

Cruise Ship or Mission Outpost?

Our frequent RV travels sometimes put us in just the right place at just the right time. So it was with a recent trip to the Columbia River Gorge to meet up with family. We planned our return trip through Salem, Oregon to attend a special event at the United Methodist Church Annual Conference. We'd heard about the event in our Florence church, as church members and friends had been encouraged to attend a presentation by Mike Slaughter, Pastor of the Ginghamburg UMC in Ohio, and author of the provocative book "Change the World".

We found a delightful RV park at the north end of Salem, and signed up for Friday and Saturday nights so that we'd have the day free for the Saturday Conference session. The Conference was held at the Salem Conference Center, and we arrived to find a large gathering of several hundred Pastors and lay leaders filling a hall so large that two large video screens were required to project the image of the speaker to those seated towards the back.

Slaughter surely didn't disappoint. His inspirational presentation was punctuated by various short video clips to illustrate his points and delivered with style, ease, and at times humor. The core of his message might most succinctly be summed up in the words "rethink church".

One slide projected the words "Cruise Ship or Mission Outpost". These words, suggesting a dilemma for today's churches, conjured up quite different images. The "cruise ship" model implies that the the members are essentially passengers seeking comfort, while leaving the control, direction and work to others. This model essentially sees the church as a physical structure, where similar people meet to address their spiritual needs. The "mission outpost" model sees the church quite differently. Jesus did not direct his disciples to build churches, but rather to take the church "out into the world".

The message was clearly one of challenge to the church models that have evolved over the past several decades. We inferred the suggestion that these models had been *assembled* as a result of comfortable traditions, rather than *designed* to follow the explicit teachings of the bible. In short, over time the church has drifted a bit off course from its original purpose to extend its mission beyond the confines of the physical building; and in so doing has not responded to the visions and needs of more recent generations. The result is what we've seen over the past several decades -- a church whose demographics is much older, and whose numbers are in

decline. Slaughter's proposed response is a church that would reinvent itself by literally rethinking the meaning of "church", and become more actively engaged in the problems of the world around us.

The challenge posed by Slaughter to the Pastors was to consider their ultimate purpose. Is it to attract the world into their church? Or is it instead be to send their church out into the world?

Slaughter's presentation, while both provocative and challenging, was obviously well received by the gathering of Pastors and lay leaders. Doubtless this message is something that we all need to thoughtfully consider as we respond to the growing need to "rethink church".

[Reporters' Comment:] *With over five hours of in-depth presentation, it's of course not possible to do more than try to capture one of the key themes from Mike Slaughter's presentation. Suffice it to say we found it both profound and inspirational. In our personal church experience we've found that our time in church tends to influence our decisions, actions, and relationships with others well beyond the four walls of the church; and in that manner is consistent with the theme presented so well by Mike Slaughter. For that reason we're inclined to think that the "new model" he describes is perhaps best seen not as a "replacement" for current church models, but rather as a necessary enhancement that is both supplemental and complementary to much of what is already in place. Said otherwise, it might be viewed as an essential new avenue for expanding the role and image of the church in ways that have the potential to capture the enthusiasm, support, and participation among younger generations; and in so doing to carry out more fully the admonition to "go out into the world".*