

With sling in hand, David went out to meet Goliath. I Sam. 17:40

# THE FIVE STONES

*A Newsletter for Small Churches*

Volume 15 Number 3

Summer 1997



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## **Pieces of the Puzzle, Pieces of the Process**

**Mark Miller-McLemore**

*In this first installment of a two part study, Miller-McLemore discusses the congregation, its setting, and his history with the church. The article stops at a discussion point in the church's life. In our next issue, we will share their response and movement. But until then, why not ask your self and your congregation the questions concluding this installment? Hopefully we can benefit from each other's journey in faithfulness.*

I would like to note some dimensions of the community and congregational setting, then try to detail the aspects of our congregational process leading toward our grasping a sense of calling and vision for our life. I began at First Christian of Chicago Heights in the fall of 1980, although I had served there part-time as Student Intern and then as Associate since fall of 1977. I thought I had a very good "feel" for the congregation and its problems. However, I was a "fresh-out-of-seminary" new pastor, which undoubtedly colored some of my perceptions. I saw a congregation with some serious internal wounds which needed healing. A troublemaker had been ousted, despite serious misgivings, at the urging of a previous pastor, and this had been alienating to some. There was a definite gulf between old leaders and new members which the ouster had sharpened. I also saw a congregation organizationally in disarray, financially dependent upon dwindling reserves, disenchanting and discouraged. They were unenthused and passive, despite their claim that they were a caring congregation and that this was their strength.

In addition, the community around the congregation was in serious decline. Most of the middle class whites who make up Disciple congregations were locating in the surrounding suburbs. Chicago Heights' housing stock and industrial base had suffered in the last 20 years. The community was extremely segregated, but the numbers of blacks and hispanics were increasing despite their disproportionately low representation in civic government. The racial mix was, and is, volatile. The political situation was intolerable: fourteen members of the city administration which had governed nearly sixteen years, including the former mayor and three of the other four council members, have been convicted of corruption. Federal investigations continue. And yet, as some people comment, these officials would likely be re-elected if they chose to run. In fact, their hand-picked successors were elected. And to top it all off, the local water supply was lousy!

Most Disciples did not want to move or worship there. A Methodist colleague who had served the Chicago Heights United Methodist congregation and had since moved to a congregation in a more "typically suburban" town immediately north once commented to me that most people in Homewood and Flossmoor would not go to Chicago Heights for goods and services. In addition, the Jewel-Osco stores in the strip mall across the street from the church moved out, leaving an abandoned shopping center for the township to seek to administer and develop. It was not too attractive. Unfortunately, we were discovering an axiom of urban ministry: that as the problems of a community increase, the resources of the community and its institutions to deal with those problems decrease. In many ways,

many ways, it is a Catch-22. You don't have the money and the people to offer the programs to attract new people. But you can't attract the new people unless you have the programs. It's tough to overcome this urban ministry dilemma!

My first five years of ministry were devoted to helping the congregation attain competence in most areas of its ministry, managing to come to some general level of congregational health, and beginning to master the different aspects of my craft. In 1985, our numbers were good, showing increases in finances and worship attendance. We had also achieved a significant attitudinal turnaround. The congregation in general was healthy, but it remained small. Our growth was not enough to help us "over the hump." We still had few visitors, and the new members who came were very needy persons and families who couldn't bring much to the congregation. We needed more. I saw my first five years here as a chapter concluding and began to consider that I was embarking on an interim period. If technical adjustments in evangelism programs were not sufficient, was there something deeper? What should we do? I began to consider these larger questions. The options appeared to be three. Either the church did not have a clear enough sense of its identity and mission to reach out with confidence; or the location was an overwhelming obstacle; or the congregation needed a change of pastoral leadership.

At that point, we received some initial feelers from a Korean Methodist group interested in purchasing our building. This served as a precipitant to us to begin to consider the possibility of relocation as opposed to remaining where we were. I was surprised to discover that the congregation's leaders were rather willing to relocate if the offer for our facility was good enough. Unfortunately, the offer received was ridiculously low, and conversations about purchase of the building soon ended. However, they served as an impetus for us to consider further and more intentionally our situation.

