

“Be My Witnesses”

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Last month at First-Independence we were blessed to have Dr. Wilburn Stancil as our Theologian in Residence. Dr. Stancil is professor of theology at Rockhurst University, just 25 miles from here in Kansas City, MO. But the focus of his lecture stretched to the ends of the earth. Dr. Stancil’s lecture was titled Christianity: Globalization and the Global South, but he began by focusing closer to home. He talked about the decline of mainline denominations in the United States. According to the *Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches*, the PC(USA) declined 3.4% in membership, as reported in the 2012 listings. This was outpaced only by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, which dropped 5.9% in membership. Overall, total membership in the top 25 largest denominations declined 1.15%. And still, most Americans are Christian; 78% according to last year’s figures. With another 5% of Americans in non-Christian religions, that leaves about 16% of Americans unaffiliated – not necessarily atheist or agnostics, but rather, they may believe in God but they have no religious affiliation. That’s about 50 million people who may believe in God but don’t go to church. So, when Jesus says “... you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth,” he’s talking, at least in part, about those 50 million people in our national backyard who don’t have a professed community of faith to call their own, a place where they can learn, grow and serve in the Spirit of Jesus Christ.

Our denomination like most others is searching for ways to be more relevant in the lives of those 50 million Americans. And yet, we live in a time when denominational affiliation is not what’s driving people. As Dr. Stancil observed, we see “a trend in Christianity today for people to move around in their church affiliation. Forty-four percent of all Americans are in a religion that is different from the one they grew up in,” said Stancil, who himself grew up Baptist and is now Episcopalian. For instance, said Stancil, “We recite the line, ‘I believe in the communion of saints.’ But based on all our “church hopping” he calls this the ‘circulation of the saints,’ ‘they’re all moving around, they’re on the move” said Stancil. And of course, our churches suffer *and* benefit from the “circulation of the saints” as people move from one church to another. But the real work to be done is not “the circulation of the saints;” it’s the building up of the Kingdom of God.

When the apostles asked Jesus, “... Is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel, he replied, ‘It is not for you to know the times or periods that

the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you.” In other words, Jesus shifts their focus from the when and where to the how and why; from speculation to action. And likewise, if we’re spending much of our time and energy seeking ways to restore the denomination of the PC (USA) here and now or to once again fill the pews in our own churches so that we can keep those doors open, then maybe it’s time we had our focus shifted. Not that preserving the PC (USA) is not a worthy and admirable goal; Not that having our churches full isn’t a good thing clearly it is. It’s just that focusing on these things as *the* goal just might not be the way of achieving them. Writing in his book *The Art of Pastoring: Contemplative Reflections*,¹ William C. Martin says that as church leaders, our “task is impossible. Consider the demands,” he says, “‘Show us God.’ ‘Tell us what God wants.’ ‘Lead us to God.’ ‘If you think you can do these things, you are already deceived,’” says Martin. “But you CAN find your own soul and perhaps show others how to do that”. In other words, our challenge as church leaders is to discover and show to others the soul of our particular ministries, reaching out to those who don’t have a community of faith, planting in them the seed of Jesus Christ, and nurturing it in whatever way we can for as long as it takes.

My wife Yuri and I are concerned about our back yard. We’re in a shaded community and on a sloop and it’s near impossible to have grass take root and grow. So recently I had an expert out, who pointed to the spindly, dry, brown threads of grass in our bare spots and said, “That’s the grass that didn’t make it after you planted seed last fall.” And it kinda broke my heart. We had such hopes for that grass. The expert tells us we’re likely to never get a full plush, lawn in the back. But don’t you know, this fall we’re going to plant some more seed, water it just as much as it needs – never mind the cost – and watch expectantly for new growth. Maybe we’ll keep even. Maybe we’ll see some real progress toward a thriving and vibrant lawn. But either way at least, we’re not abandoning the lawn to the brutal forces of harsh conditions and decay. And I had to wonder, thinking back on that, do I really put that much of my heart and soul into planting Christ in the hearts and minds of those with bare spots in their lives? Ours is not an easy calling. And it’s near impossible if we’re focused more on membership numbers, governance issues, or any number of denominational fears and distractions. Now, it’s great that we can talk about all this stuff when we gather, but if that’s all we have in our hearts and on our minds when we leave, it’s no wonder if we can’t seem to get the seeds of our faith to grow in the lives of people we meet with spiritual bare spots. Fear and speculation about an uncertain future isn’t very attractive to anyone.

It’s like what the young reporter encountered while trying to get a feel for agriculture. He called upon a farmer and said, “How’s your wheat coming

¹ Decatur, Ga.: CTS Press, 1994, 14.

along?” The farmer replied, “I didn’t plant any.” “Really?” asked the reporter. “I thought this was supposed to be wheat country.” “Some say it is,” came the reply. “But I was afraid we might not see enough rain this year.” “Well, what about your corn. How is it doing?” asked the young man. “Didn’t plant corn this year,” said the farmer. “I was afraid of corn blight.” “Alfalfa?” “Nope. Afraid the price might drop.” “Well, then,” asked the reporter, “what did you plant?” “Nothin’,” said the farmer. “I just played it safe.” We’re not called to play it safe, whether we’re disciple of Christ witnessing to the faith or farmers who rely on a good harvest. We’re called to plant, in our case to plant the Gospel of the Lord wherever it isn’t. We’re called to make disciples of all nations, of all peoples – both near and far. We’re called to share the good news of Jesus Christ as revealed to us by the Holy Spirit. We’re called to share our faith journeys with those who are wondering aimlessly. It’s not an easy calling, but it is simple and clear.

Each time we meet as Presbytery, Charles Spenser provides an overview of our collective ministries and encourages us to share news of these ministries with our congregations, so that they might share them with the people in their lives. And whether you share any of Charles’ examples is not as important – sorry Charles – it’s not *as* important as it is to share something – lots of things – whatever it is that lights *you* up about being a part of a community of faith. History has proved and scholars have observed that denominations don’t attract people; people attract people. And what is most attractive about you is your faith journey. To attract someone to your community of faith – not your denomination but your community of faith – to attract people to our churches, we need to share with them what our churches mean to us. We need to plant in their hearts and minds the seed of Jesus Christ alive, risen and working among us.

Jesus calls to us across the eons and from the four corners of the earth, saying “be my witnesses.” The next time you – the next time I – encounter someone who has a bare spot in life, what seed will we plant there – the seeds of our denominational identity or church membership? Or, will we plant those seeds that we alone – that you alone – have been given, the seeds of your faith, gathered and cultivated throughout your particular faith journey?

Amen.