Silver tea service

by Lillian Daniel in the September 8, 2009 issue

When I began my ministry at Church of the Redeemer, I worried each Sunday that the choir would outnumber the congregation. Everybody knew we had to grow. “We have to grow, you know,” they’d say, with all the enthusiasm of a person scheduling a dental appointment. “We need to attract new members and change,” they would say. There was desperation in the announcement, but a stoic resolve at the end, like when a surgeon announces, “We’ll have to take that thing out.”

Our beautiful New England sanctuary was built for greatness, the third building of a congregation gathered nearly two centuries ago. It is an elegant red brick structure, with white pillars, three great white doors and a steeple set back from a main street in New Haven, Connecticut. The church’s interior, with lofty ceilings, tall clear windows behind still more white pillars and spread-out pews, was meant to project space for God and for congregational growth. But after a couple of decades of membership decline, that cavernous interior simply projected emptiness. How could you ever fill up this grand church?

It was built for the days when people drove in to church from the suburbs. But what hope did churches in the city have now—there were way too many churches with expensive buildings, dwindling resources and wistful remembrances of a better time. We were like beautiful girls lining the wall at a dance where the boys had failed to show up.

At least that’s what I had been told, by the books I read and the conversations I had before I arrived at Church of the Redeemer. One pastor told me that he had commissioned a sociological study of our urban neighborhood, and the survey confirmed what we all knew—that there were way too many churches, and that the residents of this city neighborhood were “happily unchurched.” Long gone were the days when business and social connections came by means of the church.

Like so many other churches in the city, we had only a handful of children in the Sunday school, two of whom were mine. And we had a long list of what I began to call the “ghost families.” These were families who had once nurtured the Sunday

school, who had once worked hard to build the committees, who had once driven in from the suburbs for years with their children, who had once been gifted and dynamic leaders of the church. The current leaders would speak of the ghost families with a holy reverence. “If only you could have known them. They were such workers. How they struggled to turn things around.” Until they quit. They hadn’t died; they had just left.

The ghost families haunted me in those early years. A few of them quit just weeks before I arrived. Some of them were nice enough to call me at home before I came on board. “We’re tired, we’re exhausted, and we can’t keep going,” they’d say, as they explained a transfer to a thriving suburban church. “And we wanted to quit now, before you started, so that no one would blame you for our leaving.”

“Can’t you give me and this new ministry a chance?” I would ask over cookies and tea at their homes, where they tried to be kind but still eyed me like the drunk cousin who has come asking for money. No, they would say, after telling me everything that was wrong with the church and why they had given up on it.

After a few of these visits to the ghost families, I learned the drill. Having had to listen to what was wrong with the church they were leaving, I’d then have to listen as they told me about their new church—how *beautifully* the large Sunday school functioned, how *many* youth attended the youth group, how *inspiring* the preaching was, and how *thrilling* was the capital campaign, which had not felt like a burden but had strengthened the whole community.

“It sounds *wonderful*,” I said, determined to make one last cross-court eschatological shot. “But one day in the future, we could be like that too.” They smiled indulgently, like hardened ranchers in the company of a vegan. “Better for us to resign now, so that your feelings won’t be hurt when we resign later,” they said. “But good luck,” they would add, seeing me to the door and collecting my mug of cold tea. “It is a wonderful church. They deserve a wonderful minister.” But I wasn’t it. I was losing members before I had even preached my first sermon.

So still mourning the ghost families, our congregation had perhaps grown wary of newcomers. The members dwelled on the stories of those ghosts who had once fought valiantly and left.

I thought I was ready for all this. I had read all the books about pastoring small churches, written mostly by pastors who had turned such churches into enormous

ones. I immersed myself in the study of church growth, attending seminars and reading voraciously, particularly drawn to the books that included some kind of how-to section. I listened to tapes of pastors who had performed market surveys of growing suburbs before they opened the perfect church for that group's demographic and marketing needs. I learned that my church had all the markings of the type least likely to grow—founded in the 1800s, in a city, with no parking lot. But I also soaked up the ten steps to fixing all that, the workbook that would turn us around, the self-study that would break it all open, delighting in the great thoughts of great pastors who had grown their mighty churches—with Jesus' help, of course.

