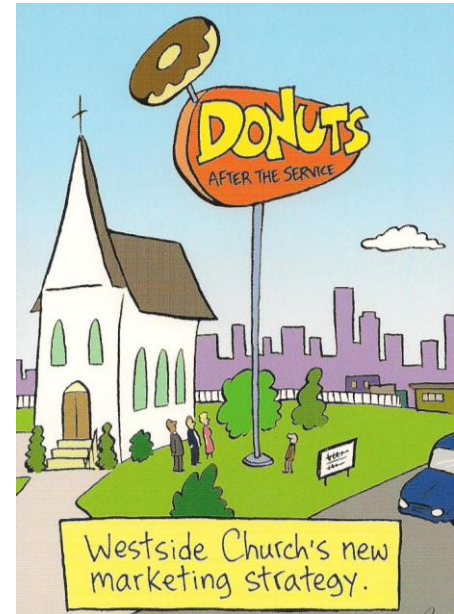


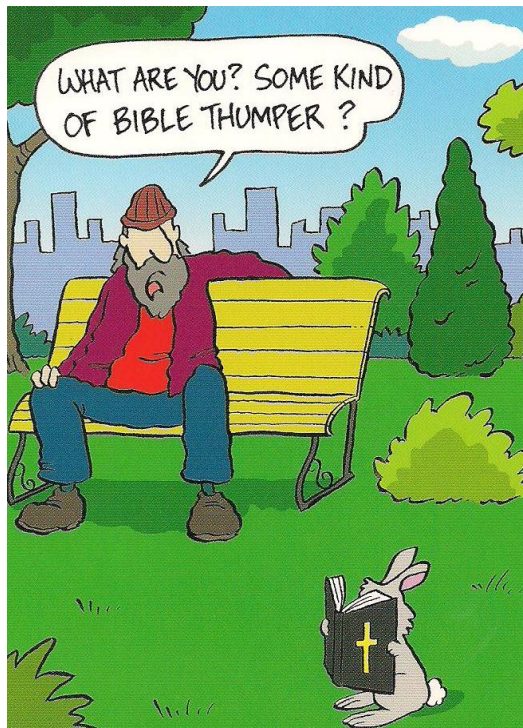
GROWING A CONGREGATION, SOMETIMES USING WORDS

Some people, when looking at each other sitting at a worship service, wonder and worry that there are so many grey heads populating the pews. That worry can often turn to an urgent desire to DO something. Of course, sometimes that urge for action results in “out-of-the-box” marketing like the cartoon to the right, or in trying to get prominent folk in the wider community to make a special appearance to get the curious and the occasional people to attend.

For example, there was a big church conference of the United Church and the organizers had invited the mayor of the city, Pat Hooley, to bring greetings. These greetings were to come immediately following the opening worship. One of the church officials gave Mayor Hooley an elaborate and flattering introduction – perhaps too flattering.



“I thank you for those kind words,” said the Mayor. “It is always nice to know that you are held in high regard. But I think you may have carried that regard a bit far when, during the worship time, you sang, “Hooley, Hooley, Hooley, Lord God Almighty.”



Others are convinced that the best way to “drum up business” is to flood the local neighbourhood with volunteers, spreading the good news that the congregation wants to share which will change lives and make a difference in the community.

On one such neighbourhood initiative, two church members were going door to door, and knocked on the door of a woman who was not happy to see them. She told them in no uncertain terms that she did not want to hear their message and slammed the door in their faces. To her surprise, however, the door did not close and, in fact, bounced back open. She tried again, really put her back into it, and slammed the door again with the same result – the door bounced back open.

Convinced these rude young people were sticking their foot in the door, she reared back to give it a slam that would teach them a lesson, when one of them said: “Ma’am, before you do that again you probably should move your cat.”

Sometimes we want to look to others as the solution to our challenges with changing demographics, with changing cultural values, with changing interests for youth and younger families or with our escalating worries.

Consider the new minister who spent the first four days with her new faith community making personal visits to each of the members, inviting them to come to her first service. However, the following Sunday the church was all but empty. In response, the minister placed a notice in the local newspapers stating that, because the church was dead, it was everyone’s duty to give it a decent Christian burial. The funeral would be held the following Sunday afternoon, the notice said.

Morbidly curious, a large crowd turned out for the “funeral.” In front of the pulpit, they saw a closed casket, smothered in flowers. After the minister delivered the remembrance, she opened the casket and invited her congregation to come forward and pay their final respects to their dead church. Filled with curiosity as to what would represent the corpse of a “dead church,” all the people eagerly lined up to look in the casket. Each “mourner” peeped in, then quickly turned away with a guilty, sheepish look. Inside the casket, tilted at the correct angle, was a large mirror.

It is, indeed, difficult work to discern what God’s vision is for any community of faith. It requires dedicated listening to the Spirit’s whispers. It is fueled by a desire to turn aside from individual “certainties” about what will work, waiting to hear the living Christ’s guidance. During that discernment, it is often the way we live in life that demonstrates to others most clearly how we live our faith – often accidentally.

A story is told of the great theologian and writer, William Barclay, when he was minister at a church in Glasgow. Barclay was deaf, and often didn’t hear comments, especially when the speaker was too far away for him to lip-read. One Sunday, on the way out of church, a man came up and said, “Dr. Barclay, I want to thank you for saving my life.”





Barclay scratched his head. He couldn't remember ever seeing the man before. "I'm sorry," said Barclay, "but I don't remember."

"About a year ago, one evening, at dusk, I was sitting on the steps of the church feeling desperately dejected about my life. I called out to you as you walked out of the church and I said, 'Life is terrible. I'm going to throw myself into the river and drown myself.' You waved to me very cheerily and said, 'Well, the best of luck to you.' That comment brought me back to reality, and today, life is good."

We are the church. Our community is our mission field. Let's encounter one another with grace, with faithful living and with good humour. Those are the relationships which will foster deeper connections among us all.