have the honor of pastoring Aldersgate United Methodist Church in North Charleston, South Carolina. We see ourselves as a missional outpost to an impoverished, diverse, and struggling community. We serve through a Food Bank & Clothes Closet, turn our building into an emergency cold weather shelter, and offer housing and hospitality to mission teams from around the country staying in our area. Our goal is to serve not only the physical needs of our guests and neighbors, but to do so in a way that embodies Gospel values and explicitly expresses our salvation hope in the Triune God.

As we have assembled our taskforce it has been a great joy to witness the varied experiences and passions of our team members. Our taskforce includes lay and clergy leaders with ministry experience to the hungry in urban and rural settings, among the sexually broken and abused, for the immigrant and refugee, and those struggling with marginalization due to addiction, homelessness, and those who are variously abled. Our team members bring a

wealth of knowledge from a variety of cultures, ministry contexts, and professional and personal experiences. I am humbled to lead this team.

The goal of our work is to produce a resource that churches across our connection can use to strengthen their own ministry to and with the marginalized. We hope to provide a resource that will include best practices, ways to reposition missional ministry from peripheral to central within a church, and offer examples and models for churches of all sizes. We yearn to assist churches to think and serve more intentionally as we seek to follow Jesus.

A few years ago a man named Stan became a regular at our church food bank. Stan was homeless and lived in our neighborhood. He visited regularly, built relationships with the volunteers, and found a warm community among the members of our church. Then tragedy struck. One evening Stan was crossing an intersection near the church and was struck by two cars in a high-speed police chase. He died instantly. Stan's death sent shockwaves through the homeless community. His death also shook our congregation.

In response to Stan's death, our church decided to hold a memorial service. However, this would prove to be unlike any memorial service I had ever seen. This casual service in our fellowship hall was half church ladies who volunteered at the food bank, and half composed of those who were homeless in our community. The service was organic and conversational. The meal afterward was eclectic. The stories being told were a bit rowdy and awkward. Yet despite the unusual scene of southern grandmothers surrounded by the local homeless community, there was also something deeply right about it all. Through the death of this shared friend the respectable church folk and those who often hide in plain sight were seated at a table together, laughing, crying, and doing church together.

As we seek to be in missional ministry to the margins, the church must remember that it is the death of Jesus that draws us all together, tearing down the dividing walls, and offering his healing and transformative grace to us all. The story of Jesus is our starting point and our constant model for how to engage in this kind of ministry. It is not tangential or optional. Missional ministry to the margins is central to our Christian identity and a crucial aspect of our Wesleyan heritage. And it always leaves us changed.

I am excited for the work of our taskforce and for the ways we will mutually encourage one another in missional ministry. As Methodists, we have a rich tradition of creative ministry to those among the margins combined with the conviction that God can bring about the deep transformation we all so desperately need. It is my prayer that we can faithfully be the church that offers hope and safe passage to all.

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