The Protestant church long ago rejected the doctrine of "works righteousness," which claimed that we could earn our own salvation through our own good works. The church rejected this doctrine in favor of a view in which salvation is not ours to earn, but comes from the generosity of God's grace. But with small churches wanting to grow, we can sometimes lose sight of grace and put our faith in our own efforts instead.

As I look back, I suppose that the church-growth movement had so soaked my consciousness that I had come to believe that my call was to shape the church, and I was far less interested in being shaped by the church. My calling was to fix, not to be fixed. We all knew we needed to grow, that we had much work ahead, but it turns out that grace was waiting for us, waiting to be noticed.

The first Sunday I preached at the church, two men visited for the first time. Tim and Jack came to coffee hour and introduced themselves as "partners" to one older member of the church. "And what kind of business are you two in?" she inquired. They shrugged, and politely explained their two entirely separate careers.

"Two such handsome young men," she told me later, with a wink. "But these young people . . . how can you be partners if you don't work in the same business? Perhaps they're also in investments."

The week after my very first Sunday and theirs, I called on the two men in their beautifully appointed Victorian home. We sat on velvet-covered love seats and sipped tea from translucent English china. My hands shook as I tried to balance a cookie on the side of my saucer. This would be my first effort at evangelism in my new church, if you didn't count my failed attempts to keep the members who left before my arrival. I was ready for a clean start. I said a little prayer and made three

promises to myself as I surveyed the floral wallpaper, the polished antiques, the tasseled silk lampshades and the porcelain figurines: One, that I would handle myself with appropriate poise. Two, that I would not make a big deal about the fact that these men were gay. And three, that I would not convey an air of desperation in my efforts to recruit them. I took a deep breath and another cookie.

Then I noticed that I had tracked dirt onto the exquisite Oriental rug and that my tea was filling my little saucer. The first cookie was starting to decompose in the liquid and float. I wondered how I could possibly get it out of there. As I tried using the second cookie as a pusher, it began to soak up tea as well, and I realized I was creating a little cookie quicksand that was threatening to spill over the edge.

“So tell us about your church,” they said. Ah yes, I thought to myself, the perfect opportunity for me to reflect on my seven days of ministry and all the knowledge I’d gleaned about our community from the members I drove away before I even started.

“Well, I should tell you up front that we don’t have any other gay couples in our church,” I announced. I put down my teacup with a bang and a splash of cookie mush hit the antique table. They looked at me strangely.

“But you’re welcome to come.” I continued, “In fact, we desperately need new members or—people say—we’ll close down. We’ve been losing members for decades, and I just got here. But I’ve been reading a lot of great books about how to grow the church.”

So with all three promises to myself broken, I took a deep breath, wiped the spot of cookie mush off the antique table and started over.

When I described the church I wanted these two men to join, it was not the church in the present but the church I dreamed it could be, a place where all people would be welcome and God’s grace would abound. I waxed eloquently about a church that probably bore little resemblance to the one they had visited. They listened politely to my big plans. Finally Jack interrupted me to say, “Since receiving your phone call, we’ve prayed about it, and we believe that God sent us to church on your very first Sunday for a reason.” A few weeks later, Tim and Jack were part of our first new-member class, which included a newly baptized lawyer from Taiwan, a Yale physics student and a 92-year-old artist.

Years later, we talked about that conversation in Jack and Tim's living room. It turns out that to Tim and Jack my awkward and clumsy statement of welcome, the one I had wanted to shove back into my mouth in sophisticated liberal nonchalance, was meaningful. It turns out that my trip to their beautiful home gave them a chance to show me what their ministry with our church would become—a ministry of hospitality. While I had been thinking about how to welcome them, they had been thinking about how to welcome me. Hebrews 13:2 says, "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for in doing so, some have entertained angels unawares." It strikes me that on that awkward visit, all of us had been entertaining angels unawares.

