

COVENANT OF THE WELCOME TABLE

The first in Hope Church's three week Stewardship Campaign, "Many Members, One Table."

About ten years ago, there was a blue-chip investment firm that flew a suit from the high-rise canyons of Boston to the mesas of the Navajo nation to explain to a group of Arizona Navajos why they should invest for old age.

Hoping to hook the 95 Navajos gathered, he started by asking how many had heard of Willard Scott. None had. The representative explained that Willard Scott was the former weatherman of the Today Show who often featured 100-year-olds on their birthdays.

"You know what?" the rep queried. "More people are living to be a hundred."

No one reacted. On the reservation, people die younger than the general population. The pitch didn't even cross the plate.

Undaunted, he persevered by telling them about health consciousness and New Year's resolutions to lose weight.

Again, blank stares. The Navajos don't make New Year's resolutions, don't have health clubs and aren't obsessed about weight.

And so it went. What does Athens have to do with Jerusalem? Clearly Boston had nothing to do with Gallup, New Mexico. The Bostonian wasn't able to cross the cultural divide in this low-income population where they don't even have Navajo words for "savings" or "retirement."

A local resident explained that for the Navajo, "Money is different. It's there to be spent. If you have some, you help your family."

Later, the tribal offices set up their own investment team, led by a 24-year-old investment-savvy Navajo. This time, this team was able to get the pitch into the strike zone where the people could hit the ball. They emphasized family, and how saving can help others, not just the individual.

"We don't target only the participants, we target families." With unemployment as high as 70 percent on the reservation, the team hopes that by encouraging those who have jobs to save money they'll be better able to help their relatives in the long run. It isn't investing for selfish reasons. It's investing for the benefit of their wider family.

Since then, there's been a 10 percent increase in the investment plan participation. In a culture that's truly family-based, taking a family approach works, savings grow, and in the long run, the family benefits.

Even Blue Blood Bostonian Brahmin investment firms get it. Stocks bought today are not just for retirement; they're there to pass on to the children, who pass them on to their children, and on and on, never spending the principle and reinvesting a percentage of the dividends, buying more as necessary and watching the whole thing grow generation after generation. It's a way for families to pool their income so that eventually no one in their family lacks.

Of course, not everyone can do this. Taking the short view is tough enough for most folks trying to make ends meet, pay mortgages, finance cars, fund orthodontics. Even tougher in the last couple of years. The long, long view is an idea many folks never think of, let alone dream about. Investing for the long term is a hard sell to much of America.

It's a hard sell for the church, too. But the early church gave it a try.

They agreed to pool their resources. "No one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common" (Acts 4:32). They sacrificed. They sold what they had, land or houses, and turned it over to the group - and as a result, no one lacked.

They worked together. They invested themselves with social capital. They created community. They took chances. They invested in each other and everybody's needs were met. "There was not a needy person among them" (4:34).

So, can the early 3M church match the success of the early 1M church? Despite the recession, we live in a time of unparalleled prosperity. We are a society and a people steeped in abundance. Yet the church and our communities are filled with needy people. Some need money. Others need love. Some need hope. Others need joy. Some need solace. Others need prayer. All need God. That's the bear market news.

But we're a part of a bull market church. Needy people have a lot to give. The church is a like mutual funding company.

Lots of folks who come to church lack something, and often are seeking that something in church ... from us, from God.

Need: Some lack companionship because they're widowed and lonely.

Investment: Invest yourself in a friendship with an elder and see what good can come from it for everybody.

Need: Some come to church because they hurt inside.

Investment: Invest your ear time for their mouth time.

Need: Some lack heat, or food, or school clothes, or money for the doctor.

Investment: Sink your money in the church's Social Justice and mission account.

Need: Some Out-of-hand kids today need a helping hand.

Investment: Invest yourself in the Sunday school, youth programming, tutoring and mentoring.

Need: Some have been rejected, oppressed, minimized by society, church, family and their hearts are broken, and they think there is no place to go.

Investment: Be a steward of the welcome table that we set here at Hope Church.

Beloved, you might say that the church is an investment club, only our capital is more than money. We invest our time, energy, talents, hopes, spirit and cash into our church. We invest ourselves in our covenant with God – to share the gospel of Jesus, to make a sanctuary for all, to set the table for welcome.

What would the church look like if it could be a people, a place, where no one lacked? A place where we invested ourselves in each other? A place where no one was needy? A place where no one felt unwelcomed?

The church would look like the people of God acting with one mind and one heart.

Church isn't just for us. It's here because ancestors in faith built it, mind and heart, sweat and bones, calluses and money. They invested in us long before we even were born. They carried the gospel against all odds and persecution. They questioned and wondered about what God was saying and teaching. They struggled with questions of faith and philosophy. They met in homes and corn fields and on the beach, in huts and cathedrals and churches just like this one. They trained and educated and built and broke down and brought casseroles and set the table with love, grace and hope.

Sometimes they built buildings and raised funds and invited the community in for supper, and prayer and song. They provided sanctuaries and street missions, Sunday school rooms, and electronic prayer chains, parking lots, church bells, pianos, organs, pulpits, carpets, heaters and kitchens.

In our case they sustained a presence in this place, in Jamaica Plain, and fought to affirm all people and be a progressing voice for Christianity... so that together, we might proceed from this sanctuary to transform the world, one Holy meal at a time.

We need to calculate church today with the same equation. It's not just for us that the church is here. It's for the people who have not yet arrived, the broken and lost who have not found out that God loves them unconditionally. AND, It's for our children's children.

But even more significantly for me – we are called to be stewards. We are moved out of gratitude to be faithful stewards because God made a covenant with us. *“I am your God and You are my People”*. *I will always love you and always be with you and always forgive you*. How can we respond with anything other than our whole selves.

Beloved, the covenant God entered into with us is a two way covenant. All God asks is that we love God and love our neighbors. All God asks is that we do justice, love kindness and walk humbly-with God.

Jesus said, "Store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal" (Matthew 6:20).

Friends, invest yourself in the ministry we call church; invest yourself in the people of God. Invest yourself in love and grace and goodness. Invest yourselves in sharing the gospel of love and forgiveness. Invest yourselves in setting this table with your commitment and presence. Invest yourself in the covenant God offered the moment you were created.

And invest yourself in sharing that covenant, here at the welcome table – where all are welcome and all are fed with the most nourishing bread and cup one can find!

Resources: Homiletics Magazine, Spring 2000.