At roughly the same time, a Christian Church in Harvey, similarly declined "inner-city suburb" nearby began conversations with us and another Disciple church about the possibility of merger. They were committed to leaving their present location. Their overly bold talk at times gave the impression that they wished to find another congregation to "take over." What we knew of the track record of mergers like this was not at all positive, and we were not eager or much interested in continuing the conversations. That congregation subsequently merged with another nearby Disciple church. As an aside, it is interesting to note that most predictions of such mergers applied to them: they added their respective 70-person average attendance together and now average about 75.

Over these years, we had also been refining and successfully practicing a decision-making process built upon a trial period of experimentation. We acknowledged that not everyone would immediately like proposed changes, but that changes would never get a fair shake unless they were tried sufficiently. The church's leadership was committed to the democratic outcome of such trial periods, and we found ourselves using them in a series of decisions of escalating importance leading up to our sense of discerning the church's calling and vision. We made gradual, seasonal changes in worship to allow people to experience things in unaccustomed ways--using matzoth during Lent, for example, or taking communion in unison during Advent are two examples. We were attempting to enlarge people's experience of worship, and these changes were well-received, in part because they were short-term. A more significant trial involved testing the practice of using only elders to preside at communion, an historic Disciple practice. This was a valuable experience for six months, but the congregation eventually decided against continuing it. Similarly, after a trial period, the

congregation decided against having the Fellowship/Coffee hour after worship at the back of the sanctuary instead of downstairs in Fellowship Hall. Leaders were faithful to the process, and rejected changes stayed rejected. Another proposal related to the rearranging of the sanctuary in order to "down-size" the seating. Since we were averaging only 70 in a space designed to seat well over 300, we were constantly experiencing the "fill-the-back-pew-first" syndrome and feeling our congregants scattered all over. We removed about 14 pews, abandoned using the raised chancel with pulpit and communion table, reconfigured our pews to a horse-shoe arrangement, and made use of a smaller and movable pulpit and communion table taken from the church's previous building and dating from the 1930s. Our seating capacity was reduced to about 150, we were all on the main floor, and everyone was closer together. This change was slightly more controversial but was well-discussed. On the whole, people appreciated what it did for our worship. As we said then, if worship is at our heart, worship ought to be lively if we wanted our congregational life to be lively.

At the same time we made a series of administrative decisions concerning funding and budgeting by which we sought to be more faithful. When shortfalls occurred in the budget, the usual practice was to cut outreach and ministry-related expenses, retaining what everyone understood to be the "fixed" expenses: heat, light, and so forth. Priorities were survival-oriented. However, in a couple of dramatic years' turn-around, we decided to finance our ministry priorities first, putting institutional concerns second. We were successful in declaring that we would fund a youth program even if it meant having to raise extra money to pay the heat bill in January. Of course, that crisis never came about. Giving increased to meet the need. But again, it was a tremendous booster of morale and spirit to see something of a bold experiment work. We were seeing how God would provide.

We entered more formally upon a two-and-a-half year process of studying our church's future following some of the discussion of relocation or merger. Our first effort was to follow up our regional minister's recommendation that we get the help of Board of Church Extension, our denominational agency for planning and construction. Their "study and plans" process was recommended and took us about a year. It did surface some necessary structural repairs needed in our facility, and we ran a capital campaign to successfully complete them. However, we received hardly any insight about our central problem which was "what shall we do?" Vernon Blankenship, our BCE consultant at the conclusion of the process, stated that "choosing the best course of action for your church is one of the most difficult I have seen. There is no clear choice which seems to be best." (Correspondence, March 21, 1986) So we continued the process on our own.

We appointed a Steering Committee which began to look into a number of dimensions relevant to making decisions about our future. We did some basic demographic research and scheduled the conference mentioned above on "Problems and Possibilities in the South Suburbs: How Can Religious Organizations Help?" Two panel members gave us a rosy vision for the south suburbs as a whole, but were less situation-specific about individual municipalities. Another told us that things would not be getting better in terms of human needs. A fourth told us that institutions like ours needed to stay put and **not** run away. (Interestingly, this person's religious institutions were not located in Chicago Heights, but had moved out some years earlier!) The last panel participant pointed out the complexity of our area by noting that there were more governmental bodies (townships, cities, school boards, park districts, etc.) in the south suburbs than in the United Nations. Therefore, it was especially tough for them to cooperate in finding solutions. The conference helped us look around. We came away with a better sense of the larger picture, glad that we had sponsored it.

