

Practicing Reconciliation Turns Churches into Peace Communities

I recently added a new subtitle to my blog: “Churches Building Peace Communities By Practicing Reconciliation.”

While adjusting my blog’s title might seem irrelevant to anyone but me, by “unpacking” this phrase one element at a time, I believe its relevance to churches and church leaders will become clear.

Let’s start with the word “churches.”

While my writing began with a focus on small congregations, over the past seven years I have come to the conclusion that size is the least significant factor in church vitality.

Rather, a church’s sense of mission – missional consciousness, to use the jargon – is a better gauge of church vitality than size. Churches with a clear sense of purpose, whether large or small, thrive and are vibrant members of their communities.

My confidence is in churches, not other organizations, to embody and exhibit the Kingdom of God as a contrast society in contemporary culture.

Those churches can be traditional, seeker-sensitive, neo-monastic, denominational or any of the other flavors that churches come in today. The form is less important than the way in which local congregations live out their calling to be salt and light to their communities and the world.

Second, the phrase “practicing reconciliation” emphasizes that the Bible is the story of God’s reconciling love beginning in the Garden of Eden and concluding with the new heaven and new earth in Revelation 21-22.

The apostle Paul wrote, “All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation” (2 Corinthians 5:18).

The reconciling love of God finds its highest expression in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and Paul continues the theme of reconciliation in 2 Corinthians 5:19, saying: “God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not

counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation."

Through the ages, Christian churches have emphasized reconciliation between God and humankind. However, there exists also the unmistakable idea that we cannot be reconciled to God without being reconciled to one another.

Theologians have called these the cruciform ("cross-shaped") aspects of reconciliation. We are "vertically" reconciled to God while being "horizontally" reconciled to those around us, even our enemies.

If God has given us the ministry of reconciliation, then reconciliation should be the signature ministry of churches.

I wrote my doctor of ministry dissertation at Fuller Theological Seminary on the subject: "The Reconciling Community: The Missional Mending of Spiritual and Social Relationships Through Local Church Ministry."

In my research and writing, I explored not only the theological and theoretical aspects of reconciliation, but also the practical and applied aspects.

Of course, I wasn't the first to come to this awareness, and I discovered that scores of churches in the U.S. (and elsewhere) are actively practicing reconciliation in their communities.

Finally, we come to the phrase "peace communities." I believe that churches that are practicing reconciliation are building peace communities.

In my reconciliation studies, I realized that much of the literature is theoretical. Authors focus on the theology of reconciliation, the multidisciplinary nature of reconciliation and stories of reconciliation in places like South Africa and Rwanda.

However, I found very few resources that could describe what a ministry of reconciliation looked like on the ground in real life. To that end, I synthesized the best of the theoretical research to develop a list of criteria for what reconciliation looks like.

I believe this step is vital because for churches to be able to engage in a ministry of reconciliation, we have to know what one looks like, and what result we seek as

agents of reconciliation.

The goal of churches that practice reconciliation is, in my opinion, to build peace communities.

I don't mean peaceful communities - although they certainly would be - but rather neighborhoods and areas included in a local church's ministry influence that have been transformed in measurable ways by the practice of reconciliation.

When Jesus sent out the 70 disciples, he instructed them in the practice of peace, saying: "When you enter a house, first say, 'Peace to this house.' If someone who promotes peace is there, your peace will rest on them; if not, it will return to you" (Luke 10:5-6).

We have neglected this idea of speaking peace, finding the person of peace and "staying in one place" to bring about transformation of an entire community.

That's what peace communities are - communities that have been transformed by the shalom of God into places where Kingdom ethics are lived out, hurts are healed, relationships are restored and God's children live in harmony.

If that sounds like an improbable fantasy, we must remind ourselves that Jesus said some pretty improbable things. I'm convinced this is the church of the future - engaged, vital and transformative.

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