

What Makes This Church Great?

Matthew 28:16-20

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost, July 11, 2021

Pastor Dave Schultz

Gospel Lesson, Matthew 28:16-20

¹⁶Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. ¹⁷When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. ¹⁸Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

Sermon, “What Makes this Church Great?”

A few weeks ago, I was watching a YouTube video which gave the backstory on one of my favorite Beatles’ songs. As the video came to an end, YouTube was ready with another video suggestion, based on what I had already been viewing. I watched the second video, and that process continued through three or four videos until YouTube finally suggested I watch a video hosted by Rick Beato. Rick is a pretty active video podcaster; all of his videos are about music, and one of his most popular series is, “What Makes This Song Great?” I think he has over 100 songs in that series, including Tom Petty’s “I Won’t Back Down” which was his lead single from his 1989 solo album, “Full Moon Fever.”

In that video, Rick Beato isolates the various instruments used in the song as well as the vocals. Quite often, he talks about things that are way over my head such as chord structures and key changes and a lot of things which are over my head. But he also discusses how certain guitar rhythms give the song its “wideness” while other instruments give the song with its “glue.” Yet all those individual instruments contribute to the whole, making it a great song.

I’ve just begun my second year as pastor of Aledo UMC, and I thought this would be a good time to ask that same question of this church: What makes this church great?

Since I’m talking about music, I may as well begin with music. We are blessed with lots of excellent music, including Katie or keyboardist, our bell choir, and our chancel choir. Those are all important parts of our ministry, but throughout the pandemic, one of the things which I heard over and over again, was, when will our praise bands be able to minister? And our worship has certainly been enriched by the ministry of our praise bands over the past several weeks.

However, as good as our praise bands may be, they’re not what makes our church great. They give our church its wideness, but it’s not the glue that holds us together. I believe there’s something else that makes our church great.

Throughout the pandemic, our church found lots of ways to provide food to others through our Caring Hearts and Helping Hands ministries as well as Hy-Vee bread and Riverbend produce distributions. Ruth Dulaney, of course, deserves much of the credit for those ministries for the sweet and determined way she has of greeting you with her clipboard and presenting to you new opportunities for ministry.

And then there's the volunteers she's recruited: there were some miserable, cold days in which people simply drove up to the church and a dedicated volunteer ran out into the rain or snow and handed a bundle of food to someone who could use it. The weather's improved and so is the pandemic, but most of those ministries continue today. Do those ministries make our church great? Again, I don't think so. They also contribute to the wideness of our church, but those ministries are not the glue which hold us together. I believe there's something else that makes our church great.

What else might make our church great? Our United Methodist Men? Our United Methodist Women? The way we've been modernizing our building with an elevator, handicapped restrooms, and new stained-glass windows?

What about our staff? Hasn't Mike done a fabulous job bringing back both praise bands as integral parts of our worship experience? Prior to May 30, he was chomping at the bit to bring them back. And Kathleen: I can't imagine a more difficult circumstance in which to serve as a director of children and youth ministries. But I think I speak for all of us when I say Kathleen has exceeded our highest expectations. And Debbie and Joanne do an excellent job in the office and with our various means of communication and the way they facilitate our prayer ministry. And yet, as good as all those things are, I believe there's something else that makes our church great.

Speaking of prayer, our church has a reputation as being a praying church, and I think that's a well-deserved reputation. We have a congregation of caring, loving people, and one of the ways we express our love is through our caring prayers. That may get us closer to what makes us great, but I don't think we're there yet.

Would you like to know what I believe makes this church great? Eight words: Our mission statement. **We exist to connect people to Jesus Christ.** But it's not just those eight words which make our church great; it appears to me that you have bought into that mission statement.

I have a confession to make: I have always felt that mission statements were rather silly and pointless. I didn't think any church needed a mission statement because we already have the Great Commission in Matthew 28: *Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.* I didn't think any church needed a mission statement because Jesus already gave us one. But you have proven me wrong. We not only need a mission statement, but we need to have one that we can buy into. And our mission statement is the glue which pulls us together.

You may not realize that our mission statement was imported from Christ Church in Fairview Heights. That's the church which gave us Jeff Bealmear and Mark and Joanne Harris. Presumably, Pastor Shane Bishop came up with that statement shortly after he and Mark were appointed to Christ Church in 1997, and I think it's brilliant.

