

October 28, 2018 Church. Why McClure

This morning's scripture reading from the Gospel of Matthew is known as the "Great Commission." It is the last thing that Matthew has to say to his readers before he signs off and puts away his pen. He believes that the teachings and relationships, the death and hope that emanated from Jesus' life needs to be shared. He believes it is important to make followers for *the way of Jesus*, it is important to *make disciples*. He finishes his book by placing these words in Jesus' mouth, "Go out and make disciples of all nations." And with a hint of the institutional church that is to follow he adds, "Baptize them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

History has taught us that these two realities do not *'hang together'* very well. It is hard to be a disciple *and* belong to an institution. Doug Hall, the theology professor I referred to a few weeks ago, wrote a book entitled "*The Reality of the Gospel and the Unreality of the Church*." In it he suggests that the gritty love Jesus demonstrated was perverted by the institution of the church. Jesus welcomed the outcast and stranger: the church developed rituals for belonging and created rules about who was acceptable. Jesus invited fishermen from their boat to follow him: the church required you be baptized, go to confirmation, and sign a pledge card. I was given a book by a member of the congregation. It is entitled, *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ*. I have yet to crack the cover but I imagine from the title that the author will suggest that following in the footsteps of Jesus is "good" - is a challenging, yet fulfilling way to live - while the church elevated a Christ who was at best a benevolent dictator and at worst the champion of witch hunts, crusades and residential schools. Earlier this fall I read a book entitled, *Saving Jesus from the Church*. It argued that the church had evolved into a cult of 'correct beliefs' and in the process became an ally of colonial and other powers. The author pleads for a return to discipleship where following Jesus is about living (not believing) – living love, justice, living peace into the world.

Biblical scholar Marcus Borg described the earthly Jesus as a social prophet and a teacher of wisdom around whom a *movement* was founded. That really changes how we look at our faith. What happens when we define discipleship as being a follower of a movement rather than a member of a church? I have only a cursory knowledge of McClure's history but from what I've been able to piece together McClure began as a movement, as a movement that sought to follow Jesus, the social prophet and wisdom teacher. The very name McClure was chosen because its namesakes – Bob and Amy McClure – lived among the needy and enacted the love of God in the world. The idea that McClure was a 'movement' seemed to be in its very DNA as a building-less entity that gathered and dispersed from a rented space at Walter Murray Collegiate. Some of you know first-hand the challenges of converting an auditorium into a worship space and of renting an apartment for an office. I imagine meetings and study groups occurred more organically in people's homes where hospitality was present and relationships were built.

McClure's discipleship produced outreach activities known throughout Saskatoon presbytery – you were the congregation who surpassed its Mission and Service goals. You were the experts in welcoming and settling refugees. One person told me that

McClure gave away fifty percent of its revenue to mission and outreach work. Dale Morrison told me McClure never quite reached that goal, but tireless workers served up ice cream at the Ex determined that the proceeds would **flow out** to others in need. Eventually the McClure movement envisioned an outreach project that would support and sustain seniors. It sounds as if the church building was almost an afterthought, the emphasis being on providing an affordable, vibrant, community-centered place for seniors to live. Even after occupying this space the McClure movement continued to welcome refugees and imagine the next step in community for those whose physical capacities were waning. It sounds as if McClure was comprised more of disciples than members, that McClure was more a movement than an institution, more a “Jesus community” than a static church.

I am told that today is McClure’s 52nd birthday. This week I asked those in the Spiritual Conversation Groups what they thought McClure does best. Welcoming refugees, engaging in outreach, and nurturing community for seniors were still named as important missions. One person told me that she sometimes pauses and runs her hand over the outreach bulletin board both to bless the activities and to feel the energy of discipleship. Others named characteristics of the McClure movement - inclusive, affirming, welcoming, justice-seeking. One person declared simply – “McClure is my family”.

In another gathering I attended this week someone suggested that McClure was tired. I’m weeks away from officially becoming a ‘senior citizen’ and I know what it’s like to be tired. I greet most mornings with enthusiasm but if I don’t get my exercise in by lunch, it doesn’t happen. For decades I anticipated evening meetings as a continuation of the work day; now the energy it takes to go out is only offset by the sociability of the group I attend. When we are tired it is easier to drift from movement to church; from a discipleship identity to that of a church member; from exploring Jesus’ call in our day to simply maintaining “what we’ve always done.”

I don’t think McClure has abandoned being a movement or given up on discipleship but the risk is there. Sometimes I worry that the confusion I hear expressed about new visions and the reluctance to look at long standing traditions might jeopardize the McClure movement. I spoke to one person who told me that they haven’t, in fact, felt the McClure welcome – a relatively new person they come and go without really being noticed. When we add to tiredness and tradition the reality that the culture has moved beyond Sunday closing and prayer in schools we realize that church as institution has a shelf life.

I celebrate that McClure has determined not be palliative but to seek a new vision and to pursue a new mission. I celebrate that the McClure movement still wants to align itself with the values of Jesus and is seeking to dust off its passion to be a change-agent in a love-starved world. I celebrate that thinking people scrutinize traditional theologies yet insist that the way of Jesus is worth pursuing. I celebrate that men can gather together and speak about the reality of their lives with its mixture of struggle and blessing. I celebrate that people want to sit together and have spiritual conversations with one another. I celebrate that the Board chair and others are asking important questions about the difference between long standing tradition and new possibilities.

What is McClure's vision? What will McClure's mission be? Seventy people show up to learn about anxiety and depression – is that reality pointing McClure towards a mission? Who might tell the community of Rosewood that a justice seeking, affirming church exists down the street – is anyone talking? The covenant with Holy Spirit Roman Catholic Church was ground breaking in its day – could it be renewed by inviting the Ahmadiyyah Mosque into the relationship? St. Thomas-Wesley sits in the heart of the core community seeking to live as disciples – do we partner with them in their mission or give them our share of the revenue we've received from Third Avenue Church? If the goal is simply to fill this building with young families, or to make the stewardship campaign successful, or to enshrine the worship and music we've always done then we may just be a church after all. But if we are still a movement then we must find ways to leave this place and discover where Jesus is calling us to speak truth to power and to love to the lonely. I wonder if Jesus actually said go forth and make disciples? It seems much more likely to me that Jesus said, 'Go forth and **be** disciples and if you do, I will be with you until the end of time.' Amen.