

Part 3: Tilting at Windmills- Challenging a Way of Life

Written by Calvin Fox

Tuesday, 13 January 2009 11:31 -

This is the day when people increasingly devalue the local institutional church in favor of the wider, "invisible" or spiritual Body of Christ. In the County where our church was there was (and is) a strong sense that all Christians in the area are the church. Groups, especially in the small towns throughout the County, had their own buildings, of course, for Worship with family and friends and for Weddings and Funerals. And the building often functioned as a community center for all kinds of non church activities important to folks who lived nearby. Each Church supported a Pastor (often part-time) to care for their spiritual needs, especially in times of crisis. The important thing was for all these usually small churches to co-operate and never to compete. All the churches were important and more or less equal in importance. Most shared in common basic conservative Beliefs and Values.

The idea of intentionally building up a particular church numerically was not very important; in fact, the very idea was opposed by many as unchristian and unnecessary. Actually, most people in the County did not attend any Protestant church and there were plenty of souls to go around, even if every church doubled or tripled in number. That was not a pressing concern. They gave lip service to evangelism, but had no burden for it and did not really share my zeal for outreach to the unsaved and unchurched. All folks were by and large content and conservative about their church. I was not. I had a passion for winning souls and for church growth. This was roundly criticized by some as not spiritual and maybe even self-serving on my part. I was criticized as having an "edifice complex", even by people who were concerned about increasing the size of the buildings for their farms and businesses. They saw a need to expand those things but saw no need to enlarge the church.

At the root of our disagreement about church growth was the definition of "church". I knew when we went to Vermont that many of the local churches there had come together a few years before to form the United Christian Academy (UCA). A friend of ours is now the headmaster and seems to be doing a good job there, but from the beginning I had a feeling that UCA would be a serious problem for our church and my pastorate. And I was correct. I am not a keen advocate for private Christian schools. They do meet needs of some Christian families and children, but most of the children in our the church and town went to public schools and others were being home schooled. The church ministered to families and children involved in all three types of schooling. I was Pastor to all the families. But the families of children in UCA were (and are) very committed to the growth and well being of that school. Very! It is part of what it means to be family. The school, including fund raisers, the sports programs and the annual special events took precedence over the local church. Loyalties were divided. I saw my work as caring for the Church, not the school; but many of the members were involved in both and when there were conflicts, the school won.

In my mind, the church was responsible to provide a good Christian education for all of them. I saw a lot of money and time that the church needed being given instead to the school. Key members of the church were teachers or on staff at the school. Attention to church activities, especially Sunday School and Youth Group, suffered because, in my opinion, time, talent and money they needed were given to support UCA. The Christian Education of the public school and home schooled children was getting short shrift (minimal attention). This did not bother the church families whose children went to the School because they were (theoretically) getting a

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full Christian education there. This was a serious problem to me. That it was so made it a serious problem to these members who did not understand why I was not throwing my support behind the school. After all, the main argument went, we are all Christians and both the school and the church are doing the Lord's work and are equally important. In practice, they were not equal. I had a difficult time with this state of co-existence. I did not agree at all with the idea that church and school were equal. I am wholeheartedly committed to the church. So is Christ. The issue that divided us on this was the definition of church. If it is the spiritual body of all believers in an area than everything and every thing Christians do is the church in action and should be given support including money, time and personnel. The local institutional church was just one of many worthwhile causes. Not to me! Christ instituted a local, organized visible church with a very unique mission. No para-church organization even comes close and should not be considered of equal importance. I have a real problem with all para-church organizations (there were a few others being supported by the Christians in Vermont besides the school. All competed for the time, talent and money of our church members). Building up the local church in every sense takes top priority. I said so. Some strongly disagreed.

I must mention another area of honest disagreement: sports. I have written that family and community were very important to the people of the County where the church was. And very important to both family and community were organized sports. Every Season has its special attraction. Hockey, Soccer and Basketball are especially huge. Skiing, snowmobiling and hunting are also big for many. All of these require time and money. Families travel hours and many miles to follow their children or share with their children in all of these activities. This is warp and woof of their lives. It is the fabric, not for everyone, but for most, in which children and parents are very caught up from childhood and from generation to generation. I did not expect this or realize when we moved there how very important sports were to the people, and particularly to the "people of influence" in the church. Life there revolves around the Seasons and the Seasons revolve around the sports- and this is true no matter what work the parents do for a living. These folks may live in a rural area, but they are on the road and on the go with sports whenever they can, including Sundays. I was not into any of these activities. None. I tried to share their excitement, but I couldn't. I had one purpose for living in the North Country- to build the local church. In retrospect, I understand why my Pastorate there was derailed. I took the command of Christ literally, "seek ye first the Kingdom of God". Conflict, I suspect, was inevitable. I was now 65. It was time to hang up the gloves. Most folks were just not into church the way I was and had been all my life. The "people of influence" and the way things are done in that County were too much. It was time to retire or at least move on. But it still hurts. We tried so hard and gave it our all. We loved them. Several people came to saving faith. Many have told me they grew in their faith under my preaching and teaching. My wife and I visited in homes and spent precious time with many families that seemed helpful to all. And we know several troubles marriages were mended. For all of this we are very thankful. Oh yes, a building was built and new members were added.