

## **“Making 21<sup>st</sup> Century Disciples”**

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Some of you may know - I have mentioned it, I'm sure, before - that I am an MBA student, or graduated with an MBA. But, part of my study in the business world, following my ministry, was what it takes to identify the values of an organization. One of the best ways of identifying and anchoring the values of a company is with a “Founder” story. Looking around the room, I see a founder among us and I wonder what stories were part of his company and how things happened in that, that still resonate today because of that.

Today we have an opportunity to consider one of the founders of our congregation. You will note that on the front cover of our bulletin is a picture - or several pictures, actually - of our pastor of Westminster Presbyterian Church from 1939 to 1949. His name is Rev. Dr. William Orr. He did something spectacular in this congregation. Rev. Orr came in 1939 to this congregation that was amalgam. It had operating in six different congregations, since 1858. Six different congregations had been birthed and started new congregation plants around the city, and then gathered together again, and then separate ones formed again. All of this came to be right here on these grounds and they built this Sanctuary.

To build this building they did, what the historians say, they had never heard of a church doing before. They didn't do a building campaign. They just got what they called a “bond”: \$200,000 to build this church building - \$200,000. Then they got another \$50,000 bond to furnish it. The equivalent of these two bonds, totaling \$250,000 in 1929, is \$3.2 million dollars today.

Then, if you recall the financial history, there was a stock market crash and Westminster struggled. By the Great Depression, as unemployment accelerated, this congregation was not able to keep up with this note. By 1932, it was struggling. By 1937, not only could it not pay its note, it couldn't even pay its ongoing expenses. This congregation was struggling. It was house poor - had a great, beautiful house and no money - and lots of debt to pay off.

Like many institutions in the '30s, it went before what they call a “77B Bankruptcy Proceeding,” and [for] this congregation, the judge nullified the second note and reduced the first note by 60 percent, to \$118,000.

In the midst of this turmoil and struggle and frustration, they sought a pastor and they called Rev. Orr. Now, Rev. Orr seems like a fascinating character. Rev. Orr had several degrees. I might think that I'm unique in having both a Doctorate of Ministry and an MBA, but that is nothing compared to Rev. Orr. Rev. Orr had a Bachelor's of Arts, a Bachelor's of Divinity, a Doctorate of Divinity, a Doctorate of Literature and a Doctorate of Law. [Laughter.]

So, this triple doctorate came to this church in 1939 - and this was considered an “unattractive” call. [Laughter.] And, this is what Rev. Orr did: Rev. Orr had a passion for raising disciples of Jesus Christ. In the 1930s, the historians described there had been a new sense of awakening for the need to do Christian Education with our young kids and, all over

the country, there had been this program where schools would release their children for an hour to go to a church of their wish.

Rev. Orr didn't want to participate in that. He said, "I can't do what I want to do in that program. I need something bigger." So, he started an after-school program on Wednesday nights.

His first night here, in this congregation, had 10 kids. He called it the Westminster Youth Club, and with the Westminster Youth Club they would play games; they had recreation - he described it as wholesome recreation; they would study the Bible; they would sing in a choir, and they would have dinner.

Through this program - in four years - historians credit that he brought 1,000 new members into the church. In four more years, he brought 1,000 more new members into the church and they paid off all of the debt. In eight years, they did what people believed couldn't be done in any amount of time: They paid that entire \$1.7 million note in eight years and they built this church.

The historians describe that that program - his focus on raising kids to go out into the world and be disciples - was what drew the town here.

That program, when he left (he went on to be the president of Westminster College) continued, and another pastor was called, C.T.R. Yeates. The newspaper articles about his coming referenced his very strong Christian Education credentials. It was very clear this congregation recognized the value and the importance of raising kids, and so they called another pastor, gifted and talented in that.

And Rev. Yeates, by 1958, when our church had its 100-year celebration, had brought another 1,200 people into this congregation; and, through this ministry - this Youth Club Ministry - they had sent 17 full-time Christian missions people into the world: pastors, teachers, nurses, educators. They had sent them abroad and throughout the world.

