

God's Voice on Main Street

by Peter Hutchison

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Many in our community find themselves sharing the sentiment voiced in Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem:

And in despair I bowed my head;
"There is no peace on earth," I said:
"For hate is strong,
and mocks the song
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!"

On a Christmas Eve a number of years ago, I was fortunate enough to be asked to participate in the 11pm service. After the service, I exited through the front of the Sanctuary onto Saginaw Street where I found a gentle snow falling to blanket the street with the lights of the street lamps and the arches glistening in the flakes. The peaceful solitude was joined by the church bells playing Christmas Carols. It was at that moment that I knew that God was speaking to the community in general and me specifically through the bells. I now frequently find myself walking along the streets of downtown Flint and without fail, no matter how dark my mood, I receive comfort and reassurance whenever I hear the church bells ringing. I believe the bells represent God's voice in the streets, beckoning to all who hear them to come and receive His comfort and salvation.

When first arriving at my job at First Pres, I met Moses. That may sound rather ominous but I really wasn't hallucinating, Moses was in need of food as it was the end of the month and his money had run out. It was easy to help Moses from the Pastors Relief fund. When this pattern continued for a few months, I questioned Moses as to his budgeting. He explained to me that he collected old bikes and fixed them up for neighborhood kids that didn't have one and that by the end of the month he'd run out of money. Rather than continue to provide money for food, the church was able to connect him with a source of bicycle parts. Moses heard the bells, came and had his bicycle ministry supported.

As our neighborhood friends began to come and join us in our fellowship hour of coffee and doughnuts, it became clear to a few families in the church that there was a need for Sunday breakfast. What started as a relatively small ministry has grown to a Sunday morning congregation of between 150 and 200 people, being served by over 50 volunteers. As Paul and I stood by the door the other Sunday, we heard that the food here was the best in the city, truly a five star restaurant for those who would have otherwise not had the opportunity to have a wholesome meal feeding them both physically and spiritually. The hungry in Flint heard the bells, came and were fed.

The unclothed began to appear at church to seek needed clothing. A group of folks led by Dawn Vallee called together St. Paul's and Court St. United Methodist, to develop a center where folks could go and get much needed assistance with clothing and food. Crossover has grown with the help of many to become one of the community's premier safety net agencies not only helping at their center but hosting food give-aways throughout the city feeding literally thousands of families. The naked and hungry heard the bells, came and were clothed and fed.

At the time of holiday cheer and gift giving, there are many in our community who are cold and alone with nothing to give to their children, a season in which we remember the gift that God gave to all His children, a time for the warmth from the love of others. Representing far more than just a material gift, a parent with nothing to give to their child feels the inadequacy of not being able to parent their child. The message from society is 'the bigger you give the better parent you are'. More than just the food that's on the table, it's the love that comes from those around you. At Thanksgiving and Christmas, we open our doors to those in need of the hospitality that God's children are called to provide. The lonely and those who felt inadequate heard the bells, came and were served.

Come to the church early in the morning and see those in need responding to God's invitation, standing outside our door. The needs they bring are varied from needing a bus ticket, help with a prescription, and money for an ID which will gain them access to the community service agencies and housing assistance, transportation assistance and employment assistance. When they arrive they are received into God's awaiting arms in the person of Lisa Horn, John, Paul and Steve, who work with them to meet their needs and always provide loving comfort.

The bells at First Pres continue to be the voice of God calling those in need to the church for comfort. The question we must answer is what kind of assistance will they receive when they get here? God calls His children to His home, but depends on us to provide comfort for those who get here. In order to do this, as we have for 175 years in this community, we need the assistance of everyone in this church family to contribute their time, their talent and their treasure. With your help and commitment we will join in the closing of Longfellow's poem:

Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:
"God is not dead; nor doth he sleep!
The Wrong shall fail,
The Right prevail,
with peace on earth, good-will to men!"

Amen.