

LEADERSHIP RETREAT – SALEM UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

I reach the Conference Center (20 Soundview Avenue White Plains, NY 10606) around 9:15. The center is a nondescript aluminum and glass one story building. Nothing special.

126P

As I walk to the main door, I meet Pinckney who was coming from another part of the parking lot. We greet cordially and he asks whether “your assistant is joining us”.

When I get into the room, there are two men and two women at one table loudly exchanging joking comments {of them is Mitzie Nelson to whom I will speak later} “she told me it’s more blessed to give!,” (as the agenda is being passed) “is this a test?” “open book!”

306

{(=the meeting has not yet started=)}

166P

9:25 a dozen people come in. One of them asks me “are you a speaker?” “No, a visitor” “Like me”

During that time, Pinckney set a few things up and then sits by himself at the head table looking somewhat vague. He does not participate in any of the joking and I do not see anyone approaching him.

176P

{this will be the pattern throughout the day. He appeared engaged with the audience only during the on times}

178P

All the tables have filled in, including the one where I sit {I had sensed that my table was not people’s first choice until there was no other choice}. Zenora Hamm sits at this table. We nod pleasantly. The assistant pastor, Richard Hayes, also sits at the table. He and Hamm get into a exchange, the beginning of which I miss: “you have a problem with Wesley then! It was a direct quote ... I’ll give you the sermon ... What was your issue?” “... elitism ...”

179P

180P

Easy gospel is playing softly in the background. People talk in low voices, some read the agenda.

9:40

{(=the meeting has started=)}

A.P.: “Good morning ... thank you for coming ... this is a time for meditation, reflexion, discernment, conversation, preparation, discovery, ... worship drawing closer to God. Turn to James chapter 4 7-11 {about the “causes of division”}

While he starts to read, I fumble looking for the place, and so does the man on my right (I found out later that he is Gary Byrd) who mutters something about using a different Bible, “where is he now?” Byrd gets a large version of the King James Bible and re-read the passage in that translation

{I had experienced and observed similar fumbling at the Salvation Army; it appears common that pastor and people do not use the same Bible and so are reading different translation; this makes extra deliberative activity necessary.}

683

A.P. then reads a commentary on the passage from James. Some people listen to him, others continue reading in their Bibles. A.P. keeps repeating “draw close to God” “join Jesus in mission and ministry”

“Let us pray” head bow down while he improvises

9:30

A.P. introduces me. I make a short statement while distributing the handout I had prepared. I made a point of using his list of what this was a time for by saying something like “from my point of view this is also ‘a time for education’” A few people respond affirmatively (as is done during sermons).

A.P. “Questions?” {none}

“we need to discover who we are, what are our gifts, what we are good at, what we can use by the power of the Holy Spirit ... discover what God wants us to do , where he wants us to go ... to be instruments of transformation

A.P.: “I like this prayer from Mother Theresa.” He proceeds to read it

<http://home.comcast.net/~motherteresasite/prayers.html>

684

A.P., very theatrically “Please close the doors!”

{(=the retreat has **really** started=)}

Matthew Chapter 6 verse 6 “when you pray, close the doors”

