

“Shake It Up Baby, Twist ‘N Shout!”

Steve Ramer, Pastor

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Scripture:

2 Corinthians 9:6 -15

The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work. As it is written, "He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor; his righteousness endures forever." He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God... Through the testing of this ministry you glorify God by your obedience... and by the generosity of your sharing... because of the surpassing grace of God that he has given you. Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

Sermon:

I've decided to preach about our church budget this morning.
“Boring!” You say? Maybe?

But trust me next years budget is anything but boring;
it's chock full of all kinds of new initiatives,
exciting new ministries, and of course a few challenges!

As I like to say each year, “budgets are moral documents,”
That say far more about what our real values are
than any other statement of faith we might choose to write up!

As you may have heard, the Elders want to spend nearly 20%
more than we did last year.

And they are proposing at least three new initiatives on the expense side.
That's right, we want to spend nearly \$20,000 more than last year
and all of it is to significantly expand our ministries of outreach!

If you think the Elders are crazy for coming up with such a proposal,
well, I guess my answer to you is, “Yes!
We have decided to “shake things up” a bit!
Yes I will own the fact that I encouraged these crazy ideas,
That have resulted in a whacky budget!

But really you all are also responsible!
For you see, over the last two summers you allowed me to take a sabbatical.
And during those breaks I read a bunch books and magazines
and I spent lots of time thinking about our little fellowship.

First let me say that I do not feel that there is anything
seriously wrong or out of whack here at FCMF!
Currently church consultants like using the terms “health”
and “vitality” to evaluate congregations.
And by their criteria I would say we are pretty healthy and vital.

But, be that as it may, I have also been feeling
that maybe we do need to, “shake” things up a bit more here at FCMF?
Now I think we would all agree that to continue to be vital
and to maintain one’s health does require effort
and especially embracing new ways of being at times.
So to avoid the possibility of falling into a rut
I decided to shake things up a bit!
And yes, you’re welcome!

Crazy idea numero uno.
Hire additional staff!

Whoa, wait a minute, you want to actually hire more staff
for a congregation of 50 or so folks?!

We can barely afford our current half-time Pastor!

Yeah I know... crazy huh? I told you this wouldn’t be boring.
So let me start with some very sane and practical reasons for doing this.

Like most churches in the US we are aging!
More than half of us are over the age of 50,
which frankly is not a very good long-term growth strategy!
So for several years now I have been convinced
that if we are to attract an increase the numbers
of a younger demographic then we must put some money to it
and pay someone from that demographic to coordinate the outreach.

Now some good news: We are actually more diverse in age
than most “mainline” Protestant churches.

In the 11 years I have been here we have had young adults visit
and even get involved here at FCMF.

Some moved away while the others eventually stopped coming. In the past year or so we have seen another influx of young adults many who are pretty regular on Sunday mornings, as well as helping out with FFH and Friday nights.

Maybe we need to try something different this time? Maybe we need to do more to sustain this current group as well as attracting a few more? And I have heard from some reliable sources that there are quite a few 20 somethings out there who are searching for what we have to offer.

Now I think you all have met Michael Ranieri? He's the good looking young guy with flowing locks of black hair seen hanging around with us this past year.

And as I, and others, have gotten to know him we know that he is truly excited about what Anabaptists believe and has jumped in with both feet to what we are about.

You also may know him as the guy who always seems to have several other folks in tow with him on Sunday mornings. Part of his job would be to expand this outreach effort to younger adults. The other part of his new role would be to assist us in our ever-expanding ministry to the homeless. And Michael has also demonstrated a great passion for this. His efforts would definitely reduce some of Steve's stress and busyness while increasing our effectiveness.

I think we are all painfully aware that not only has the homeless population grown significantly over the past few years, but that our city's response has not only been slow to help but often quick in being increasingly harsh.

Our ministry to the homeless has similarly grown over the years.

First we welcomed FFH families several weeks each year. Then the FFH day center moved in and now uses our building 6 days a week! Several years ago we started opening up on Friday evenings providing showers, a warm meal and a warm place to rest.

And as you also see in the budget we are looking to add two more needed services for our homeless neighbors.

