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Religious Education for Effective Ministry: Confronting Leadership Challenges in One Beloved Community

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Rev. Smith has been appointed to be the pastor of First United Methodist Church (FUMC). With the appointment, it comes a specific instruction that the church must be “turned around,” and it was Rev. Smith’s responsibility to make it happen. FUMC has been in decline for many years under the leadership of several pastors. Rev. Smith is black and the congregation is predominately Caucasian and elderly, with longtime members who have stayed on because “this is their church.” Rev. Smith comes to the church bringing her experience, energy, and vision. This appointment is a cross-racial cross-cultural appointment, which is part of her denomination’s mandate for the future, as it places pastors that reflect the diversity of the surrounding community in churches that do not currently look like the community around them. Currently FUMC does not interact with the community—it does ministry “to” the community but not “with it.” Therefore, from the beginning, Rev. Smith knew that her job would not be easy. She accepted the appointment believing that a “new wind” must blow through the church bringing forth spiritual revival. She now faces a crucial issue in the church, which she feels is in a make or break situation. First United Methodist is located in an urban environment. FUMC has been in this city for 133 years but has been at this site for 83 years. Originally, the neighborhood consisted of predominately white, blue-collar workers, but has since transitioned into a neighborhood community of mostly African Americans, Caribbean Blacks, and Hispanics. When the church was first built in this neighborhood and for many years after that, both consisted of white blue-collar workers. As the neighborhood began to change, no efforts were made to develop new programs or a more inclusive worship to include the growing diversity. The lines are drawn; Rev. Smith knows it but she is determined to turn First Church United around. As she has said before in conversations with the church, “God called me into ministry and the Bishop sent me here. No one is going to stop me from serving God and the church.” For a brief moment, she felt terribly alone, but then she remembered that she did have some support at FUMC. Rev. Smith took a deep breath, “I am going back to the drawing board. There is much work yet to be done, and I will not give up. But what is the next step?” This paper is based on a case scenario for a religious education program and as a response to *Cooling of the “Spirits”* by Marjorie Nunes of the Summerfield United Methodist Church Bridgeport, Connecticut. The author of this response paper analyzing the problems from the case study provides suggestions for a Religious Education ministry as a program for the church, and data on effective church growth and leadership.¹

Keywords: race relations, church leadership, religious education ministry, Christian education, organization management, conflict resolution, church growth, diversity in ministry, beloved community, leadership

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1. Introduction

The role of religious education is to support the educational needs of a specific community. The purpose of religious education is to restructure the learner's field of expertise and experience as it consists of shaping the learning environment to enhance behavior modification. Furthermore, Anthony discussed that the educator facilitates shaping the program environment from one of change activities to those conducive to bringing about results. Religious Education helps us to know who we are, live in a community, participate in society, and live our faith in the world.²

Learning on the other hand involves our perception such as experiences or how we perceive a situation so that we can become aware. As we perceive, we naturally begin to interpret the perception to make meaning. Meaning is an interpretation where to make meaning is to construe experience, to give it coherence which we do intentionally and unintentionally. This can be shaped by innovation, culture, world view, and gender, view of oneself, faith, understanding, persuasion, racial, ethnic, or cultural background, physical shape, experiences, family background, or intergenerational upbringing. Much of learning is unconscious and informal which can be said to be a process of constructing and appropriating or a revised interpretation of the meaning of an experience as a guide to awareness, feeling, and expression. Learning involves our perspectives, communication, action, self concept, the external context, what we already know, and learning content.³

When forming programs in any organization such as in a church premise or outside, one must understand the concept, purpose, context, content, participants, process, and methods of how we educate people on religious education. When developing Religious Education Programs, teaching and learning go hand-in-hand and that the process of teaching interacts with the process of learning. He further suggested that knowing something about educational processes and the leaning abilities of the people we teach will assist in the effective achievement of our competency and ministry. Learning involves interrelated processes such as how we perceive, remember, applying, and valuing.⁴

This paper presents a fictitious case brief response of the First United Methodist Church titled Cooling of the "Spirits" by Marjorie Nunes Summerfield United Methodist Church Bridgeport, Connecticut, and recommendations on religious education program for their ministry that may be effective in serving the needs of the different populations associated with the church as a beloved community.

