

“IN THE HEART OF THE D.S.”

We must get to know them – The Lost Son

North America and our ministry context is part of a “glocal community,”¹ that requires new strategies and a new outlook on mission for effective ministry. As Methodists, if we are to remain true to our prime directive, given the fact that we are hemorrhaging our youths to other faith groups and organizations, it will become mission critical to adjust missional strategy. This challenges us to think of our culture in missional terms says Stetzer and Putman² in their writings on breaking the missional code. We are to identify the secret societal code that, if broken, creates a unique synergy between church and society.

“There is a code to be broken which involves cultural and spiritual barriers that blind people from understanding the gospel.” In their words, “Our task is to find the right way to break through those cultural barriers while addressing the spiritual and theological ones as well.”³ All of this is to be done at our local parish level. **It is through this means that we refocus our missional priorities to include our young adults who are right under our steeples but currently absent from our pews.**

This missive attempt to do just that. It aims to refocus our efforts, as United Methodists, on our young adults who are known to society as ‘millennials.’ This group of young adults is living right under our churches’ steeples; they are without a voice, seemingly disenchanting and disconnected, yet among us. They are our youths, our millennial constituents.

In their writings, Stetzer and Putman⁴ challenges us to “breaks the code within our mission field and find effective ways to reach the people to whom God has sent us. Breaking the code leads to ‘breakthrough!’” Our Christology, ecclesiology and missiology must align⁵ so that equilibrium is reestablished to **our church’s growth and our church’s health. This will obliterate blindness to community, other races and other approaches.** It will lend to a more relevant and effective missional agenda for our churches and our local communities.

As in most ministry setting, we have failed to apply needed resources to break the code that will ignite ministry and specifically reclaim and **stop the hemorrhaging** of our young adults from our worshipping community. Hemorrhaging is defined as an emergency condition in which

¹ Stetzer, E. and Putman, D., “The Emerging Glocal Context,” *Breaking the Missional Code: Your Church Can Become a Missionary in Your Community*. (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2006), 1.

² Ibid., 14.

³ Ibid., 4.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 53-58.

a ruptured blood vessel causes bleeding; it is usually more difficult to treat when it is inside the brain. ***Since the brain affects all our body function and organs, continual hemorrhaging will eventually traumatize and shut down the entire body***; so it is with this loss of millennials among our worshipping community. Our hope is that our people become Incarnational expressions of Christ in our communities;⁶ and win this vanishing segment of our community who are becoming disillusioned and invisible to the church, right before our eyes.

The code that evolves for this analysis is that our young adults between the ages of eighteen to thirty five years are missing from among our worshipping community. They are usually referred to as “the Millennials.” Attendance and participation of this millennial constituency within our church community is relatively non-existent, at best, disconnected. There is a need to ascertain the reason(s) why the millennial constituents within our churches are choosing not to become an integral part of our church community, and what actions will be required to attract them. Our vision must extend beyond the church’s current operational needs and social comforts; it must extend to the multiplication of ourselves. We must stop the massive exodus of our young adults. All living things that will survive must multiply. To lose our millennial is to aid and abet the destruction of ourselves. Maybe our answer is in an analysis of the parable of the lost son:

The Lost Son

“And he said, a certain man had two sons: And the younger of them said to his father, father, give me the portion of goods that falleth to me, and he divided unto them his living. And not many days after the younger son gathered all together, and took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his substance with riotous living... (Luke; 15:11-32)”

Thomas Nelson,⁷ the great biblical commentator will also suggest that the parable of the “Lost Son” reinforces a basic priority of Jesus’ ministry and message that we must emulate as we endeavor to reconnect the millennials to our beloved worshipping community. The notion of exercising patience, pliability and understanding for a dissenting voice is telecasted through the narrative of this parable. The absence of young adults - millennials that we are experiencing might be evidence of a “dissenting voice.”

The parable of the Lost Son⁸ provides a great segue as we attempt to understand the reason why millennial are choosing not to become an integral part of the beloved community. It might even suggest what it takes to attract them back into the believing community.

The parable amplifies the malady of a generational divide and the ensuing sociopolitical and economic pressures that fractured a family and tested the fiber of their relationship and their love for each other. It also attests to the power of mercy and love folded in a redemption story, even when the more rebellious of two youths appeared undeserving.

Jesus delved into the mind of a young man. By today’s standard, that young man will be considered a millennial. He was the younger of two brothers. His personal priority seemingly was materialistic; he was driven by a selfish sense of entitlement which was supported by an indulgent father. An obvious flaw in this young man’s personality is that he was conceited, cavalier, opinionated and self-determined; he rebelled against the rule of law, the ideals of family and society. Gathering all that he had, he moved to the fringes of society to explore and shape his own destiny. As with any journey that has its genesis in relativity, flawed ideals and distorted philosophical premises, the vicissitudes of life disrupted that journey and brought it to an abrupt end. Jesus’ proclamation that “when he came to himself,” can be inferred as an emotional and mental experience that catapulted the lost son to a different level of maturity. It was at that point that he sought reconciliation through repentance.

⁶ Stetzer, E. and Putman, D., *Breaking the Missional Code: Your Church Can Become a Missionary in Your Community*. (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2006), 5.

⁷ Thomas Nelson, Inc., *New Kings Study Bible, Second Edition*, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publisher, 1985).

⁸ (Luke; 15:11-32, [Kings James Version])

The most important part of this story is that the son who got lost willfully could be redeemed. The imagery of a compassionate father models the attitude and posture that must be assumed in reconciling those persons who are different or sitting on the fringes. As with the father, our attitude should reflect undying hope. It must be one where we are expectantly waiting with open arms and love. Our message of reconciliation is vested in the initial contact of forgiveness and our continual action of love and acceptance.

These gestures of goodwill open the dialogue. It is proof positive that the father was thinking of the son and is ready to engage a **nonjudgmental discourse**. The parable ends with the thought: "But it was to make merry, to revel and feast and rejoice, for this brother of yours was dead and is alive again! He was lost but now is found!"⁹ It takes maturity, selflessness and a Christian heart to echo these sentiment especially when you have been the victim as this father was. The Maxwell Leadership Bible¹⁰ emphasizes that Jesus prioritized the need to seek and save all that were lost or estranged. This was most important to our Lord. What about us?

Jesus told "memorable stories illustrating his priorities. He repeated these three account, as I have share with you. It all underscored these priorities; he spoke of familiar people and situations." This was designed to reinforce his message of seeking and saving the lost.¹¹ As with the sheep, this commitment must extend to the reuniting of our young people – our millennials within the worshipping community. It is mission critical to the viability of the beloved community.

The success of the prodigal son's reconnection to his family was predicated on the father knowing the values and love that he had imparted to his son. It was also annexed to the hope that the power of these values will one day return him to his home and the acceptance and celebration of a forgiving and beloved community.

Are we modeling the same? Is there a quest for love, forgiveness, reconciliation for the least and even the worst of us? A change of attitude, the ability to listen, to give others "voice" and to leave a channel open for dialogue assured the full redemption of a son. Could the same formula bring our young adults - millennials back to a "United Methodist Church?"

***From my Heart to your Heart -
Getting to know your D.S. through these written narratives!***