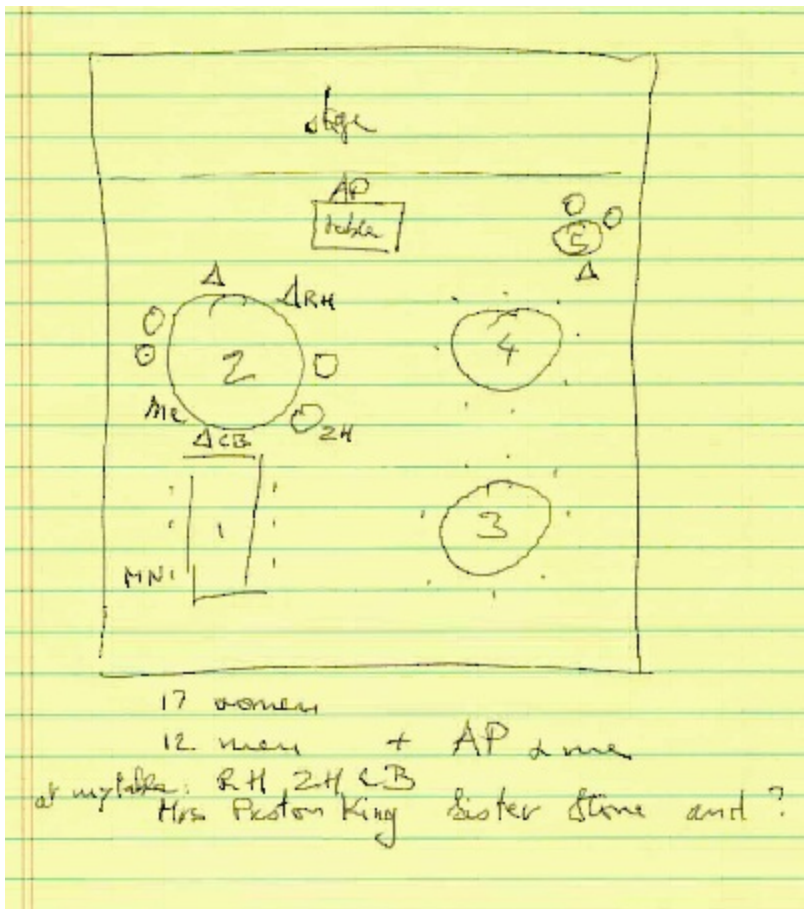
“Brother ? Lock us in!!”

A.P. reads, slowly, with many pauses, from a book *The presence based church* by Terry Teykl (2003),. Four types of churches: 1) the Martha church where everything is very well organized and runs like clockwork with many committees and many people on each “is this like Salem?”; 2) the Mary church where things are more disorganized, the services vary as people’s needs change from Sunday to Sunday “is this like Salem?”; 3) the consumer church which caters to whatever individuals want and do not try to change them; 4) the presence church “but I don’t want to read about this one”

{for whatever reason I get to be sure that this is what he wants Salem to fall under but wants to create a kind of suspense}

Salem sounds more like a Martha church than a Mary church. Think about the church we have been overtime.

I want you to discuss in each of your table what kind of church you think you are. You will need a recorder, a reporter, and a time keeper (he says this somewhat theatrically). You have 10 minutes.



Before this happens, Zonora Hamm asks the question I would have asked:

ZH: "What about the presence church?"

AP: "I am being deliberately vague. It is about people who are open to God as the body of the church"

The audience breaks by table. ZH organizes the group and then kind of apologizes "I didn't mean to take over as leader."

Someone: "Salem is a combination of all the churches." ZH summarizes the three churches, makes a mistake, is corrected.

"It is now different from how it was with the earlier pastor when there were less variations in the services." "Some people attend as consumers"

AP: this is up! Table 2, please report!

Reporter: "what am I exactly supposed to do?"

"The real question was ..."

{quite a lot of back and forth about what to do in the report. This kind of fumbling did not reappear, though various styles of reporting were used; there was some joking

presentations, etc.}

“This is what you should have done, short and simple”

“Table 4! We are a Martha church with consumer overtones ... we are bickering over who gets recognition ... we are very busy...”

ZH, {somewhat belligerently or is it just forcefully?} “I don’t understand why you say that the Martha church has difficulty with sustaining prayer?”

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AP: the structures are in place but they are not functioning

someone gives the example of the “prayer lines” that used to be quite effective but not any more.

10:35

AP: let’s move on to page 2 on the booklet

someone: can’t we take a break?”

AP: no! Later!

AP reads the paragraph “we the church...” as his answer to the question “what do you think Salem is?” and then adds “I have not been here long enough but ...”

AP: “we are a crossroad: keep things are they are or change things ... getting older and dying out ... take 10 minutes to discuss ... before let us turn to 2nd Corinthians ...”

ZH: “you want us to be obedient?”

AP: “take on Jesus Christ as ... ambassadors ... do I stay the same or am I an agent of change”

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ZH: “does it mean that we are not in Christ if we stay the same?”