2. Cooling of the "Spirits"⁵

The goal of First United Methodist Church is to achieve "A new wind to blow forth spiritual revival" as stated in the case brief, the following are suggestions to Rev. Smith and the Board of First United Methodist Church. First United Methodist Church, Rev. Smith needs to reach out and interact with the community, even though FUMC does create programs for people in the community. As a church that was known to have had white pastors throughout its existence, having a black pastor and the demographics of the community changing to include diverse populations not only means that the FUMC should interact to understand the needs of a changing community but how best to serve its diverse needs.

3. Identifying the Problems

To better understand this, suggestions to Rev. Smith and the board of the First United Methodist Church is to identify the problem, for example, a survey, specifically a SWOT Analysis on the community can be

conducted to better understand what gifts already exist in the community and how FUMC can improve on its program to the beloved community. The problems for FUMC however are as follows.

3.1. Leadership

The new pastor is a black woman in a predominantly Caucasian church—two big major problems—a woman and black. For a church that is traditional and has been in existence for over a hundred years with probably white males as pastors, this can create a lot of “leadership and trust issues.” One being the music director, Mary Brown who resigned after Rev. Smith requested to include more “praise songs” in the worship, and other leadership challenges in which Rev. Smith had a meeting some members about the air conditioning problem over the summer suggestion of closing the beautiful sanctuary for two months which some members responded “That’s what we do here, we have been doing it for years and it works for us.”

3.2. Financial

Another leadership issue was when Rev. Smith conducted a meeting with some members of the church regarding the heating problems and how they would fix the air conditioning for the summer. One of the members Nadine Surety whose family has had long standing financial benefactor for the church always wanted everyone to know her status and have her opinions heard stated that “We do not have the money to do it and we are just fine where we are. We all know each other here and we like it like that.”

3.3. Faith Issues⁶

Identity issues of congregant’s faith, such as understanding religious education and faith issues regarding questions such as (1) who am I? (2) what am I looking for? (3) who is God ? (4) will God be present in the new church setting? (5) will congregants understand or enjoy the liturgy or preaching of the new pastor? (6) how will the new pastor and the church deal with the needed educational component for the different ages and groups within the church? (7) how can one deal with the faith issues of finding God in the midst of a new leader who may bring in a different idea of what “they are used to hearing or learning?” (8) how will all their investments be utilized by the new pastor or how can they take all the years of investment in the church with them should they choose to leave? (9) what do I need to understand about faith issues before committing to a church? what do I need in life for spiritual growth and how can I address them with the new leader? (10) who am I in relation to the past, present and future, so that I can understand life’s purpose? (11) how is this church going to deal with faith issues and challenges from existing members? (12) How will the new pastor deal with faith issues of new members and the host community at large?

3.4. Religious Education Issues

What I need to understand and know about religious education issues such as: (1) The church has a history of being a traditional church for the demographics of the community has changed the neighborhood which is now becoming urban. (2) There are no new programs that appeal to people in the church and efforts to create new ones have fallen on deaf ears or in friction with some members such as stated above with Ms. Mary Brown resigning after the pastor requesting to have more praise songs in the worship service. (3) FUMC does not interact with people in the community but has a ministry for the community but not the community with it. (4) The economic structure of members of the church has been blue-collar for a long time, but now different groups of people are in the community which has significantly changed the church. (5) There has been a lot of

vandalism on the church property by people in the neighborhood who are unsure of the purpose of the church in their community or how they can reach out to the pastor or the board or issues they are facing in their communities.⁷

4. Form a Committee

This committee would include select individuals or groups in the community that represents the diversity, talents, and gifts the community can offer and how FUMC can support groups as well as improve on its program to enable FUMC to serve the community better. From this group, committees of individuals can be selected to form other committees which will assist FUMC with its heating problem, for the summer question of holding services outside the beautiful sanctuary which seems to be a major problem for the church, and if there are any heating problems for the winter. From this group, a selection of individuals from the community can be hired to conduct religious education seminars or workshops for members of FUMC. In addition, a committee of people interested in assisting the church with their skills from the community can be formed as volunteers such as with resolving the heating and air conditioning problem and other repairs to the general church building. One thing that most churches do not do to reach out to people in the community is to request for volunteers to assisting with issues within the church. The church can increase their outreach or ministry of programs to the community by also making the community a part of the church.

