

25 Years of Mecklenburg Ministries: A Theological Perspective

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Once upon a time, the land we think of as Mecklenburg County was heavily wooded, with Native American villages along the banks of the Catawba River. When immigrants from Europe began to flood the region during the 18th century, the dominant religious affiliation was Presbyterian, with churches established at Sugaw Creek and Steele Creek in the late 1750's.

Mecklenburg's first settlers were Christian, although the *intensity* of their devotion to God varied, just as it does among our citizens today: some led lives healthily pervaded by the presence of God, while others conveniently pasted a label on the outside of a decent but utterly unspiritual life.

Like most American colonists, these settlers were dedicated to the proposition of religious *freedom*. They erected no theological fences: you didn't have to be Presbyterian or anything else to enter Mecklenburg and build a cabin for your family. Nowadays, conservatives relish the notion that the Founding Fathers were devout Churchmen, that their intent was to establish a Christian nation, and that all troubles in America can be traced to non-Christian elements that were permitted too much space. But this is bad history, and is little more than a biased retrenchment that idolizes one viewpoint among many. A series of legal acts between 1701 and 1715 guaranteed religious *toleration* and the celebration of *dissent* in all of North Carolina.

After the Revolutionary War, many kinds of Protestants lived here, as did Catholics, and Jews. During the 19th century, the population grew, as did religious diversity. Our generation has witnessed changes that would have been inconceivable to the Catawba Indians, or the Scots-Irish settlers, or even the Charlotteans who witnessed the Civil Rights movement. The world has come to Mecklenburg. Peoples and religions many of us read about in social studies textbooks now are on our doorstep.

Division, Secularism and Fear What role has religion played in the life of Mecklenburg County? Certainly faith traditions have brought our citizens solace in times of suffering, and hopefully instilled a zeal for the moral life. The fact that we have historically been a people who cared about God has also created *division* and rancor. Methodists might have good-natured arguments with their competitors, the Presbyterians; but Methodists haven't stayed on the same page with each other, and neither have the Presbyterians, Baptists, Episcopalians, or Jews. Human beings, either because of their flawed comprehension of God, or due to their intense passion about God, find cause to disagree.

in this country and in our county, *dissent* has always been allowed. It has occasionally been celebrated, but not often enough. Why have we harbored distrust and at times acted violently toward those who believe differently? Is it base insecurity? A bunker mentality that fears what is unfamiliar? Have we over the decades closeted ourselves with people like us and not befriended those who look or believe differently?

Today our city is divided into clear racial and economic sectors. But it was not always so: the historian Tom Hanchett has shown very clearly that, if we go back a century or so, Charlotte

“resembled a multicolored patchwork quilt... In the 1870’s, business owners and hired hands, manual laborers and white-collared clerks, black and white people all lived side by side.”¹ With urban sprawl has come a restructuring of the city which might seem to have been inevitable, but the loss of *familiarity* has proven tragic. We do not know each other. This lack of familiarity divides, isolates, and breeds false assumptions.

As Mecklenburg has grown, we who are people of faith have simultaneously struggled against a cultural trend, as has all of Western civilization: the rise of *secularism*. A century ago, whether you were Christian or Jewish, or even if you weren’t much of a congregation person at all, the idea of God, the belief that there was some dimension beyond this life, the spiritual posture that believes in right and wrong, the nobility and hope of humanity, was pervasive. Now, more and more people inside and outside our faith communities do not believe in God; faith is more transient, or vapid. Perhaps in a society of diminished faith, fears and insecurity among the religious are heightened, and at precisely the point in history when we need to join hands, we self-destructively push each other away; instead of discovering the wonder of friendship with others who care about God, we make the few others who do care into our enemies.

To admit our *fear* – of difference, of strangers, of terrorism, of meaninglessness – is a crucial first step toward becoming courageous, and hopeful. Scott Bader-Saye, analyzing how in a post-9/11 world, security is our reigning idol, wrote “We fear excessively when we allow the avoidance of evil to trump the pursuit of the good. When we fear excessively we live in a mode of reacting to and plotting against evil rather than actively seeking and doing what is good. Fear causes our vision to narrow, when what is needed is for it to be enlarged... Our overwhelming fears need to be overwhelmed by bigger and better things, by a sense of adventure and fullness of life.”²

We believe that *now* is the time for us to discover we are in the middle of a great adventure, and to learn to see that the world we see at our doorstep is the fullness of the life God is giving us. In its “articles of incorporation” adopted in the summer of 1987, Mecklenburg Ministries was determined to respond to human need, suffering and injustice, and to raise issues of conscience. These continue to be in great evidence all around, and we continue to address them. What may be less obvious is that we are poised, not merely to continue to react to problems, but to realize the delights of our diversity, to relish new friendships, to strengthen community, and to be the driving force to help Mecklenburg be what God would have this beautiful place to be.