Other questions within the table: “What would the changes be? Is any change as good as any other as long as it is change?”

This moves to a discussion of classes {probably as illustration of the debate} “I did not understand what the classes were doing when I was younger. Now that we do not have them I understand and I miss them. We have to bring something from the past into the future... We used to go out on the street as missionaries ... some people do not want to do what we think ...”

687

{So far, and most of the day, the discussion is couched almost solely in a religious, spiritual, discourse, particularly in AP’s set ups and interpretatory comments. Still, there is little doubt of where he wants to move people. How this is done, in detail, will be an interesting matter to tease out}

Recorder 4 speaks in very spiritual tones

Recorder 1 starts with St Paul and gets into an evangelical discourse to which several persons respond. Applause.

Recorder 5 (this table was added late and has become the “young adult” table: less than 30. The young man talks about welcoming tourists, “the French are rude but maybe we are rude too.”

AP: Let’s take a break.

During the break one of the elderly lady to my left asks me “you don’t share? You just take note? Why don’t you share?” I make some speech about not being a member but I do have my opinions and that perhaps I could mention them in private “I should member that I am Catholic and that our parish would have some of the same issues.” asks “are you interested in holiness churches?” Members of her family belong to different denominations. She says, that she has a ranking for churches and that the Catholic church is one of the two or three bottom churches from her point of view she ends with “I am sorry” {I do not feel that I was put on the spot}. She does not elaborate. While we have this exchange I look at ZH and others and do not get any encouragement. So I never did “share.” The lady that made the suggestion is one who is almost systematically interrupted every time she asks questions I find interesting.

688

11:25 to 11:45

AP restarts. He reads from Wesley diary a longish passage about Wesley being kicked out of churches, towns squares, pastures over a several week period. This ends with “I preached in the pasture and 10,000 were attending!”

“Who is God calling us to be?”

“We just have a new member names Said, he comes from Italy and before that from Egypt... there are the projects around us with new Africans and hispanics... there is gentrification ... individuals who do not look like us ... two Asians who come to midday services on Wednesday ... so we become more perception of changes ... when people come to us we must be warmer, when shaking hands not only to the tourists but also to the repeaters ... There are some people who prefer the Baptists for their singing ... will Salem remain Black or will it change? It will happen if we do something... this is not only an interracial matter but also an age issue.

“Questions?” “Lets more to the small groups”

“Add a comment in several languages so that the European visitors know that we are more than an African American church.

Table 4: “we used the Roberts Rule of Order!” AP, with mock outrage, “you hare to use

Roberts?!" People laugh

"We have many churches, three Methodist churches close to each other, perhaps we should cooperate rather than compete so that we have better, bigger programs... infusion of the new in the community ... how to we bridge the two ... we can't be everything to everybody ... our guide must be the Bible ... our primary role to lighting up Jesus Christ."

12:20 "Lunch!"

A few cold cuts on the table. Nothing fancy. Some people have brought their own snack. While eating I ask ZH about John Nelson. She remains reserved saying something that he had left to get a doctorate in public health. "He was never comfortable as pastor ... he was searching his way... I agree that he is looking for something that he may not quite have found." ZH agrees that this is a good characterization.

12:55

AP: "Let's read from Isaiah" then reads a meditation on the passage.

AP: Reverend Hayes will lead {Richard Hayes, the assistant pastor who sat at my table but never participated}

RH: "What we are to do?" "Turn to page 8 on the agenda" explanations ... quotes from scriptures each chosen for having something to do with leadership
"it is important that we come to some consensus ... meditate on God's word ..."

AP: "do you know Star Trek ... think of the starship Salem going where it has never gone before!"

1:30

p 10: translate mission into action steps "what it really means ...:

ZH: what activities? ... people who come in an out? ... after school programs?

AP: (probably in response to some challenge) "this is what I want you to do but I am just the pastor, I do not want to influence you"

{I am sure this was delivered half-jokingly and similarly taken as a counter-factual. It is clear throughout that the pastor sets the agenda, the topics, and most of the scriptural quotes as well as their interpretation. But setting this authority to set the agenda should not be taken, and I do not think it was taken, as the power to act on this agenda.