For one thing, it's short. Only eight words. It's even shorter than the 34 words of the Great Commission. I've known of churches which developed long, verbose mission statements that were immediately forgotten because they were so long and verbose to be of any use. But not this one.

Secondly, the word *connect* is brilliant. It's not only a good Wesleyan word; it's also broad enough that it gives us lots of latitude in what we do for God and for neighbor, while still holding our feet to the fire. And the word *connect* does not commodify either you or our

neighbors as nothing more than notches in our spiritual belts. We can do lots of things in and beyond this church, all in the name of connecting people to Jesus Christ.

Why is our mission statement so important?

One: It gives us a quick and efficient way to assess everything that we do as a church. Does this ministry help us to connect people to Jesus Christ? If yes, we go with it. If not, we go in another direction. That means we can go back and look at our praise bands, our Caring Hearts and Helping Hands ministries, our United Methodist Men and Women, our elevator and handicapped restrooms, our youth and children's ministries and even our new stained-glass windows and ask: Are these things helping us to connect people to Jesus Christ? And we find that in each and every case, the answer is Yes. And we find that we are doing what we're supposed to be doing; we're fulfilling our mission.

Two: Our mission statement keeps our focus on Jesus Christ. If a congregation doesn't know what its mission is, then it will slip into a default mission based on the wants and needs of the people, rather than on Jesus Christ, who is the head of the church. Let me put it bluntly:

- Some churches exist to connect people to one particular political party, or at least to the agenda of one particular political party. In the process, they refuse to question their party's agenda and they become blind to its shortcomings.
- Some churches exist simply to raise money so they can pay their bills on time and tuck away some cash for a rainy day that never really comes. They become nothing more than spiritual banks, yet they never come face-to-face with their own spiritual bankruptcy.
- Some churches exist to provide a power base for a select few. These are people who want power and control, and the church provides them with the venue for accumulating the power they seek.
- Some churches exist as personality cults for the pastor instead of Jesus. And while I would be flattered by that, that is not why I went into the ministry. I became a pastor because God called me to be a pastor and to witness to the love of God through Jesus Christ. When a personality cult began to form around John the Baptist, he bluntly stated, "He (Jesus) must increase; I must decrease."

When a congregation buys into a mission statement as I believe we have done here at Aledo UMC, then it helps us to keep our focus on Jesus, rather than on human beings. We won't squabble and bicker with each other because we realize that squabbles will prevent us from connecting people to Jesus Christ. That doesn't mean we won't have disagreements; we simply won't let our disagreements get in the way of our mission.

Our mission statement gives us our reason for being: we exist to connect people to Jesus Christ. There is no other reason for us to be.

When a congregation buys into a mission statement as I believe we have done here at Aledo UMC, then it helps us to be good stewards of our financial resources. That includes the money that we as a church spend as well as the money that you earn and the donations you make to charitable organizations such as this church. Once you've bought into our reason for being, which is to connect people to Jesus Christ, then you realize that you can participate in that mission by making a financial investment in that mission. We give that we might connect people to Jesus Christ.

Our mission statement calls for some *therefore*.

- **We exist to connect people to Jesus Christ.** Therefore, we have set aside our personal agendas for the sake of Jesus Christ.
- **We exist to connect people to Jesus Christ.** Therefore, we faithfully attend the worship services, the Bible studies, the Sunday school classes and more because we want to be connected to Jesus Christ.
- **We exist to connect people to Jesus Christ.** Therefore, we volunteer our time and energy to the ministries which help others to be connected to Christ.
- **We exist to connect people to Jesus Christ.** Therefore, we faithfully give of our tithes and offerings to the mission of the church, so that its work might continue to the glory of God.

We exist to connect people to Jesus Christ. Why else would we as a church exist? We exist to connect people to Jesus Christ. That's not just a mission statement for our church; it's a mission statement for our individual lives. Why else would God have created us? Why else would Christ have died for us? He created us and he died for us that we might be connected to him. There are lots of ways in which we can connect people to Jesus Christ. Are we fulfilling our mission as followers of Jesus Christ?

One final thought: consider our mission statement from the other side: the God who created every star in every universe; the God who watches over every creature on land and in the sea and in the sky—that Creator wants to have a relationship with you. Jesus Christ wants to be connected to you. Are we connected to him? Are we connecting others to him?