

1Friday Teaching Session, NEMA Diocesan Council, 2025
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About three weeks ago, I received a text from our Bishop asking me if I would make a presentation about the history of some of the things we have been doing at St. Matthew's. Being the obedient servant I am, I said I'd be delighted. And I am. Because I have been anxious to share some of this with all of you. I know some of you have heard some of it. I hope you will all find something of value here.

I was called to be the pastor of St. Matthew's Church in the fall of 1982. I have now been there for 43 years. I believe I may now be the longest serving pastor of any one parish in the history of the REC.

During my tenure at St. Matthew's I have served on almost every board and committee in our Diocese and National Church. I have four times been Archdeacon of our Diocese. I've been Provost and Dean of our Seminary, and have served under five Bishops. Throughout my tenure, one of the questions that has been raised over and over again, on a local, diocesan and national level is: what can we do to grow the Reformed Episcopal Church? It is not an easy question to answer.

Recently Bishop Sutton has encouraged us to do what he calls "front porch ministries". I believe there is value there, but I hope to speak to something that must undergird that work.

We start by asking, why do some churches grow and others not? Why does a program that works in one location not work in another? There are a great many factors that enter into the answer. Sometimes it's location. A church may grow because it is the only church in a growing community. Sometimes it is because of dynamic leadership. Churches may grow because of wealth and a diversity of programs. I remember speaking to someone who was looking for a church with a gym and basketball courts. To my mind he was asking the wrong questions, but he settled on just such a church. Unfortunately it did not have solid Biblical teaching.

The Apostle Paul tells us,

[2Ti 4:3](#) *For there will be a time when they will not put up with sound teaching,*

but in accordance with their own desires, they will accumulate teachers for themselves to have their ears tickled,

It is sad to say there is a lot of ear tickling going on in the modern church.

When I look at little St. Matthew's. I see a sanctuary that seats about 55 comfortably. We are certainly not the only church in the neighborhood. In fact, our community is over-churched. There are at least 9 churches within about a mile of us. The neighborhood being 99.9% developed is certainly not bursting with people looking for a church. I cannot say I was a dynamic or charismatic leader. And wealth was certainly not our strong point. I inherited a building in disrepair and a bank account that caused my treasurer to give me a pay check I could not cash. More on that later.

To complicate matters, I had parishioners who didn't like the liturgy. One in particular used to slam the prayer book closed and throw it down in the pew in the middle of the service. She despised the way we worshiped. I actually had to ask her to leave. When she did, the whole congregation breathed a sigh of relief. A couple of years later I was asked to visit her in the hospital. She said, "you are going to find this ironic, but two nights ago, when I thought I was dying, the only thing that came to me and comforted me were prayers and responses from the Book of Common Prayer." So, we made it a priority to teach the value of our Common Prayer tradition. We still do that. We had to, because early on the people in the church were driving visitors away by apologizing for the way we worshipped. Today, I think everyone in the parish loves the liturgy. Visitors get that.

So how do we get them to come?

Well, back to the beginning.

When I first started, I met with the Bishop every Tuesday morning for prayer. One morning he told me he did not think the REC would survive to see the turn of the century. That was not what I wanted to hear.

From the General Council down to the parish, we had what I believed was all the right stuff. Biblical fidelity, a beautiful liturgy, good preaching.

The list goes on. I wasn't raised in the REC, I joined because I loved what I found here. So, why was my church and so many others on the brink of closing? Why did my Bishop at the time have no hope for the future?

I decided to focus on the positives. So we tried a lot of things. Hard work certainly played a role. I believed in that, still do. We repaired the building to make it more appealing. Much of the work was done with our own hands. We visited each house in the community. On one occasion, we distributed over 500 New Testaments on another, the same number of videos describing our church. Not a single person came as a result. We started a daycare center and that helped turn our liabilities into an asset. Money stopped going out of the church budget to pay for things like utilities and lawn care. People in the neighborhood started to know about the church. Still the church was not growing as it should. And then of course we tried every outreach program on the map. There was Evangelism Explosion. Some of you remember that. It worked at Coral Ridge in Florida. So why not try it here. We and many others did. It actually worked for very few churches, as evidenced by the fact that it is unheard of today. When I cleaned out the Seminary library for our move in 1996 we culled more than fifty copies of the book. That is part of what told me that many others had tried it and it didn't work for them. Otherwise they would not have given the book away. It was a solid program, so why didn't it work in other places. Well, coincidentally, Coral Ridge had two of the factors that promote church growth, a growing community and a dynamic leader.