We plan to install around 20 lockers on the outside north wall so that folks can have a place to store personal possessions.

We would also like to try an experiment over this next winter where we would open up around 7 am on Sundays so folks can come inside for warmth and perhaps worship.

See, nothing boring about this budget!
"Shake it up Baby now! Twist 'n' shout!"
But I will preach on that next week!

Those who follow Jesus are not called to just be practical but a community that also has Biblical mandates to consider as well!

Jesus unambiguously calls us to minister to the poor in our world.

And either by twist of fate or perhaps by Divine providence, it seems that simple geography has determined our ministry to those poor who are experiencing homelessness by placing them at our doorstep. Unwanted by the business community and in spite of the city's efforts to push them out, "Old Town" will continue to have a large concentration of homeless poor for the foreseeable future.

Theologically we Mennonites profess to belong to what is called an "upside - down Kingdom!" God's rule, we believe, is not going to be very appealing to the rich and the powerful in our world.

God's rule, rather, is a beloved community made up of the meek, the poor, the oppressed and the excluded. And so our impulses to ministry and to budgets should then be counter intuitive as well!

We see things differently than does our culture. Our perspective is from the underside. We value those who our society discards or does not want to see. We are crazy!

We are crazy for thinking this way and crazy for doing what we do! When the culture around us pities us, or ridicules us, or even threatens us to stop we actually find some comfort and confidence in that since that is how they also treated Jesus.

But even good theology and biblical study
does not immunize us from internal struggle.

We pray and wonder, “Do we really have the resources to pull this off?”
“Perhaps it’s just a fool’s errand we are asking you to participate in?”

After all here’s a dose of reality:

Pledges have not risen significantly in the past couple of years.
And though nearly everyone in the fellowship is fully employed,
wages for most have stagnated, leaving many long-time givers
unable to increase their pledge!

And let’s get brutally honest, you now want to spend money
to reach out to two groups who have even less financial resources?
And to top it all off one of our longest and most generous givers
just passed onto her eternal reward this past year.

Well my first response is to say that the biblical narrative does value
both prudence and preparedness, as well as taking radical risks
and seeming “leaps of faith!”

God does provide what we really need and when we really need it.
Sometimes it is like manna from heaven that magically appears.

On other occasions it is the result of someone planting a seed,
then tending the garden and finally showing up at harvest time.

Perhaps the key is for us to take just enough risk
so that we remember that we are not totally in control
and thus cannot take all the credit!

Nor are we to be foolish and possibly squander that which God has
generously given us in the past in order to sustain God’s work.
Over the last decade our budget has seen its share of good and bad times.
It was cut several times due to an economic recession as well as
the loss of several generous financial givers.

But we have also witnessed years of surplus
and years where previous cuts were amazingly restored.
And not only have we survived but we have indeed thrived.

I cannot end this morning without responding to
what I also consider some “myths”

First, I know for a fact that we have actually received some very generous monetary gifts from numerous young adults and their families.

Our homeless guests actually do throw in a dollar or two most Sundays which not only adds up but often inspires those of us who do have means to consider giving more.

Our service to the homeless is the only rationale that Martha has used to raise nearly \$30,000 over the past several years.

Frankly if it were not for the fact that the homeless are using our building, I really have no idea where the money for the new floors, or windows, or bedding or added insulation would come from.

The use of our building to serve others has also brought in hundreds of volunteers to paint, clean, cook, landscape, water plants, and to donate fridges, furniture as well as toys and TV's we don't need.

Every year I open at least one envelope, from someone in our community whom I have never met, that contains a check, because, in their words, "they know we do something for the homeless?"

And finally, what about the loss of Eliza, isn't our increased pledged giving in addition to the loss of her pledge?

No! All I can say is that it is the intention of her daughters, to continue her pledge for a couple years (we are in the process of confirming this).

When we step out into unfamiliar territory our faith grows.
We recall the great faithfulness of a generous and loving God!
It is not our work but God's work we are called to participate in.
And it is God's budget we have been called to be a part of!
Just as are all the resources we have been given
They are only ours to hold only to temporarily
and to assist in the building of God's Kingdom!
And since we know that "God loves a cheerful giver,"
give God everything you've got!

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