For those of us who embrace hope as we move into our future together, there are a few considerations that loom as crucial to explore together:

History Charlotte has a bad habit of tearing down old buildings to erect new ones. But to us and to our faith traditions, history matters. In modern times there are those who are deaf to history. They wish to erase the past, and to those who have suffered their message is “Get over it, move on.” All our religious traditions are grounded in history, in the actions and words of real people, and God’s role in history is decisive. So history matters – and especially the history of pain. We are attentive to the victims of evil and injustice, and we care for the perpetrators as well.

¹ Tom Hanchett, *Sorting out the New South City: Race, Class and Urban Development in Charlotte, 1875-1975* (University of North Carolina Press, 1998), p. 3.

² Scott Bader-Saye, *Following Jesus in a Culture of Fear* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2007), p. 56, 60.

We believe in the possibility of reconciliation, but we cannot get there unless we affirm that what has transpired through history in Mecklenburg matters.

Toleration? Mecklenburg County law has always guaranteed toleration of religious preference. But “toleration” hides hostile sentiments: I “tolerate” what I really dislike, but I bite my tongue. Martin Luther King, Jr., often said “The law can prevent a man from lynching me, but the law cannot make a man love me.” In an eloquent speech in Nashville he said,

Desegregation is shallow. Our ultimate goal is integration; desegregation is only a first step. Integration is creative, the welcomed participation of others, genuine intergroup, interpersonal doing. A desegregated society that is not integrated leads to physical proximity without spiritual affinity, where elbows are together and hearts are apart.³

Our goal, for ourselves as Mecklenburg Ministries, but also for all the citizens of our county, is welcomed participation, interpersonal doing, spiritual affinity; our goal is for our hearts to be close.

Listening Perhaps we can agree, among all our religious traditions, that the greatest theological virtue is not having all the answers, but being superb listeners. The primal text of the Hebrew Bible begins with the word *Shema*: Hear! (Deuteronomy 6:4). We value study: and the presupposition of all study is that I don’t know all I need to know just yet. Being mere mortals, we never master the topic of God. Openness is not a wishy-washy uncertainty or a kind of polite political correctness: openness is simply the mirror image of the truth of the universe. There is much we do not know, and God asks us to be above all else excellent listeners, to be “quick to hear, slow to speak” (James 1:19).

Not only do we have a muddled understanding of God: we certainly don’t understand other religions. How could we, from the outside? If I am to know anything about Judaism or Islam or Christianity or Hinduism or the Baha’i faith, I need to listen, ask questions, listen some more, and never think I have it all figured out so as to pronounce judgment on someone who believes something I am only beginning to understand. At some level, we will never fully understand another person and another religion or denomination. But, failure to understand each other is no barrier to love. In the film *A River Runs Through It*, the father, preaching his last sermon, recalling the death of his son who puzzled and eluded him, said, “And so it those we live with and should know who elude us. But we can still love them - we can love completely without complete understanding.”

Talking We listen – and we also talk! We need to learn how to tell our own story, to put into words what we believe and why it matters, in respectful, honest ways, never bludgeoning others with our words, never trouncing the other guy with my superior ideas. If we can listen, and talk, and do so respectfully, we can even engage in vigorous debate. The zenith of friendship is not wallowing ever lower to find some lowest common denominator we can agree upon. I believe what I believe with all my heart, and so do you; because we listen, talk and love, we can bat ideas around, test what I thought was a brilliant idea five minutes ago until you raised a provocative question, and leave the conversation wiser, and humbler.

³ Martin Luther King, Jr., “The Ethical Demands for Integration,” *A Testament of Hope*, ed. James M. Washington (HarperSanFrancisco, 1986), p. 118.

Sharing When we listen and talk to each other, we find that what we share far overshadows what separates us. We believe in God in a generally secular, cynical world. Faith matters to us. We stand for wisdom, humanity, compassion, and reverence. We believe God made the world and continues to care for it, and for us; we sense God longing to use us for the renewal of this world. We love, we hope, we raise families, enjoy friendship, are grateful for blessings. We visit hospitals, and grieve those who die. We are mortal: before the Hebrew cemetery in Charlotte was opened, many “daughters and sons in Israel” were buried in Presbyterian cemeteries.

Depth A secret to loving those we may not completely understand resides in the depth of our own faith. David Gushee studied the pathetically small number of Europeans who rescued persecuted Jews during World War II.⁴ Why did they risk their own lives to hide strangers who were Jewish? The only factor among many that stood out was their Christian faith. But clearly most Nazis claimed to be Christian! As it turns out, the more superficial your faith was, the more likely you were to be an SS officer or a looter of Jewish businesses; a bland, token Christianity seemed to give Germans space to exercise violence against Jews. But the deeper your faith, the better grounded you as a Christian were in the Bible, worship and prayer, the more likely you were to be a rescuer, a friend to the Jews, an opponent of Nazi atrocities.