Then there was Christianity Explored and Alpha. Good stuff there too. It worked for some but not others. There was a telephone calling campaign. Again, a good idea in principle, but still something was lacking. Visitors were rare. Lay evangelism even more so. Something was lacking. Frankly, though we did attract a few people through our day care ministry, I was at a loss for what to do. We just continued on year after year trying one thing after another.

Then a few years ago, I recalled reading an old church history book and one of the author's observations came glaringly to mind. He'd said "the revival started in a prayer meeting." It dawned upon me, that as good as my theology had been, as faithful as I'd tried to be to Scripture and as hard as I'd worked, one important component was critically lacking. That component was prayer and an absolute dependence upon the Lord. Yes, we were a people of prayer. We had a wonderful and beautiful liturgy. But I think sometimes we just went through the

motions.

Psalm 127:1 came to mind. *Unless the LORD builds the house, They labor in vain who build it. Unless the LORD guards the city, the watchman stays awake in vain.*

For more than thirty five years, I believed I understood and was operating under the rubric of that verse. Still year after year we'd adopted one program after another. Don't get me wrong, we did make progress, some might even say for a little church there were times when we thrived, but it seemed we'd take two steps forward and one backward.

And things are worse now. I've now come to believe that church growth and church life takes place in a hostile environment. Scripture tells us our adversary the devil roams the earth seeking whom he may devour. He doesn't want to devour his own. So, who then? The society of the 1950s that looked upon Church membership favorably, now tends to be quietly if not overtly hostile.

So, our dependence upon the Lord must be absolute and resolute. We must be David standing in a field, facing a giant with 5 small stones. Yes, we must swing that sling, we must do the work, but to think we can bring down the giant by the strength of our Labor is a big mistake and no matter how loudly we declare the Lord is my strength, unless we embrace the absurdity of slinging rocks at a giant. We miss the point. Nehemiah piled rocks with a spear in one hand, but it was God who built that wall in the presence of His enemies.

This is where the second half of Psalm 127:1 comes in. *Unless the LORD guards the city, the watchman stays awake in vain.*

Christian, get the image. You are the watchman on the wall. You can yell danger until your lungs burst, but unless the Lord is your might and protection the enemy will overwhelm you.

Looking at it from a slightly different perspective, our Lord Jesus put it this way in Mark 3:27 *"No one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man. And then he will plunder his house."* Mark 3:27 (nkjv)

Satan is the strong man, the world around us, his goods. Jesus is the one who binds him. In other words, unless Jesus Christ drives our efforts to grow the church we are destined to fail. You see, we cannot bind the strong man. Only Christ can do that.

Let's make no mistake about it. We are not trying to bring basically neutral people into a positive relationship to God. We are called to go into battle against an overwhelming and hostile force armed with a few small stones. We don't have what it takes. But God does.

Saul's army stood paralyzed by fear of a giant. But a boy armed with a sling and 5 small stones carried the day because he understood the power was not his. He believed the Lord was on his side.

We must see ourselves as that young man.

I believe we are closer as a society to the first century than we are to the mid twentieth. Remember the first century society was pagan and overwhelmed by evil. The first century church was persecuted. And early Christians did not have the tools we have. Still they turned the world upside down. The Emperor Constantine did not change the world, God did through the lives of changed people. While 21st century persecution of the Church in America is not overt yet, it is nevertheless covertly taking place. And evil surrounds us in our society.

In 1943 when St. Matthew's was first built, the township required a community center of some kind be built in the then new development. The developer decided to build a church building and the township was happy with that. Today, we could not build a church where it now stands.

We live in a society that is covertly becoming more and more anti Christian. Listen to the values some of our politician are espousing. Charlie Kirk was not just assassinated for his political views. He was effectively espousing Christianity and Christian values and the secular world did not like it.