Shortly after they had joined our small church, by which time a little of my grand vision had happened and much of it had been exposed as nonsense, Jack and Tim invited the entire congregation to their house for an Epiphany party. When children ask me to explain the word *epiphany* I describe it as a light bulb turning on, a sudden recognition, or an "Ah ha!" moment. Around New Haven, the Latino community is large enough that this 12th day of Christmas is a city and school holiday known as Three Kings Day, a highlight of the year in terms of shared meals and worship that made our Congregational observance of the day look sadly perfunctory. So the idea of an Epiphany party filled me with delight.

By now the congregation had sampled Tim's gourmet baking at church coffee hour and raved at his skill. Having visited their home, I knew that this party would be grand and extravagant.

Church members had stopped trying to fix the two men up with the single women, but still, I worried. I knew that Jack and Tim had taken a leap of faith in joining our church, instead of another one more explicitly welcoming of gays. I knew that for Jack and Tim, the hospitality they gave so generously could well have been denied to them in the past. I knew that our church and I were learning hospitality all over again as we moved away from being desperate to grow toward being welcoming for the sake of God and the stranger, away from a desire for the church of the past to a vision for the church of the future. Would people at church understand the significance of the invitation to an Epiphany party? Or would busy schedules and bad weather conspire to keep us isolated from one another?

The night of the party the weather was icy and the roads slick. I arrived late myself, terrified of what I might find. Yet when we pulled up to the house the lights from the

window and laughter behind the door pulled us into a stuffed house more crowded with church members than our average Sunday service. Everybody had shown up.

Children ran up and down the stairs, making their parents gasp as they brushed by the many fragile things. Some of the little ones marveled at Jack and Tim's Christmas tree, which was the biggest I had ever seen. Every ornament was Victorian. The older members had set up camp in comfort on those same love seats I had perched on so awkwardly. Later I realized that while I had been wondering who would come, they had been organizing rides for one another and reaching out to the newest members. Now they looked right at home, the women still in their bright Sunday suits and sensible shoes. They balanced tea sandwiches and petits fours on their saucers with ease. One of them gestured to Tim, who was standing solemn sentry at the enormous silver punch bowl, ladling pink liquid into tiny cups.

"Now this is a party the way we used to do them," she said. All the ladies nodded in recognition, pointing out the doilies under the cookies and the lavishly set table, and the home arts that they worried had passed away in the march of time. Tim and Jack glowed under the endorsement on a snowy night in the midst of a cold world that didn't always appreciate their lives. Here around the tea table, generations spoke through the practice of hospitality about what changes in life and what does not.

"Today women don't have time to do all this," the women said. "You women today, you work and have careers, and children," they said, glancing toward their new pastor as a member of this species. "But this party just takes me back to the old days."

It took us all back, but forward too. For hospitality is not a lost art. It is a practice, and an act of faith. It is one that our church came to practice well, thanks in large part to Jack and Tim and many others who naturally bring beauty and welcome into everyday encounters.

I would eventually discover that I was wrong that day in Tim and Jack's living room—our church already had gay members. We would go on to receive more, and to write a statement marking ourselves as open and affirming to all people, regardless of sexual orientation. We would also grow inter racially, and to wrestle with differences of class. But to my mind, our congregation's practice of hospitality was honed by the Holy Spirit at that Epiphany party, when on a cold winter's night people who had been strangers suddenly strangely warmed one another.

The hospitality went many ways. Our hosts invited us into their lives and their world. The church accepted the invitation, which in turn invited Jack and Tim deeper into the church's life. But first God makes the invitations—when we take a moment to welcome a newcomer, when we make an awkward visit, when we serve a cup of tea, when we entertain angels unaware.

