

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Last week I attended First Call Theological Education in Ligonier, PA. While I was gathered with other first call pastors in Region 8 of the ELCA there was a lot of discussion on the declining membership in mainline denominations. We talked about different trends and what people might be looking for in a church. We finally came to the conclusion that we need to be more proactive in the ministries that we are doing to continue to grow as a church.

I couldn't help reflect on last week as I read the epistle lesson for today. In the text from 2 Thessalonians we hear about some members of the community who aren't working. Rather they were living off of others because they think Christ's return is imminent. The members of this community in essence stopped sharing the good news, which brings me back to the conference last week.

Our contexts are changing. The church is no longer the center of people's lives like it was fifty years ago. We talked about how Lutherans are laid back and that we hope for people to come and see our church. The message that I heard over and over again last week was that we need to be louder in our approach to reach the unchurched in our communities by becoming engaged in ministries that benefit not just our congregation but the community.

As I thought about this I couldn't help but think, Saint Nicholas doesn't do too bad. We have a lot of committed people who do wonderful things for the congregation and the community. And then I thought of how we might become more engaged in a variety of ministries – how we might grow as disciples of Jesus Christ.

What are some things that we might do differently? How might we be more engaged as individuals and as a congregation? I recently read the book by Albert Winseman titled, "Growing an Engaged Church: How to Stop doing church and start being church again." In his book he has a lot of great ideas for congregations to become engaged in ministry. He discusses how important spiritual health is important to the life of a congregation. He states that the four outcomes to measure a church's and an individual's spiritual health are life satisfaction, inviting, serving, and giving.

The thought is that if one is satisfied with their life they have a sense of direction, stability, and peace. This doesn't mean that someone who is satisfied with their life doesn't have any difficult times.

Inviting is the next step to measure spiritual health. Sharing the good news with others is key to passing on the faith. Research shows that it is through relationships with others that draw people into church communities. Who could we invite in our lives that we know that doesn't have a church home?

Service to others is piece in measuring spiritual health. Congregations that are engaged in service attract people.

Finally, giving is the last outcome in measuring spiritual health. People support the ministries of the congregation when they are involved and engaged.

Are there things that we could do to strengthen our spiritual health? How could we become more engaged in ministry rather than taking a laid back approach? What are things we could do to be bold in sharing our faith?

Are we satisfied with our lives? Are we comfortable inviting others to Sunday school and worship? What kinds of service activities do we participate in? How much do we give to support the ministries of the church? Are we engaged in doing ministry?

As the apostle reminds the Thessalonians about working for their food. We also need to work to share the gospel with Jesus Christ. The world that surrounds us is changing, what can we do to help? How can we be engaged in our community? How can we grow spiritually?

We all have our own answers to these questions. We all have passions and places where are gifts can be used. The ELCA is exploring opportunities for growth. As we journey ahead together, we may do things that make us uncomfortable, but we will be engaged for the good of the gospel.

The peace of God which surpasses all human understanding be in your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus the Lord. Amen.