We need more than a few rallies, we need the power and protection that can only come from the Lord.

Unless the LORD guards the city, the watchman stays awake in vain.

Which brings us back to the first part of Psalm 127:1 *Unless the LORD builds the house, They labor in vain who build it.*

Much of 20th and 21st century church growth and evangelism misses the point. The so called experts and mega church movement see themselves as the builders and the architects. They try to build churches using modern technology and elaborate techniques. A number of years ago, Rick Warren wrote a book called the Purpose Drive Church. He was celebrating the growth of Saddleback Community Church. He described how he'd done a survey of 3000 homes in the community. He went door to door asking people what they wanted in a church. In essence he conducted a secular consumer survey for church planting. At one point he described an encounter with his real estate agent. He asked the man if he had a church home. The agent responded he did not. To which Rick stated, "good, you're my first member." To the best of my knowledge, he never said if the man came or continued to come. The amazing thing to me is that I could find little mention of faith in Christ. The result of the survey was that he asked 3000 people what they wanted in a church and gave it to them. While it did not come out in the book, it did in his seminars. They would hear the same music on Sunday morning as they did going to work on Monday. There would be little mention of sin and nothing confrontational said from the pulpit. In essence he asked 3000 unchurched people what they wanted in a church and gave it to them. Sunday morning at Saddle Back was very entertaining. Twenty some years later he wrote another book called The Purpose Driven Life. Why, because after leading the purpose driven church for twenty some years, I think he realized the people didn't get the purpose. I can't find the direct quote, but I heard him in an interview where he was decrying that the people in the church he built were unwilling to support missions.

Rick Warren asked 3000 unchurched people what they wanted in a church and got an answer because most of the people he asked had previously been churched. Today the answer to that question would be, "We don't want one," Because those being asked have been unchurched from birth. I don't know how many thousand read the book or attended his seminars. I do know that few found any success in them.

Nevertheless some of the practices have continued. Some still believe

the key to church growth is multi media and big screens. Some believe the key is in what they call worship teams and modern music. Others look for success in elaborate programs or sports centers. I know of a very large church property that contains a grocery store, several athletic fields and a bowling alley. Its members hardly have to leave the confines of the property, and there is an eight foot wall surrounding it.

The first century church had none of that. Still they turned the world upside down by the way they lived.

I remember a study done by one of the major mega churches. They concluded that after 20 years of being a mega, seeker sensitive church they had failed to make disciples for Jesus Christ.

Their solution: They needed to find another “new” way to reach people. They failed to realize that the right way is the old way. The right way is the way in which God is the architect and general contractor and we are but the laborers, in our churches, in our homes and in the workplace.

We must be reminded that it is the Spirit of God who changes lives. It is the Spirit who must draw people to our churches. Yes, we play a role. We must labor. We must live 24 hours a day for Jesus. We must preach the gospel. Remember God has chosen to use the foolishness of preaching to reach the lost. As Peter said, always being ready to make defense for the hope that is in us. It means living in such a way that the world around us sees the joy that is ours in Christ, and wants what we have. It means making our churches open and welcoming places, while at the same time standing up for the truth as it is in Jesus. And truth is critical. This is one of the values of our form of worship that we must communicate. For the liturgy we use communicates the objective truth of God. Most of the modern language liturgies fail dismally there. Most all fall over into subjectivity. And the truth cannot be subjective. There is no such thing as your truth and my truth. There is only one truth and His name is Jesus. And who He is, is set forth in Scripture and we cannot change that. So you may think the most important thing is what you feel about Jesus, but it is not. The most important thing is what He thinks about you. That is what comes through to us through our Liturgy and worship. And when we do it right it touches something people crave today.

And It means work.

I mentioned that when I first started at St. Matthew's the building was in disrepair. The paint on the front door was peeling. The sign out front could barely be seen. The sidewalk was in disrepair and there was little if any parking. The inside of the building was little different. Downstairs there were holes in the walls and throughout it was dirty. I remember being accused of painting one of the classrooms without authorization. I hadn't. I had simply cleaned the vinyl wallpaper.

