

Sustained by Love – Go and do!

Matthew 9:35 – 10:15

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Rev. Heike Werder

The Congregational Church of Needham

When I was invited for an interview with this church in the spring of 1999, I am pretty sure that it was mentioned numerous times that CCN is an Outreach church, and that this church gives away a lot of money, about 20% of its income, right off the top. That amounted to around \$ 90,000. I thought that was great because I came from a church who gave its Mission committee about \$ 2,000 a year to give away on behalf of the church but if the committee wanted to give away more money, they had to fundraise for it. I think that is when my church cooking career started by doing endless spaghetti and NE Ham and Beans dinners.

Sure enough, when I got to the church, one of my committee assignments was Outreach which I was charged with to attend. In all honesty, in the beginning that was not fun. You might think it is fun to give away money, but it actually turned out to be the monthly board meeting of the “Congregational Bank of Needham”, dolling out the dough. The spread sheet was enormous, the list of organizations we supported was impressive, and almost anyone who asked for money, got some. But that was it. That was all that Outreach did 17 years ago. Important and responsible work, yes, but there was something missing. There were plenty of groups within the church that did outreach activities, but the committee charged with outreach, just gave away money.

Over the years, that certainly has changed. The committee itself has moved from just being a financial arm of the church to a committee that wants to educate our membership about Outreach and the needs out there, and to help us “Go and Do” outreach in our place and time.

This church has done some amazing work and supported great projects over the years. I know, pride is one of the seven deadly sins, but I am proud of this church. I am proud not only because of its generosity, but I am also proud of us “getting it” – understanding that the church is not just a place for one’s own personal spiritual growth in faith, but that we are here to take our faith, our muscle

power and our resources and share it with our community. Our buildings are also a means of Outreach, open to be used by community groups. I think we know, as a church, that we are blessed by God and by the generosity of its members, and that as a community of faith, we are to pass on these blessings.

I know this is not the time to give you a complete list of all the things that we have done over the years but here are some that stick out: we have helped built a Habitat for Humanity House, given the seed money for a program called “Steps to Success” – a tutoring program helping eligible students to get ready and into college, struck up a partnership with the Walker School here in town, given scholarships to children to attend our preschool and summer camps, supported the Mission trips for our own youth group, and we have given money to food pantries and Needham town organizations to support their work. And then, there is our Guatemala project, probably by now our longest standing outreach program, started by Clark and Kay Taylor in the 80s.

I have asked Brenda and Dave to help me again think about the ways that we are making a difference in the lives of our friends in Santa Maria Tzeja. Our outreach funds for the village supply school supplies and teaching materials, make improvements to buildings, provide small stipends and salaries for a librarian and health promoter, support the work around the village and new initiatives. The Guatemala committee and friends work tirelessly to raise more funds to subsidize teachers’ salaries, to pay for 15 young people to attend High School, and one student to go to university at present.

But listen to what this Outreach program has accomplished over the years: 10 teachers have earned their teaching credentials, over 300 students have graduated from High School, and 18 have graduated from university in such professions as architects, lawyers, engineers, agronomists, journalists, and doctors. This has happened in just one generation where the students’ parents may have had at most a primary school education or none at all. And many of these young professionals are committed to giving back to the community and are taking on leadership roles within the village.

This partnership has left its mark on us as well. The program has created cross-cultural relationships through the exchange of letters between (partner) families, and broadened people’s understanding

and perspectives on social/economic/political justice issues that can impact our growth and faith journey.

For some of those who have gone to village for a visit, it has changed their lives forever, be it Ali Durbin and Amanda Kistler. If you wish to hear more about our partnership and the latest trip to the village, stay after church next week and hear the report. (Thank you Dave Johnson and Brenda Metzler for your input!)

We value outreach deeply, I believe, but we don't do it so we can be proud and feel good about ourselves. As followers of Christ we have been given some very clear instructions of what to do with our faith.

When Jesus came on the scene, he had a plan: to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, and to give sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free - all through his message of God's unconditional love and grace. He did so by teaching and preaching, by feeding the hungry, healing the sick, and by extending a radical welcome. And what he did, he needed his disciples to do as well. That is what our scripture reading this morning is about - Jesus giving instructions of how to go about bringing the good news to the people. Then, as the church formed, the apostles and the early Christian communities were busy with spreading the good news by doing a lot of outreach ministry to relieve hunger and care for the sick, widows and orphans.

Beginning with Jesus, outreach consisted of immediate help and relief - let's call that charity, but then moved toward much more toward transforming lives and offering new relationships, especially the one with God in Christ. The call was in the end to go out and make disciples, to bring the good news in whatever form it was needed.

The church of today is solid on pursuing charity. It has not lost its desire and power to take care of people and their immediate needs which is, in essence, food, shelter, clothes, and health care. But for the most part, many outreach effort stop short of changing and transforming lives for the long run. Most of them fall short of addressing the issues of why this person or family is homeless, or why are they in need of food and clothing, and why they are without adequate health care. This is the point

when outreach/charity needs to move beyond itself and into the realm of justice seeking. Outreach and justice go hand and hand.

Jim Wallis, a progressive conservative and editor in chief of *Sojourner's Magazine*, says in his book *Fair Works* that the greatest heresy of the 20th Century American religion was to make faith a purely personal matter, and that we have done the same with social issues. If a family is having trouble making ends meet, we figure it is their problem only; maybe they should seek financial counseling when there is too much month left at the end of the paycheck, or they could put in a little bit more effort and get themselves a better-paying job, or they can always go to the food pantry.

Wallis wrote, "Many people work hard and full time and yet remain poor. That's a social, and fundamentally moral, issue for the society to face. These are structural problem, which can be remedied only by social and economic policy." Charity will help in the moment of need but will not address structural problems; charity in fact lets them continue, and makes some of us feel good about reaching out and down to help out. Justice work asks the tougher moral questions that can lead to real change.

As a church that values outreach, we wrestle with that tension. The Outreach committee wrestles with that every time we meet. I personally appreciate all the committee's efforts wanting to support programs that have to do with education because a good education, for the most part, can and will change someone's life for the better. They have my vote (although I don't get to vote) when they seek to support organization that do the justice and advocacy work for they often have the right and better resources to do that than we do. Next week, the Rev. June Cooper of City Mission will preach. City Mission, besides doing charitable work, has definitely stepped into the role of being a Christian organization that advocates for justice for those teetering on the edge of society. That does not mean we are off the hook on this one. It would be great if we ourselves find more ways to work on advocacy issues that address the root causes of poverty, homelessness or inequality.

Outreach is about charity and justice, and about something else. It is also about sharing God's good news of love in the process. The theological word for that is evangelism which I know comes with highly negative connotations because of how it has been done in the past and or how is has been high

jacked by more conservative churches and denominations. None of us sees themselves going around and tell everyone we meet that “God loves them.”

We can do evangelism through our ministries that we pursue as a community of faith. Our ministries come with good news for those who need to hear it, news that they are not forgotten, news that they have allies in pursuing a society that is fair and offers everyone a chance to live a good, healthy, and transformative life.

May our desire for justice, love, compassion, and care speak loudly in who we are as a church and what we do as a community of faith. May the ministry of Christ be an inspiration to us and encourage us to go out to feed the hungry, heal the sick, find the lost, and offer them a place where they are welcomed and loved.

In fact, may everything that we do be informed and sustained by God’s love and in the name of Christ.

Amen.

Sources:

Jim Wallis, Faith Works: Lessons from the Life of an Activist Preacher, New York: Random House
2000