5. Outreach

FUMC can reach out to people in the community through various means such as: evangelism, witnessing, workshops, and seminars on educational understanding to learn about tolerance with different community groups such as diversity outreach, peace-building programs and activities that can promote inclusivity in the community.

6. Develop Programs

FUMC can add to its already existing outreach programs or create new ones such as extra-curricular activities that will serve the different groups in the church as well as the diverse population of the urban community in which the church is based. FUMC can create new programs that can meet the challenges of culture, knowledge, and diversity in the community. These programs can include activities for the difference cultural and age groups both within the church and in the community. For example, a committee of people who are interested in singing praise songs can be formed and alternate between already existing worship style songs.

7. Work with the Community

To make FUMC one of the “Thriving congregations” in the community,⁸ Rev. Smith can incorporate different religious education seminars or workshops that will enable congregants and those in the community to understand FUMC purpose within their community as they will see an “architecture” of possibility within their infrastructure. For instance, they understand and appreciate what they already have such as skills and talents and make use of their current resources such as buildings, people and so on. For a diverse community where FUMC is located, it will be easy to collectively use the skills and talents of volunteers within such a community.

8. Innovative Concepts

Thriving churches look and listen to their context closely to ground themselves in what is organic and natural to their immediate environment. For example, questions such as how Rev. Smith can introduce new innovative concepts can begin by asking herself how to bring on a new and diverse congregation that represents the community into the church. She will need to plan carefully how not to chase away the already existing Caucasian members who have been worshiping in the church for years and consider it “their church.” She can be to maintain the history of the church by keeping the building and its architecture, which appeals to older members as well as bringing in new life into the church “space” by representing the dynamics of the community.

9. Understand the Role of Religious Education

Understand the need for the role of religious education in ministry and the content for everyone involved such as Rev. Smith, her board, and people in the different committees. Paying attention to how to nurture younger generation, bring in new members, and understanding the needs of the already existing congregants through element of worship, what the pastor is teaching, and they process what they are learning to be able to apply it to their lives and communities.

10. Experiences of the Religious Leader⁹

Rev. Smith needs to bring in the wealth and energy of her previous background and experience and understanding that the models of religious education from her previous experience can be utilized in gaining new members to the FUMC which can increase the diversity in population of the members as well as an opportunity to create new programs for outreach to people in the community. She needs to understand how to resolve conflict effectively in her role as a black woman church leader in a predominantly white congregation. She can see herself as any of the following: (1) a biblical interpreter, (2) a spiritual educator, (3) discerning gifts, (4) a prophetic agent, (5) a sacramental educator, (6) a story teller, (7) a cross-cultural educator, (8) a bridge-builder, (9) a peace maker, and (10) a trusted friend.

11. Diversity in Ministry

One thing Rev. Smith can incorporate into the increasing diverse ministry is a Kerygmatic congregation of teaching and preaching which is suitable for small congregations to assist new members and old ones develop their personal commitment to Christ and in guiding them through worshiping and in increasing their faith in God by (1) assist members in explaining the need for religious education such as increase in praise and worship songs, (2) formation of different small groups within the church where she can assist members in growing their faith and understanding of the purpose of the ministry, (3) to foster spiritual development, support Christian education, retain young members as well as previous members while recruiting new ones, (4) develop extra-curricular and social activities for members of the church to relate and interact with people in the community.

12. Conclusion

First United Methodist Church has received a new pastor, Rev. Smith, a Black female who has been having some leadership challenges with members of her congregation. The church has been a traditional church

in which members know each other and probably are not open to much change. Several members of the church over what seems as minor disagreement during some meetings such as requesting for more praise songs during worship services led the resignation of the Music Director, Ms. Mary Brown. Another leadership challenge for the new pastor occurred during a meeting where some members disagreed with the pastor on having church services outside the beautiful sanctuary during the summer months because of problems with the air conditioning caused a friction among several people in the church.

Other challenges for FUMC and Rev. Smith included loss of members, worship and liturgy style, a reduction in tithes and offering because of the economic conditions of people in the community. Change of church community environment, and family income of new members has decreased therefore posing more social and economic challenges. Cross cultural changes in the community are now increasingly becoming multi-cultural. No major or new religious education activity or program were known that the church created in the past few years, hence, an almost stagnant congregation and church programs but Rev. Smith despite all odds, was not backing down and very determined, responded that “God called me into ministry and the Bishop sent me here. No one is going to stop me from serving God and the church.”