Then I visited three of the other parishes in Philadelphia. One had broken windows in the sanctuary. One was surrounded by an eight foot high cyclone fence with barbed wire at the top. Across the street was a play ground where hundreds of children play on a regular basis. I asked people in the neighborhood, "what goes on in there?" They answered, "we don't have a clue." The third had a tree stump with a broken electrical wire hanging off of it. Little wonder we weren't getting many visitors. We looked like nobody was home.

So we made up our minds to change that. I believe St. Matthew's exterior now invites people to visit us. When they come in in the winter the building is warm. In the summer it is cool. More importantly, the people in the pews make them feel welcome. If they are unfamiliar with the liturgy someone might sit with them. After the service we make it a point to ask about them. Only when they ask do we tell them about us. The attitude of the people touches the loneliness we heard about yesterday.

Inside we repaired the walls and made the building attractive and clean. People want to be there. But it was and still is work.

Personally I make it a point to interact with unchurched people. You can't reach people with the gospel if you don't interact with them. I like to play golf and go fishing. I intentionally don't play golf with other Christians on a regular basis. One of the men I played golf with had a stroke and is no longer able to play, but as a result of our interactions, he now zooms in on Sunday morning. Another that I go fishing with now comes to church. You cannot reach the lost unless you interact with them. I remember playing golf with someone who said to me, "I have never met anyone like you before, you don't get mad. Why?" That opened the door to a conversation about Christ and how he

changes us that lasted for an hour. I never saw him again, but I hope he went away changed. My point is that living the Christian life made him ask the question.

Interacting with unchurched people is work. Still, I have to ask you, how many unchurched people do you interact with on a regular basis? And when you do, does your Christianity show?

Which brings us to what I believe is the most important component of that work. The labor of prayer.

I don't mean occasionally remembering the church in our prayers. I don't mean just on Sunday morning. I mean laboring in prayer for the growth of His church. Morning, noon and night. We must pray for God to build our churches.

If the growth of our Church isn't important enough for us to constantly be before the Lord in prayer, I believe God will take His blessing somewhere else.

In Matthew 7:7 we read, *7 Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: 8 For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened.* Matt 7:7-8 (KJV)

The original carries the sense of constant asking and consistent seeking. You don't ask once, you keep asking and asking, and asking again. You don't just knock once. You knock until the door is opened.

If the image of the wicked Judge of Luke 18 who answered the widow who hounded him day and night teaches us anything, it is that we must be constant in prayer.

If as James tells us the effectual fervent prayer of the righteous avails much, then I have to ask, how fervent are we in our prayers for the growth and health of our churches?

I mentioned earlier that Nehemiah rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem with a

spear in one hand and the stones in the other. What I did not mention is how often he fasted and prayed for God's blessing.

Before the start of the pandemic, I started to pray a special prayer. I've since charged my assistants and lay readers to do the same. Not just once a week, or once a day, but several times a day. I've asked the people to join us in that prayer. It has become such an important part of my life that I find it on my lips when I wake in the middle of the night. And some of you will identify with me when I say that at my age that is a regular occurrence.

That prayer asks God to fill our sanctuary to overflowing with those who love to worship and serve our Lord Jesus Christ.

There is a danger in that prayer. Remember The Prayer of Jabez. People treated that prayer as if it was a magic spell that would bind God to bless them. They went so far as to purchase gold leaf leather copies of the book. They carried the book around like a magic talisman. I don't think the author ever intended that. Nevertheless they did it.

Our prayers must never look that way. Instead, they must reflect two things, the honest desires of our hearts and a total dependence upon the Lord. It is not a magic spell. It is an attitude of the heart.

Yes, we must work hard. Ministry is hard work. But the devils minions also work hard and we cannot break down the gates of hell unless we do so by the power of our Lord Jesus Christ.

I can't say we've reached our goal yet. But I can say we have more people in the pews now than we did before the pandemic. Shortly after the pandemic the Bishop confirmed twelve people. Most were adults. Three weeks ago he confirmed four more. All adults. And the interesting thing is the visitors keep coming. For example, three months ago a young woman and her aunt visited the church. They liked it, but the aunt was going back to Arizona. When she left, I thought that was the end of it. Then she started zooming in to Church and Bible study and the young woman continued to come. Then she brought her husband and he continued to come. Last week she didn't come because she was sick. But he came without her. Their presence I do not believe was by chance, it was the power of the Spirit of God answering prayer.

