



Missional Church: Casting the Nets Wide

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June 10, 2018

There was an article a couple of years ago in the Capital Journal online news feed from Topeka, Kansas: The historic Central Congregational United Church of Christ where the Rev. Charles Monroe Sheldon of “What would Jesus do?” fame, was up for sale for \$425,000.

The article stated that: “The Coldwell Banker Griffith & Blair realty website said the church was built in 1900. In addition to its Sanctuary, it has space for Sunday school classes, offices and a chapel building, which is attached to the south side of the main building. The church has served the central Topeka area for nearly 130 years.

Its enduring legacy came from Sheldon, who in 1896 penned the Christian novel, “In His Steps,” which became an international best-seller and made the Topeka pastor one of the most famous preachers of his day. The book posed the question, “What would Jesus do?” And applied the teachings of Christ to issues of the late 1800s.

The Rev. Joshua Longbottom, the church’s pastor at the time said the sale was brought about by the high cost of keeping the large building open.”
[posted: April 7, 2016 by Phil Anderson phil.anderson@cjonline.com]

Well friends, this is a striking event especially when everything appeared to be okay in the life of the Central Congregation Church. What is more amazing is what the pastor said about the building. “Basically, we can’t afford it,” Longbottom said. “We’re trying to maximize our money and use it for missions and ministry instead of overhead.”

I believe that the congregation discerned for some time on what direction in ministry and mission they would cast their nets. They’ve made a course correction in what is important to where God is calling His church to be in the world; in other words, to be on God’s mission to engage the world and community around them and also for us.

Well the story of Jesus on the shore of the Sea of Galilee is the third appearance of the Lord to the disciples. He is the first to ask them to cast their nets wide and in a different direction.

Of course, the minds of the disciples were most likely centered on the events of recent days with the appearance of the risen Lord. Their hearts were probably heavy as they fell back into the way life was before the Lord. Simon

Peter decided to go fishing and the others went along in the fishing boat too. It turns out that they were unlucky in catching fish during the night.

In the morning, Jesus **“Stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. ⁵Jesus said to them, “Children, you have no fish, have you?” They answered him, “No.” ⁶He said to them, “Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some.”** With those words, they cast the net to the right side of the boat and struggled with a full net. When they recognized the risen Lord, Simon Peter jumped into the sea and swam to shore while the other disciples brought the boat. The Lord had a fire going and they ate fish together for breakfast. Still, some of them wanted the Lord to show them something else to confirm that it was he. So he took bread and gave them fish as well.

Ultimately, Jesus is calling his disciples, calling each one of us, to cast their nets and our nets on the right side of the boat and yes, even to make a course change in the midst of loss, transition and uncertainty. Everyone must make a course correction in life and faith.

Friends, over the past 12 months, the congregation has been through a whole church or whole system review lead by the Journey Ahead Group better known as JAG. This process has been enlightening for many and scary for others. All those who participated shared praises and concerns, and joys and issues so they could be heard. To share what’s on their hearts and minds. Those who shared are those who want to be part of the solution.

The Journey Ahead Group report which the Session has received, is taking action on and which is now in your hands is a pivoting moment in this congregation’s life. This is a time to shift our thinking from going to church to affirming that “I am the church”. What this means is that we move the church and the body of the faithful from just being fed and seen as a “dispenser of religious goods and services” where many churches are at today.

The paradigm shift is to a place where the church becomes a “Body of people” who learn to self-feed their faith and willingly share and actively live their faith in Jesus Christ in the community every day. We are an example of Christ in this world. This is a place where clergy work along side people with teaching and loving hearts to equip members for the work in God’s Kingdom today. No, I am not advocating for the clergy to step aside but to be teachers of the faith with you.

One Executive Presbyter asked me “Are you prepared to work yourself out of a job?” I wasn’t sure what he was talking about. But the more he said some things the more I realized that he was asking me to educate and to equip the people for ministry so that they do the ministry of Jesus Christ and not just the pastor. Since that time, I now understand what it means to be a church that is actively involved in the ministry of Christ. Not only in a building. But in the community and the world around us.

Yes, you and I must become what God has called us to become in this place. An article on the Missional Church says this, “The church must explain and display the Kingdom of heaven today, now, here. Yet it must do so as a “Pilgrim people.” In other words, the church, like its Savior, must “embody,” “enflesh,” “incarnate” the Good News that God’s redemptive reign of peace,

justice, and healing now extends to all the world through his Spirit and his body, the Church.” (<https://www.9marks.org/article/what-world-missional-church/> Jonathan leeman blog.)