So what is our best conceivable strategy today to become friends, and to build community? Christians should be the best Christians they can be, Jews the best Jews they can be, Muslims the best Muslims they can be, Hindus the best Hindus they can be, and so forth. The deeper we are in our own faith, the more secure we feel, and the better equipped we find ourselves to be to engage those who believe differently. The closer I am to God in my tradition, the closer I can be to you in your tradition.

Proselytizing Obviously this flies in the face of many within our traditions who believe we should convert others who believe differently. The charter of Mecklenburg Ministries declares that we will not proselytize. Once upon a time, evangelistic revivals might have proven effective; our city is home to the world’s most famous evangelist, Billy Graham! But even Graham has mellowed over the years and now articulates a warm respect for people of other faiths. As Mother Teresa (living in a predominantly Hindu culture as a Catholic) put it, I can “love all religions, while being in love with my own.

Is proselytizing evil? It can be; but it need not be. A tentative goal we might agree upon would be this: if someone converts from Christianity to Judaism or Islam, or from Judaism to Christianity or Islam, or from Islam or Judaism to Hinduism, we would want that dramatic shift to be the result of a community being loving, compassionate, welcoming, engaging, and not because of fear, manipulative tactics, or even intellectual browbeating. As the *Qur’an* (2:256) states, “There is no compulsion in religion.”

Humility Winston Churchill said of Clement Atlee: “He is a humble man, and he has much to be humble about.” Before we vaunt ourselves as better than another religion, we acknowledge we have much to be humble about. When it comes to thinking about God, we humbly admit that no single construal of God is big enough; truth is too massive. We are more likely to get to God by love than by knowledge, but the desire of our heart than by the agility of

⁴ David Gushee, *Righteous Gentiles of the Holocaust: Genocide and Moral Obligation* (Paragon House, 2003).

our brains. The same holds for our relationships with each other. If I know I lack perfect knowledge of God, I am less haughty, and more likely to be kind.

Repentance Not only is our knowledge limited; our hearts and behavior have had their shrunken moments. We have hurt each other, we have been hurt by each other. Repentance is the order of the day, within all our religious traditions, and certainly in the ways we relate to each other. We repent for ourselves, and we repent for our kin who acted in abominable ways last year or in the 1950's or a century or two ago. We are divided as a community, and within ourselves, by sin, as all our traditions acknowledge. Perverse forms of faith have been attached to prejudices, resulting in lynchings, segregated facilities, despicable legislation, and personal ugliness. It is horrifying to look at housing policies from the early twentieth century, when our city systematically segregated this county, with loan and zoning priorities couched against "undesirables," like Jews, blacks, and hispanics. To this day, many residents in Myers Park have deeds that declare only white Christians can own this plot of earth. What do we need to repent of today? Can I climb out of my self-indulgent bias and ask what part I play in dividing and hurting? The only hope is talking it out, listening, forgiving, loving, letting God heal what is unreconciled.

Justice Justice matters, and for us justice is not merely the good being rewarded and the bad people being punished. Justice is blind to privilege, and pays special attention to the oppressed, those nobody else cares for. Our faith traditions compel us to speak up for those who have no voice, to stand with those who have no advocate. We believe in justice, one that far exceeds present realities. Justice is action. A cardinal tenet of Islam is *ṣāliḥāt*, just deeds: feeding the poor, sheltering the homeless, protecting the orphan. We believe the best way to forge a friendship is by serving together. Nothing builds community better than finding common cause and laboring together for good. Injustice cries out, urging the people of faith to act, and we reply, together, our unity being perhaps the most powerful witness to hope, the most effective deterrent to injustice.

Friendship Friendship is our passion. To Aristotle, a friend is someone who helps you to be good, to be wise; he suggested that the opposite of a friend is a flatterer. In our diversity, when we seek out friends who do not mirror our narcissism back to ourselves, we can stretch, and become good and wise. The Catholic theologian Karl Rahner spoke of adherents of other religions as "anonymous Christians." I wonder if we could bestow upon each other elegant sobriquets, or strive to achieve the same lovely titles: a Temple might name me an "honorary Jew," or our Church might welcome a Muslim as an "honorary Christian." Everything hinges on one person befriending one other person; if this never or rarely happens, we have no chance at broader community building in Charlotte.

So, in conclusion, the challenge before us is one to which we must rise, not only for ourselves, but for the whole community we serve: Can we learn, as Jonathan Sacks suggests, "to feel enlarged, not threatened, by difference? Can we hear the voice of God in a language, a culture not our own? Can we see the presence of God in the face of a stranger?"⁵

⁵ Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations* (New York: Continuum, 2002), p. 5.