You have to believe deep down in the core of your faith that God answers prayer. And what better prayer can we offer than that He would bring the lost to faith in Christ. Remember, Scripture tells us there is joy in heaven over one sinner who repents. (Luke 15:7 & 10)

So, where does that leave all of us?

Well, I hope with a better recognition of the role God plays in the growth of our churches.

And, with a renewed commitment to pray for the growth of your church and the salvation of the lost. That prayer is the one thing every one of us can do. My question to all of you today, is, will you do it? Will you pray everyday, multiple times a day, that God would fill your church to overflowing with those who love to worship and serve our Lord Jesus Christ.

Unless the Lord build the house, they labor in vain who build it.

There are two other items I want to point to. One is a Biblical imperative, the other a suggestion that goes along with it.

The first is our focus on the tithe. As I mentioned, when I first started at St. Matthew's the church had very little money. The vestry prepared a budget and presented it to the congregation and asked the people to fund it. To the best of my knowledge, there had been little or no teaching on Biblical giving. In those days the clergy would say I can't talk about giving because the people will think I want a raise. By the middle of my first year the bank balance was down to six hundred dollars and I regularly could not cash my pay check. This went on for a while.

We needed to do things differently. So I decided to start teaching the only principle I could find in Scripture on giving. It is called sacrificial giving. It was common at the time, but mistaken in the sense that the way it was taught was that anything a Christian gives is sacrificial giving. That is wrong. I believe Scripture clearly teaches that the first 10th, belongs to the Lord. That is the tithe. **Sacrificial giving does not begin until the tithe is made.** You haven't given God anything until the tithe is met, because it already belongs to Him.

I don't intend this to be a seminar on tithing. That is for another time. Nevertheless I do want to encourage our clergy to teach tithing. Not because our churches need money to operate, but because it is better for the **giver**. My Father does not need my money. He owns the cattle on a thousand hills. He wants me to tithe because it is better for me that I do. The prophet Malachi tells us to bring the whole tithe into the storehouse and God will open the windows of heaven and pour out a blessing. He also tells us that God will rebuke the devourer if we do. And He did. Once again this is not a magic formula. Instead, it is an exercise in trust and obedience. I have a lady in the parish who was paying off her daughter's wedding. She heard the teaching on tithing and decided it was the right thing to do. She came to me a year later and told me she had expected it would take two years to pay off the wedding and it would be three if she tithed. Turns out she paid it off in a year. God opened the windows of heaven and poured out a blessing. He also rebuked the devourer. I have met a great many Christians who say they trust God with their eternal lives, who do not trust him with their wallets. So Pastors teach tithing to your people because it is in their best interest.

To compliment your teaching you need to change the way you do your business. Our vestry decided to change the way we made our budget. We started by looking at the prior years giving and adopted a policy that said we would not spend more in the current year than was given in the prior year.

That was the first year. In the second year, if the giving was lower than the previous year we lowered the budget. If the giving was greater we split the difference and put the balance into savings. I am thankful to God and happy to say that most years giving exceeded expenditures. Savings started to grow and God blessed. In the summer of 1983 St. Matthew's had just over \$600 in the bank. Today we have just under a million in the bank and investments. It didn't all come through the excess. There were bequests and other transactions. Still God blessed. In the meantime we have spent several hundred thousand on building improvements and funded a number of special projects here and overseas. And we do not draw on the investments for current operating expenses. If necessary we will cover a deficit but we don't plan on that. In 2026 we will spend only what we received in 2025. If that number is lower, we will budget to spend less.

There is more I could say, but I think I've said enough. So let me

conclude by saying that I believe there is a danger in our modern day and age to think we can come up with a better way of doing things through modern methods and technology. My proposition is that the best method is God's method. The best way is the old way.

First century Christians did not turn the world upside down with fancy programs or modern technology. Instead they took changed lived into a hostile world. Indeed, they trusted God because He was all they had and they did the work.

Trust in God and do the work.

Unless the Lord builds the house. . .