In that time, as well, this congregation became the largest Presbyterian congregation in the United States. In addition, this congregation taught the Presbyterian church throughout the country to do Youth Club. One in four Presbyterian churches in 1958 had a Youth Club program - the program that Rev. Orr started. In addition, in 1958 they described that every mainline denomination had adopted this similar program. This church - Rev. Orr was the entrepreneur and the mega-church pastor of the 1930s. It was entrepreneurial. It was seeing what could be, doing something nobody else had ever done, and reaching out to raise the kids to be disciples of Jesus Christ.

That is the root and passion and story that started this congregation, as we understand it: a passion to raise kids to be disciples of Jesus Christ.

In a funny way, I'm a product of this story. In 1983 my father took his second call as pastor to Northminster Presbyterian Church in Bakersfield, California. That church was founded in the early 1950s, and when I went in 1983, I met my first friends at the Youth Club program in Northminster Presbyterian Church in Bakersfield. I went through that program as a junior high student and then as a high school student. By my senior year, I was leading

the team that was running the youth club program. That was my first opportunity to lead in ministry. The four friends that stood up in my wedding all came from that Youth Club program. I was knit together in the church. I was taught to lead in ministry through the program that started in this congregation.

Rev. Orr had a passion for carrying out the Great Commission. He desired to make disciples of Jesus Christ. He wanted to raise effective church members and, through them, this congregation sent people all over the world and changed Christian Education throughout our denomination and throughout our country.

He was echoing an earlier founder's story. This founder story is of our Lord Jesus Christ, who, at the culmination of his ministry, came to his Disciples on the mountain of Galilee, as Matthew describes it. He appeared to them, they fell down and they worshiped and - interestingly enough - some doubted.

It must have been a remarkable experience to come before the living Christ, resurrected. Jesus said to them, "*All authority in Heaven and earth has been given to me.*" Now, this is something that they had heard before. They had heard Christ claim his own authority as the Son of the living God, but it had been validated in a new way. He had been resurrected and had come from the presence of the Heavenly Father to them, to speak to them and call them into this ministry.

He said, "*Go now and make disciples of all people.*" It was noteworthy, in part, as scholars still recognize this, or consider this, because he was explicitly saying, go to the whole world - rather than just the Jewish people or the people of God in the Israeli state. And when they took this - they did this in the early church - they went to the whole world and taught people to be disciples.

Now, Jesus' words here are much more in depth than just proclaiming the Good News that there is salvation from sin, or that the kingdom of God is at hand. It's not just saying it once. He said to, "Make disciples - to make students, to make people, who will learn to do what I have taught you all to do."

It's not one night or one sermon. It is *years* of life-long teaching, and that is what Rev. Orr did here. He didn't preach one sermon. He didn't go stand on a street corner. He brought children here and he raised them up, week after week.

Rev. Orr, at Christmas time, was so excited about the kids in this town that he had these enormous flannel graphs. I haven't seen them. Apparently they didn't survive these many years. But the pictures look like they were about six feet tall and 10 feet wide, and he would tell these elaborate Christmas stories, the three Sundays leading up to Christmas.

Then he brought in his train sets. There is a picture on the bulletin of this train set, here. [Bill pointed to the bulletin cover.] You can see that this massive train set filled The Commons. This was his personal train set. According to the newspaper article, he had 48 individual trains.

As I read this with one of my staff members, she asked, "Was he married?" [Laughter.] I will be quite honest. I have read through quite a lot of the historical literature and I have not

seen a reference to a wife. So, I don't know how he would have attended to a wife, with three doctorates and 48 trains. [Laughter.]

He was passionate about bringing children here. They would bus kids from the school system throughout the week during the Christmas season. He would come twice a day - morning and afternoon - and [invite the children to] come into the Sanctuary. He would tell the Advent and Christmas story, and then they would go into The Commons, and he would show them the massive train set. He was passionate about raising kids and leading them to be disciples of Jesus Christ.

How do we live out this story today? How do we live out the Great Commission and how do we, as a congregation in 2018, respond to the call and Christ leads us?

Things have changed. The programs that Rev. Orr led in 1939 - they don't fit today. We still have a Westminster Wednesday program, but it is a much harder. Kids are busy. It used to be, from what I can know, there was nothing else to do. You got home from school and you did chores, or maybe you got to go to Youth Club and there was nothing else to do.