Built for a time when ladies had time for elegant teas, our church, like many New England Congregational churches, had an old-fashioned ladies parlor that we seldom used. Grand in proportion and furnished with oriental antiques in need of repair, too big for our average events, the parlor was dusty, tattered and seldom used. It wasn't long before Tim, who had taught himself how to upholster, had befriended a long-term member who could hang wallpaper. Between the two of them they used money raised by a series of elegant dinners to renovate the ladies parlor. It ended up looking a lot like Jack and Tim's living room, with handmaid silk Roman shades, pink Victorian wallpaper full of exotic birds and flowers, and velvet love seats.

Some people were shocked to see such an extravagant room and more shocked to see how we came to use it. After all the work the men had put in, we couldn't continue to call it the ladies parlor, especially when we wanted it to be used often and by everybody. So gradually it came to be called the upstairs parlor.

The congregation came to be known for our lavish teas after church, when we pulled out all the good china. The older members taught the newer members how to make those tiny cucumber tea sandwiches from another era. Sometimes as a congregation we wondered if the frilly fun of silver teas might seem self-indulgent to an outsider. But it felt like ministry to us. We knew, for instance, that the parlor was restored not just for our pleasure but also to host the nursing mothers' group, the environmental activists, the labor unions, the teenagers and the social workers who meet there for retreat. When people find out they will be meeting in the upstairs parlor, generally they take in their breath. "Surely this room isn't for us?" they ask. But it really is. And the ornate wallpaper takes in the shouting of union stewards, the tears of a woman with postpartum depression, the strategizing of community mediators. A few antique chairs get nicked along the way.

I recall the scripture in which the disciple who will become the betrayer, Judas, castigates Jesus for allowing Mary to perfume his feet when there were poor people to be fed, and Jesus' angry response. "The poor you will always have with you," he said. But Jesus would be there only for a little while. And Judas, who had lost his

sense of extravagant beauty, would soon lose his sense and his life.

We’re not Jesus, but like him, we are here on earth only for a little while. And so we long for a life lived richly and deeply. We know there is something wrong with the patterns of a world in which people starve while others live in absurd wealth. We know there is something wrong when homeless people die of exposure after funding for their shelter is cut. We know there is something wrong when so many families are too poor to be able to serve their kids breakfast, so it becomes a part of every child’s New Haven public school day, leaving even less time for learning. There is so much wrong in the world that Christians must attend to. It can feel overwhelming to turn to the practice of hospitality in a broken and inhospitable world.

Yet we found that the hospitality of a silver tea offers both pleasant comfort and prophetic correction. At the teas I looked around to see people who do not have this elegance at home enjoy it with others. I saw people who have no china of their own get to own the china of the church. People whose usual lunch is a yogurt slurped down while they stand in front of the refrigerator got to sit down instead in the parlor before a lovely plate full of treats and gaze upon floral arrangements that seem too grand for any one house but are fitting for the whole people of God. There, in the church’s shared finery, we could dream of a day when the beautiful things in life would all be shared.

Busy parents who think they are too busy during the week to sit down to eat with their children stood around the old sink after silver teas lovingly washing each piece of china, and they wondered if a sliver of this hospitality might find its way back home. Teen agers, who claim to love nothing more than eating fast food in a car, instead played mother and ladled out the sherbet punch to the children, who marveled that they were allowed to use such pretty things. In a world of hoarding, extravagance breeds extravagance. Together in our old formal church parlor we were practicing hospitality, taking one another in and receiving one another’s gifts.

A recent widow who lives alone got to preside over the pouring of the tea. She sat behind a silver tea service that generations before her have washed, polished and drunk from. Here she presided over a crowd. As she was pulled out of loneliness, tentatively emerging for a moment from the shadow of her grief, there at the head table she poured out for others what has already been poured out for her.

This article is adapted from Liliian Daniel's book This Odd and Wondrous Calling: The Public and Private Lives of Two Ministers, *coauthored with Martin B. Copenhaver and*

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