

Being the Church at Brentwood

No Longer Strangers

Ps 89:20-37 & Ephesians 2:11-22

July 22, 2012

476, 528, 480 (St. Peter), 587

There is too much social alienation and loneliness in our city.
People feel cut off and isolated
in the midst of the large number of people
who live in metro Vancouver.

That's the surprising conclusion reached in the latest survey
conducted by the Vancouver Foundation.
The Vancouver Foundation was established in 1943
to harness the gifts of energy, ideas, time, and money
so that caring residents can build vibrant, healthy and resilient communities.
It is Canada's largest community foundation.
One of their priorities is to help strengthen
connections and engagement in the community.

That's why the findings were discouraging.

A good number of the people surveyed
said that it was hard to make friends here.
They feel alone more often than they would like.
This was especially true for young people
between the ages of 24 and 34.
People found neighbourhood connections
cordial but weak.
There was still a strong sense of ethnic exclusivity.
People appreciate the diversity in the city,
but prefer to associate with their own race and clan.

So, all in all, more loneliness and division than was hoped for.
The report links these conditions to poor personal and social health.
It encourages groups of all kinds throughout metro Vancouver
to find new opportunities and take greater responsibility
for getting people connected and engaged.
That is what will generate healthy, vibrant and livable communities.

I think this report confirms the wisdom of this congregation

two and a half years ago when we conferred with each other
to identify the kind of church we were being called to be
and what strengths we had to respond positively to that call.

We realized that we are a multi-ethnic neighbourhood church
that is called and equipped
to nourish souls to flourish in the grace of Jesus Christ
here in the Brentwood neighbourhood of North Burnaby.

There are other ways of being church,
different but equally faithful.
Burnaby Taiwanese Presbyterian Church is a good example.
It is a regional ethnic church,
drawing its members from across metro Vancouver
and living its life in the language and cultural traditions of Taiwan.

Here's what we realized we offer as a church
and can offer ever more faithfully as we move forward.

We offer worship, learning, fellowship, and service.

Our primary and central activity,
the gathering around which and out of which our lives are focused,
is worship, usually on Sunday mornings,
but from time to time, on Saturdays now, with Jazz Vespers.
In welcome, in song, in prayer, in reflection, in generosity,
we are opened to and formed by the loving energy of God
experienced most clearly in our relationship with Jesus Christ
and made effective in our midst by the work of the Holy Spirit.

Worship is a time of learning as well.
We have been reading and reflecting on the sermon text for the week.
It is available on the inserts in the bulletin and on the website.
We listen to the minister's reflections on the text in the sermon
and often continue our conversations about the text over lunch.
Every second week, we convene for Bible study on the text on Fridays.
The youth of the congregation convene for learning and fellowship
on the alternative Fridays.
In all of these activities, we seek to be formed to be witnesses
to the ways in which God has healed the world in Jesus Christ,
the ways in which God has overcome alienation
by reconciling us to himself and restoring our full humanity in Jesus Christ.

That gift of reconciliation gives rise to our welcoming spirit.
It is a genuine welcome to anyone who comes.

It is a genuine welcome that we reach out to offer to our neighbours
as we invite them to enjoy our witness and work
by connecting and engaging with Jesus Christ in this fellowship,
whether we are worshipping together, learning together,
eating together, or working together.

Out of all of this arises our service,
our many expressions of compassion in everything we do.
We talk about this as being a blessing to people.
We do it as individuals and as a community.
Good examples of our service as a community
are the suitcase campaign and the collection of diapers for Dixon House
that we are just beginning to do this year.

But what has all this to do with our text this morning?

I think these are the ways we live out this text –
by worshipping, learning, being in fellowship, and serving.
The text reveals to us that God desires to include all people in his family.
Both Jews and Gentiles, through the saving work of Jesus Christ,
are called upon to leave their old enmities behind
and embrace each other in the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ.
God will build us all together
into a home where God will be with us
forming us into a blessing for the whole of creation.

We are no longer strangers,
or “wandering exiles,” as Eugene Peterson paraphrases this passage in *The Message*,
but we are now members of God’s family,
with all the privileges and responsibilities that this gift brings.
It brings the privilege and responsibility of worship.
It brings the privilege and responsibility of learning.
It brings the privilege and responsibility of fellowship.
It brings the privilege and responsibility of service.

And we are not alone in living this richness of life.
As our text reminds us, God is with us and for us,
living in us through his Spirit.

*Let us pray that the Holy Spirit will use these reflections
to provoke us all to flourish in the grace of Jesus Christ.*