Mike Mather

Learning To Love What Is Plentiful

This could be our revolution: to love what is plentiful as much as what's scarce." These words from Alice Walker's poem "We Alone" are written on the hearts of every small membership congregation. Or should be.

Small urban congregations often beat themselves up over what is scarce. "We don't have as many members as we used to," we say. Or, "We don't have as much money as we need to do anything." Too often our annual conferences and denominational leaders say the same thing to us—wringing their hands over declining membership, rather than looking at what is in our hands.

In John 10:10, Jesus promises us abundant life. And that is true wherever we are. It is a promise that we are called to have the eyes to see and the ears to hear of its presence around us. The realm of God *is* near!

What is plentiful in our parish is spirit, love, forgiveness, creativity, imagination and hope. We don't bemoan the fact that our membership is "only" 107. We continually seek ways to celebrate the gifts that we have in our midst. We are beloved children of God who believe that we have something to offer to one another and to the community at large.

In October of 1992 a little boy named Columbus Coleman was shot and killed while playing in his grandmother's front yard a block and a half from our church. The next night a community meeting was held in the sanctuary. The church was packed as we shared our grief and anger and hope that night.

Aaron's Gifts

At the end of the meeting, the parents of a 12-year-old young man who lived near the church stopped to talk with me. They were already concerned about how their son would spend the next summer vacation from school.

Could the church find some positive work for their son to do in the community?

We talked with the Mission Committee of the church about it and decided that we would try to find a way for Aaron (the young man) to share his gifts in the community. We found a college student to work with Aaron. His name was Joe and we gave him a one sentence job description. He was to "pull out the talents of Aaron for the benefit of the larger community."

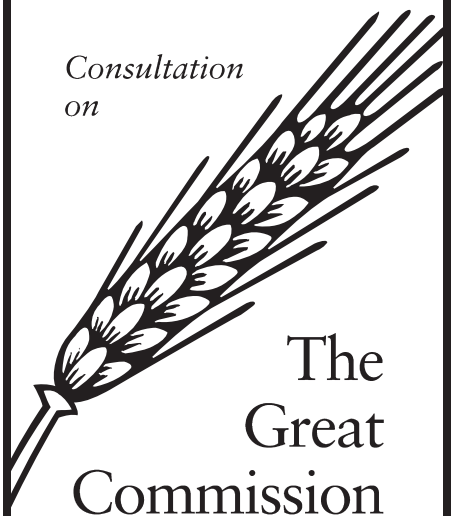
We got a little money from some individuals in the church and some money from the North Indiana Annual Conference and the summer began. As Aaron walked Joe through the neighborhood, showing him around, they found themselves being followed by lots of children. They decided to do a neighborhood clean up. Among other things they swept up 147 pounds of broken glass.

Aaron also held an art class for the children who had been part of the clean up. They drew pictures of their community. They looked at the pictures they were drawing and then at the pile of glass they had and they decided to make a mosaic. Over 8 weeks that summer, they divided those 50 children into 2 groups and they created a mosaic on a piece of plywood, eight feet by four feet.

This mosaic tells a story of our neighborhood. It's a very different story from the one the media had been telling. The mosaic shows a boat on the St.Joseph River, a car, a house, the sun, flowers, trees, birds, the United Methodist flame, our church, and people singing in the Gospel Fest that was held in a neighborhood park that summer.

The mosaic, made out of what other people consider garbage, is a reminder to us that where the world sees poverty, we are to cry abundance. Where other people look to catalog needs, we look to make sure we don't miss the gifts around us.

Consultation on



The Great Commission

April 3–6, 2002

A gathering to think afresh about mission and evangelism

Sponsored by

Candler School of Theology

United Methodist General Board of Global Ministries

United Methodist General Board of Discipleship

World Methodist Evangelism Institute

Mission Resource Center

Foundation for Evangelism

For information, call 404.727.6352 or e-mail candleralum@emory.edu.

CANDLER SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY | EMORY

Spiritual, Cultural, and Economic Development

Our mission revolves around three needs: spiritual development, cultural development and economic development. Our worship life is the center of our spiritual development as we find ourselves formed and reformed each Sunday and throughout the Christian year. Covenant discipleship groups encourage an active prayer and mission life in our congregation.

In cultural development, we attempt to find ways to invest in the talents of people who live around us. When people come to our food pantry, we ask them what they do well enough that they can teach someone else how to do it. Then we invite people to teach in something we have called "The School of the Spirit." In the School of the Spirit, you can teach anything you want as long as you get three people to show up for the class. We have held classes in Mexican cooking, guitar and banjo playing, basic auto repair, Bible study, quilt making, and painting/sketching. A group of people in our parish started a group called "Pictures of Hope." They built a dark room in our church building (with volunteer labor and a grant from the city) and had a month-long exhibition of their work at the Regional Museum of Art.

In economic development, we got a small ($1,000) grant from a local utility company to lend to people who want to start micro-businesses. This has given us the chance, for example, to invest in a woman who wanted to borrow $50 to start a small flower-selling business. She had been working as a prostitute in the area around our church.

These are all things we can do because they don't cost much money. They are not the large scale projects that much larger places can do. But they build on our strengths. We can know the people we deal with—neighbors, parishioners, and even strangers. We can know people by name. In a larger congregation, such small opportunities might be missed.

What is plentiful in our parish is spirit, love, forgiveness, creativity, imagination and hope.

At the heart of what we are doing is the notion that God doesn't call us to do it all. We trust that if we can discern what God is calling us to do, that not only will it be enough, but it will be more than enough. ❑

Mike Mather is pastor of Broadway Christian Parish UMC in South Bend, Indiana. He has been pastor of Broadway for almost 10 years.