We also began to send teams of lay people to visit other churches -- local congregations like us and other Disciple churches in the general vicinity. We asked our visitor teams to observe a worship service and meet to interview lay leaders in selected congregations. This process generated a good deal of insight for those who took part, but proved too time-intensive to sustain. Our teams visited only about five other churches in the course of our study.

In part to substitute for visiting fewer churches than we had planned, I scheduled a conference of ministers who were a part of the local Association in order to interview them about their churches. Their comments generally reinforced our experience: that for mainline Protestant churches in Chicago Heights, things were tough and getting tougher. Only one of those churches had an attendance averaging over 150, and it was located near the border with another more affluent suburb. All of them had suffered membership losses and were struggling with finances. In fact, most of them were not as well-off or healthy as we were. It was good for our people to get a sense that they were not the only ones having hard times. And our people saw some genuinely interesting and exciting things when they visited places like Central Christian Church of Kankakee, which had recently moved from the declining inner city to a booming outlying area and experienced significant growth. These experiences were all very provocative.

The Committee sought to make sure that the discovery process was open to all members by holding four in-home meetings for discussion of the church's future by smaller groups. In addition, two "town meetings" were held at the church to allow for airing of concerns and questions. Many newsletter articles were written and occasional sermons preached in efforts to try to keep the trust level high. Typically, questions ranged from "Where would we go if we moved?" to "What will we do if we stay here?"

In its explorations the Committee also uncovered the report of a 1973 consultation with Lyle Schaller, who had visited and worked with First Christian and another local congregation.

Schaller's comments were, as usual, insightful and accurate:

To this outsider this congregation stands out as an example of 1) a caring, sharing, and sustaining fellowship for a large core of the members. 2) a far-above average degree of loyalty and devotion by the members to this fellowship, 3) a congregation with a far-above-average proportion of members actively involved in ministry to the community, 4) a church with an outstanding image of a church concerned with the community around it, and 5) a strong financial base.

In addition, this congregation has an excellent building at a highly visible location and a large number of able leaders.

It also appears to this outsider that on the one hand this congregation is at a fork in the road in making decisions on its role, and on the other hand there is evidence of a cumulative series of decisions that reduced the list of alternatives to two or three.

The decision appears to have been made to be primarily a Chicago Heights church,

not to relocate to the west; to emphasize quality rather than quantity in congregational life... to be a church with a basic self-image as a community-oriented congregation.

Schaller went on to suggest two alternatives, one basically in continuity with what had gone before -- that is, a highly active and visible role in community service ministry, both by the church and by its individual members -- or another alternative involving the congregation much more intentionally in systemic change within groups and organizations in the community for improvement of racial relations.

Schaller's comments were a helpful backup to what some of the Committee was discovering as they talked with people in the church and the community about our future. It seemed clear to most of us that the congregation had pursued the first, less-complicated and more hopeful option. Schaller's optimism about the congregation's ability to sustain itself was conditional and highlighted: "If that fellowship admits newcomers into the group." He was a bit pessimistic about most congregations' ability to do so.

Schaller had also commented that our congregation had "bet its future on Chicago Heights" by virtue of its location in the central part of town rather than close to an edge that might make it easier to reach and attract members from other communities. He also commented that the next two or three years would be critical to the congregation's future. It is interesting to note here that First Christian -- Chicago Heights underwent a transition in pastoral leadership about one year later. Although it seems to me as if the emphasis on community service which Schaller outlined as one option in continuity with the church's tradition continued, it was no doubt diluted by the need to expend energy on a pastoral transition. In fact, something was definitely lost -- Schaller's report, for about 13 years!

#### Questions for Learning

† What are the congregation's strengths, weaknesses, internal and external challenges?

† *What actions did the congregation take?*

† What role did pastoral leadership take?

† *In what ways is this story similar or dissimilar to your own?*

† What responses or changes would you envision for the church in this article?

† *What responses or changes would you envision -- for your own church?*

~ In our next issue, we will share what did happen in the life of First Christian Church Chicago Heights, IL~



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