

STA Outreach - Jan 5th, 2011

Dear Friends,

This week marks the end of two full years of our weekly outreach at the Bus Plaza...which we'll continue, by the way. It's been a delightful, productive and growing time for each of us. Thank you for your supporting emails and prayerful assistance! In gratitude we offer this in-depth report and hope it stimulates thought and action throughout our movement:

A person who very much supports the Spokane outreach recently asked, "How many of those six or seven thousand people you've shared Christian Science with at the Bus Plaza over the past two years now attend one of our CS churches?" Fair question. The immediate answer, incredibly, is that there have been visitations but we are not aware of anyone who regularly attends services at the several area churches as a result of talking with us or getting a copy of Science and Health from this outreach.

How could that be????!! It just doesn't seem statistically possible----there have been many, many people clearly and deeply touched by our words and message over the last 24 months; a number have said they would visit our churches; some have sought out practitioners; some have come back to our table and reported improvements in their lives and even healings through reading S&H; some have reported loving the book, reading and re-reading it; people frequently come back to get another copy for a friend or relative because it seems so important to them; some have subsequently used a Reading Room; and many have been given a slip of paper that lists the Sentinel Radio Program, internet websites and addresses of local churches and Reading Rooms. So why aren't our churches flooded with curious seekers?

And the follow-on question: What does this imply for our movement? If people like the message but don't follow up to become "churched", what does that mean for the human structure of Christian Science?

As most of you know, we have from the very beginning made it our policy to focus on sharing the Comforter in the most loving way, without a hidden agenda to fill church pews. People recognize and respect that stance for its clarity and honesty. We knew that was Christ Jesus' way. We also knew that people would be led to follow the Comforter in whatever ways made sense to them. Why, then, are none of the 4,400 book recipients in our churches on Sundays and Wednesdays? Some suggest that "younger people aren't interested in church", "Science and Health is too hard to read", etc.

Recently a new and startling thought has come to the surface concerning this outreach and our whole movement: could it be that those obvious weary wanderers/seekers, and even those who already hold the cup of cold water in their hands, here and everywhere, ARE INDEED READY FOR OUR MESSAGE, but perhaps "OUR CHURCH" as currently practiced, is NOT READY FOR THEM?

Are we churchgoers perhaps resistant to the very idea of newcomers who may be less inhibited or less prosperous or less educated or different looking? Have we become comfortable as small, sincere, clubbish groups functioning as branch churches or societies? Do we feel confident our services will inspire newcomers and are not perfunctory exercises? Would newcomers be impressed by an array of loving, healing acts they see or hear about our members performing in the community? And...do some combination of these "repellant" ideas reside in the collective community thought?

Those are definitely provocative questions. And they go much deeper than whether or not there is a gracious greeter at the door of the church, or whether there are cookies after the service, or the nature of the music provided.

As if those questions aren't quite enough on the plate, in subsequent conversations about this, another universal element was injected: as one church member described it, "our poor lost children". (That's not accurate metaphysically, of course, but it represents a heartfelt human expression.) That is, our children who spent their formative years in Christian Science Sunday Schools rarely continue as active students and church participants after age 19. It doesn't matter what part of the country one considers, or how wonderful the experience was for those young ones, the results are and have been the same for all generations of Sunday School students growing up after the Second World War. And if they, who got all the loving Sunday School teacher attention and picnics and camaraderie and up-close observation of adult Christian Scientists, have chosen not to continue after age 19, is that a flashing traffic signal telling us that what hasn't been working for our younger generations over the past 60 years must be adjusted before divine Mind will lead them and all those others directly to "church" as Mrs. Eddy defined it?

This offers a great deal prayerfully to ponder.

For starters, isn't it truly a call to re-examine exactly how we are demonstrating Mrs. Eddy's beautifully comprehensive definition of "church" in a 21st century context? Does church mean a building where services are held twice a week?...an Internet connection to services or other inspirational activities?...a specific kind of organization and hierarchy? Is it possibly a remarkably flexible concept? These are essential questions.

If we choose to directly face these questions it can become a wonderful opportunity to examine the very nature of our understanding of, and commitment to, this ultimate Science.

Here are some thoughts about ways to address those questions:

1. We need to be honest with ourselves. There's nothing unscientific about facing the fact that our human church structure is in serious decline. And is that a bad thing? Maybe it's just an alert to lead us to examine how "church" can best be practiced in very different ways from the traditional brick-and-mortar fashion: maybe a new awareness of how some things have NOT been working will lead to creative new ideas that better fit our contemporary thought community. Mrs. Eddy even suggested that we would eventually outgrow church as constituted in her era.
2. We need to share more directly with each other, individually and collectively. What makes some churches/societies successful? What impedes others? Do our traditional sharing and teaching activities for those beyond Sunday School age rely too much on passive listening? And there are wonderful, practicing students of Christian Science who are not affiliated with a particular church/society; how can their activities best be incorporated into a mutually-inclusive effort to share the Comforter?
3. We need an honest evaluation from a good sampling of those who grew up in our Sunday Schools (and perhaps graduated from The Principia) but are not currently active students of Christian Science. What were the factors that caused them to move on to other (or no) spiritual pursuits? What would attract them to re-engage? What barriers do they see in that path for them? What are their suggestions?
4. We need to consider how far our human movement has fallen into the trap of having format and organization become sacred. Just as the Pharisees' religious sentiment focused on ritual, and the Christian movement became the Catholic church focused on ritual, how, in the broadest sense, has our movement become emmeshed in perfunctory ritual that has nothing to do with the impulse to move "from sense to Soul"?

5. And, we need to consider how the growing, vibrant Christian churches around us may have "out-Christianed" us in some respects. Many provide consistent warmth, love, fellowship, compassion, sharing, and giving in ways that are far beyond our norm. Many even work hard on prayer-based healing. We can certainly learn from some aspects of their examples if we are open to learn.

Far from fearing the answers to any of these questions, wouldn't a clear-eyed introspective look seem, all in all, a wonderful opportunity to examine the essence of what the 21st century Christian Science movement actually is and can be?

Some of the above may seem jarring. But after talking one-on-one with quite a few thousand people during this Spokane outreach, we have come to some inescapable conclusions concerning our particular clientele: (1) our movement is essentially unknown and invisible, especially to those under age 50; (2) many people are open to the Comforter's message...they just have to hear it in ways that are in tune with contemporary thought; (3) there are very, very few (maybe a dozen out of our thousands of discussions) folks who attack Christian Science or challenge its treatment of children, etc---those old fears are essentially groundless; (4) the questions we have most needed to be prepared to answer are "What is Christian Science?" (in 25 words or less!), "What can I do to escape from an addiction?", "How can you say there is no devil?---it says so right in the Bible, which is the word of God", (these questions may vary a bit, but represent the essence of what we CS's need to know); and (5) we need some better mechanisms to reach and begin the conversation with newcomers, and then some better mechanisms for continuing dialogue/study with them as well as new Sunday School graduates...and each other.

The good news is that we clearly have the tools to address these issues. Let's do it!

Lovingly,

Spokane Outreach group