That is not true today. Families are busy. It is competitive and difficult to raise kids. There are pressures on them to do well in sports and music, and it is hard. It is costly to spend our time coming to church.

How do we do it today? Our kids are different today, as well. Our world is in the midst of change. The scholars that I appreciate use the term "liminal." Liminal times. Liminal is a time of transition. It was first used for adolescents. Adolescents are liminal in that they are changing from something to something, but they are not yet. And, those are the times we are living in. Our culture is not settled. It is changing, and changing rapidly.

We will talk more about that in the class that I'm going to be teaching after worship today, if you are interested in coming and participating.

But our children are growing up in a world so different than the one I grew up in and we grew up in. The introduction of social media and smart phones, and everything, is changing. How you find your identity; how you find your mate; how you differentiate from your children; how you learn to get your first job; how your job changes every few years. The world is changing and we can't teach them how to do it, because we didn't live it.

We need to prepare them [our children] for something that we aren't going to get to participate in and, as this world changes, we have the opportunity to raise children, so they can be ambassadors of the kingdom of God in this new era. I can't do it; our children can. They are going to be the first generation native to this new culture. We will be like immigrant parents bringing our families, and our children are growing up in a culture we don't understand. We have an opportunity to prepare them to go out into this new world. Like Rev. Orr sent people to Africa and Egypt, we will be sending people to Facebook and Twitter and all of these worlds we just don't begin to understand, and it will be different next week.

What do we want for our kids? Evangelism may seem cynical. Raising disciples could seem like something we just want to do because we care about members - because we want to

raise a crop of workers to go out and accomplish our tasks - and I don't believe that is what Jesus was asking for. I don't believe that's what Rev. Orr desired and that is certainly not what we, as a congregation, desire. We don't want to raise kids to be disciples for the benefit of the church. We want to raise them to be disciples because that is what they are *made* for; that is where they will find joy and serenity; that is where they will find meaning and purpose; that is where they will have the opportunity to accomplish things that last far beyond their lives; be they doctors, lawyers, or pastors, or missionaries, or Twitter evangelists, or people like the high school students in Parkland High School - regardless of your position on their politics, how *they* are challenging our world. Our children can be that for the kingdom of God.

Following Rev. Orr our church did struggle. It has struggled. We are not a church with 3600 members that we were in 1958. Even before Rev. Yeates finished his time in 1972, the historians are recounting struggles that he had, as Des Moines began to move suburban and the members began moving all over the city. He had difficulty knitting the congregation together.

Following his departure, Rev. Doyle Hansen came and was beloved, and then died tragically with his daughter. Following that another pastor came, who left the denomination and started another church, and brought some of the members of this congregation to that new church.

Following that we had an associate pastor who had affairs with people in the congregation, and was brought up on charges, and people were hurt.

Our congregation has experienced turmoil and struggle. It is not the 3600-member congregation that it was in 1958. Rev Orr came into an "unattractive" call because the church was struggling financially. It didn't have a sense of itself. Its confidence was dashed and he brought it new life. We have not faced struggles worse than Rev. Orr faced.

Our congregation is poised and ready to do the work that God lays before us. We have been blessed by the many generations who have come before us these 160 years - to have this building debt free; to have a Foundation that supports our ministry and our mission, and even this building and its upkeep. We have a harmonious staff. We have a congregation that has been through a discernment process - and I identified four things that are central to who we are as a congregation and can lead us into the future.

What do we need? What can we do to live out the Great Commission? Let us return to our Founder's story. Let us remember the passion of Rev. Orr that built this congregation - that same passion that echoes 25 times a year when we have baptisms, and share the vows with the congregation and we reaffirm our commitment to raise our children. Let us return to our Founder's story, this call of Jesus Christ to make disciples.

We don't have all of the answers as to how to do it. I don't know how to do it. Our staff doesn't know how to do it. We have read and studied. I have a doctorate in the changing ministry in America. We collaborate with people at other churches, at [Lutheran Church of] Hope, and other Presbyterian churches to find out, but we don't know yet. We are just going to lean in and try. We are giving our children the best opportunity we know how, to

become those who accept our Lord Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior; to become those who join Jesus in Jesus' ongoing ministry of reconciling our world.

Amen.