



Sharing the Good News!

Penn Northeast Conference of the United Church of Christ

Another Viewpoint

by Alan C. Miller, Conference Minister

A number of months ago I was waiting in the narthex ready to process into the sanctuary at the church I had been invited to preach at on that particular Sunday morning. Just before the organist began to play the processional hymn, a couple raced into the narthex obviously late. As they scanned the sanctuary looking for a place to sit, the wife said to her husband: “Oh look, someone is sitting in our pew!” Now they were totally befuddled, not only were they late but they were going to have to worship God from a different point of view.

I’ve often wondered if this idea of “pew ownership” is a new idea or if it dates back to the earliest days of the church. In the Gospel of Mark, there are two feeding stories. In Chapter 6, Jesus is teaching his followers, time flies by and Jesus realizes that it is late in the day and those who have gathered are hungry. We are told that on that day he fed 5,000 people with five loaves of bread and two fish. Later in Chapter 8 again Jesus is teaching a large crowd of people who have been following him for three days. Again he realizes that they are hungry and he feeds 4,000 people with seven loaves of bread and a few fish. I wonder if some of the people who were at the gathering of the 5,000 were also at the gathering of the 4,000; and if they were, I wonder if they started complaining about the new people who were “standing on their hillside.”

Two weeks ago I did a leadership workshop for one of our congregation’s consistories. During the workshop the members of the consistory asked me: “How can we help to break our church out of old patterns and to be open to new ideas?” I suggested that as leaders they could all intentionally sit in “other” pews on Sunday morning and

watch the reaction of the other members. They laughed at the idea but were not sure that they were willing to try something “that drastic.”

In the days of ancient Israel, the Exodus event was not only an answer to prayer, it was a drastic new change. People of that day associated the idea of God with a particular region or kingdom. The idea that God was not stationary but traveled with them as they wandered for 40 years through the desert on their way to the Promised Land, was a revolutionary new idea. Every day they pulled up stakes and moved on. At the end of the day they camped in a new location, and God was there – walking with them, wandering with them, traveling with them as they journeyed on and on.

We do children’s sermons and have children sing songs about how the church is not the building, yet most of us practice a faith in which we have locked our understanding of God into the same pew in the same building for years on end.

What would it mean for you to start looking for God from a different point of view? If your prayer life centers around talking to God, what would it mean for you to try sitting in quiet contemplation, listening for God? If your practice of mission has centered around giving money so that others can do the ministry, what would it mean for you to start volunteering at a soup kitchen, a food bank, a shelter, or go on a mission trip? If your learning about faith pretty well stopped on Confirmation Sunday, what would it mean for you to go on a retreat, start reading the Bible, or sign-up for a Bible study course? God has promised to walk through all of life with you, what would it mean for your relationship with God to try out sitting in a new pew?

TO CONTACT US OR TO REGISTER FOR EVENTS

431 Delaware Avenue www.pnec.org web page 610-826-3113 phone
Palmerton, PA 18071-1908 610-826-5464 fax
Alan Miller: AlanM@pnec.org Toby Holleman: TobyH@pnec.org
Nancy Azar, NancyA@pnec.org Barbara Jennings: BarbaraJ@pnec.org
Patty Rehrig: PattyR@pnec.org Beverly McClure: BeverlyM@pnec.org
Fran Potters (Resource Center) – Resource@pnec.org