13. Summary¹⁰

First United Methodist Church is located in an urban environment. FUMC has been in this city for 133 years but has been at this site for 83 years. Originally, the neighborhood consisted of predominately white, blue-collar workers, but has since transitioned into a neighborhood community of mostly African Americans, Caribbean Blacks, and Hispanics. When the church was first built in this neighborhood and for many years after that, both consisted of white blue-collar workers. As the neighborhood began to change, no efforts were made to develop new programs or a more inclusive worship to include the growing diversity. The lines are drawn; Rev. Smith knows it but she is determined to turn First United Methodist Church around. Suggestions were made for Rev. Smith above such as:

13.1. To Identify the Problem

To identify the problem and how best to assist members through the dissemination of a survey, and conducting an assessment (using a SWOT Analysis) of church members and the issues they may be experiencing within the church as well as a survey of people in the community can be conducted to better understand what gifts are in the community already and how FUMC can improve on its program to the community.

13.2. To Form a Committee

This committee would include select individuals or groups in the community that represents the diversity, talents, and gifts the community can offer and how FUMC can support groups as well as improve on its program to enable FUMC to serve the community better.

13.3. To Conduct Better Outreach

FUMC can reach out to people in the community through various means such as (a) evangelism, (b) witnessing, (c) workshops and seminars on educational understanding to learn about tolerance with different community groups such as interreligious dialogue and interfaith peace-building.

13.4. Develop Programs

FUMC can add to its already existing outreach programs or create new ones such as extra-curricular activities that will serve the different groups in the church as well as the diverse population of the urban community in which the church is based. FUMC can create new programs that people can adapt to meet the challenges of culture, knowledge, and diversity in the community.

13.5. Experiences of the religious leader:

Rev. Smith needs to bring in the wealth and energy of her previous background and experience and understanding that the models of religious education from her previous experience can be utilized in gaining new members to the FUMC which can increase the diversity in population of the members as well as an opportunity to create new programs for outreach to people in the community.

Elements of effective churches and ministries according to Baker (2010), are that: (1) Churches need to cherish the deep relationships across ages, cultures, and geography. (2) An effective church values the voices and leadership of its young people while it answers a deep yearning for an exemplary community. (3) The depth of transformation that takes place in the church and the results in the life of the disciples outside of the church. (4) Experiencing and naming God as an ongoing act of sacred theological reflection is important in experiences of the religious leader. (5) Questions of faith formation such as who I'm I? What do I believe? What does it mean to be this or that? and so on as indicated in section 3.3 above can best assist members through the pastors' strength and knowledge as a trained seminarian who can deal with issues affecting congregations who want to thrive.¹¹

14. Conclusion

Rev. Smith, needed to first of all identify ministry needs of her congregants or ministry members by encouraging, preaching inspirational messages, recognizing their talents and providing opportunities in the communities to expand into practice such gifts and talents. She can also needed to ask theological questions as reflections such as what gifts members of the church and community had as sons and daughters of God? She needed to assist congregants in understanding if they were using their God given talents and gifts effectively to serve the purpose and kingdom of God. She needed to ask members in identifying their spiritual, as well as regular gifts and talents. As for the religious education ministry needs for FUMC, Rev. Smith needed to ask herself questions such as how she will encourage or enhance the spiritual needs of the church members so that they will have cause not to leave the church. She needed to develop ways as on how to encourage, and assist her members in bringing out their talents and gifts so that they could use it within the church, as well as serve people in the community.

It was clear that Rev. Smith had a rough start with members of First United Methodist Church (FUMC). For one, she was the first black female pastor the church ever had, therefore, issues of race relations would immediately come to mind. Members were not immediately welcome to her ideas of leadership and "changing" which she saw as opposition to her leadership, especially when some members objected to finding new ways in which "things were done around the church." With her being open to some of the suggestions provided above, Rev. Smith may be able to assist her members in recognizing and bringing out their talents in forming different committees and small groups in which members will be able to use their talents and gifts in serving God's kingdom. Rev. Smith and her congregants need to reach out more to the general community and make the

community a part of their Religious education ministry and eventually members of the church. It is obvious that the dynamics and demographics of the community has changed and will continue to change especially when one is confronting leadership challenges in any beloved community.

Notes

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