So each of us is being called to truly live our faith in the community in which we live and actively emulate Christ. You know that it is hard in today’s society. Christians are now being looked down upon. People leave the church for a variety of reasons. Some of those people I have visited with throughout my ministry always say, “The reason I don’t go to that church anymore is that people are not living out what Christ is doing as a reconciling Lord. There is too much conflict in the church and I don’t want to be part of it.”

We are moving away from the practice of just “going to church” to becoming followers of Christ to become “the church”. Yes, we come to church one hour a week and then we go home. But friends how do we live out our faith the rest of this day and the rest of the week? How are we the church? Yes, this might be frightening and full of uncertain feelings and thoughts. However, this is the time for us to cast the nets on the other side of the boat. Or as the passage entails, cast the nets in other places than the same old places.

Friends, as we recognize the past, this congregation is now at a pivot point in its life cycle where the casting of the nets is called upon to be wider than they are today. With the Session taking the action to “Strive to become a Missional Church,” we must embrace what the Lord is calling us to do today as faithful disciples. This is a challenge for each of us as we are in good company as we serve the risen Lord.

Now, the invitation of Jesus in John chapter 21 verses 15 thru 19 asks the followers to lead and follow him. ¹⁵.... **Jesus said to Simon peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my lambs.”** ¹⁶A second time he said to him, **“Simon son of John, do you love me?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Tend my sheep.”** ¹⁷He said to him the third time, **“Simon son of John, do you love me?” Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, “Do you love me?” And he said to him, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep.** The Lord said all this to him and all this disciples today ¹⁹**“Follow me.”**

The leadership of this congregation – Ruling Elders, Deacons and Pastors have taken vows to lead and care for the people, to care for you. Our response to Jesus to feed the sheep and tend the lambs means we have to care for others. We love and we love and hope. Servant leadership is to serve others and we must emulate the love and care of the Lord. Something we do every day and not just on Sunday morning.

One of the ways in which the nets can continue to be cast wide is through one’s commitment to learn more about Christ and what is being asking of us today. It is important for each of us to evaluate how this congregation can continue a viable ministry and sustainable mission for Christ in this community. Whether this church continues is up to each one of you here. Yes, the pastors are going to do their part. It is our responsibility to usher in the Living God’s Kingdom here on earth.

Indeed, we all have a commitment to the witness of Christ in the community through our lives. Yes, a building may help the effort. However, we must pursue and fulfill our major task as Christians and as a church. This is our commission to fulfill. We can only move forward in our faith journeys to become disciples for Christ.

So let us cast our nets wide to redirect our attention to advancing a Missional Church life which is much different than a Consumer Church concept. A Missional Church is “A body of people sent on a mission who gather in community for worship, community engagement and teaching from the word in addition to what they are self-feeding themselves throughout the week.” In other words, we become the church. We are the church. We are in the world and not afraid to be out there to share the Good News of Jesus Christ. If we fail to live up to what Jesus is asking us to do; no wonder so many people see the church as irrelevant in today’s world. We have to make Jesus very relevant by how we act, by how we love, by how we communicate and how we invite people to Jesus.

So my dear sisters and brothers, the risen Lord calls each of us to cast the nets wide so his ministry, his mission and his church will draw people to him. Those disciples pulled that full net of fish. A good example of fishers of men and women. We too can do that in the world.

May it be so for us as we listen to what the lord asks us to do by casting our nets into the world as we actively live our faith with love, justice, peace and hope. And most of all, with graciousness.

I am the church. You are the church. We are the church together. Amen.

Scriptural Support:

John 21:1-19 (NRSV)

¹After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way. ²Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. ³Simon Peter said to them, “I am going fishing.” They said to him, “We will go with you.” They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing. ⁴Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. ⁵Jesus said to them, **“Children, you have no fish, have you?”** They answered him, “No.” ⁶He said to them, **“Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some.”** So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish. ⁷That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, “It is the Lord!” When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the sea. ⁸But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off. ⁹When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. ¹⁰Jesus said to them, **“Bring some of the fish that you have just caught.”** ¹¹So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not

torn. ¹²Jesus said to them, “Come and have breakfast.” Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, “Who are you?” because they knew it was the Lord. ¹³Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. ¹⁴This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

¹⁵When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my lambs.” ¹⁶A second time he said to him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Tend my sheep.” ¹⁷He said to him the third time, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, “Do you love me?” And he said to him, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep. ¹⁸Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.” ¹⁹(He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, “Follow me.”