People did dissent more or less forcefully or publicly—even if they did not do it as vocally and publicly as ZH. Eventually it would be nice to have a video record of such a meeting to sort out exactly the give and take in all its modalities}

{by 1:50 all the conversations have remained abstract and (dis-)agreements most often phrased in religious discourse}

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RH: “must set goals like any other business or non-profit organization ... challenge ... specific ... but not too difficult or easy

AP: Your small group task: what is you five-year goal?

Our table: ZH “our members should join community organization”

someone: “all our activities, e.g. after-school basketball programs, should be faith-based, with prayers and commentary at the beginning and end.”

Several: last year our membership was 514, it got down by 26 deaths, 2 people have left, 2 have joined {my memory of the figures are approximate} ... we must increase membership by 10% a year.

Someone: my brother-in-law is at Elam; it is thriving because there are pew captains who get detailed information about everyone who visits and then follow-up.

... we have greeters

... we need a system to communicate with the visitors

... but many write ‘Paris’ ‘Rome’ what are we to do with those?

... we have a system but we do not use it

... I attended Salem for two years and had to fight my way in

ZH: “I attended for 15 years and was on many committees before I joined!”

... Salem is cold

... Allen does not announce to visitors that they are welcome to come for refreshments after church

... the greeters should make this announcement

... we should have cards requesting prayer

14:30

I have to go to the bathroom. On the way back Mitzie Nelson who had been standing by herself by the door to the parking lot catches my eye “what do you think? I thought this would be more like a training thing? I can figure out in a meeting like this what God wants me to do. It takes a long time for me to figure it out.” {She started talking even before we had quite settled to a talk} I asked her about John Nelson: “he was wonderful, spiritual... made be think of Paul Robeson ... you know the last day he preached, it was about the transfiguration and there was a pigeon in the sanctuary and it flew and landed on the piano. I could not stop myself from laughing!” I asked her whether I could interviewed her: “why me? I have lived all my life in the projects,... Columbia taking over ... why don’t they build their thing in the football stadium ... gentrification ... call me, leave a message, I am very busy.”

14:40

690

691

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051

a general animated conversation is going on:

ZH: the preliminaries to the service should be made more effective

692

... the worship committee is working on it

... restart Bible study

AP: {a set of somewhat testy exchanges} “pick a date and show up!

639

...

This is partnership, not a dictatorship. This is your church. I’ll do it if at least 30 people show up, the leaders too.

...

What time? I am prepared but I won’t do it if there is not strong participation. OK, so the first one will be on the Wednesday after Easter, at 6:30

ZH: you are intimidating us! Give us time!

AP: when passing the peace ... there are several methods ... I am watching ... we must have a spirit of engagement ... patience is essential ... hospitality for visitors.

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... clarification about the change from “visitors’ table” after the service to “coffee hour” open to every body.

... no pictures, there should be a sign in several languages

AP: no pictures is a general rule for baptism or weddings, or at least the photographer has to be stationary

694

discussion of the committees as listed on the leadership many and their leaders. Some confusion about what some committees do, or who should be listed as leader.

3:20

AP: the discussion of leadership will be led by Carole Paynter. She goes through the basic practical steps of running a meeting.

3:30 AP “where do we go from there?”

{(= the meeting has begun to end =)}

Ephesian 4 {call to unity}

what is our constituency?

{(= the end of the meeting =)}

3:50 “Folks I want to thank you ...”

“Let us close with the Lord’s prayer.”

{(= the meeting has ended =)}

I approach AP to thank him. I mention that Linda has approached the head of the day care and that Ms. Skinner may not have understood what we wanted. He said something to the effect that it is best to contact him first when approaching someone new so that he can introduce us. I said that the issue may have been that she thought we wanted to make close observations of the children and that this raised permission issues. I stated that we are more interested in the adults at this stage. I also stated that everything Linda and I hear while at Salem will not be reported as coming from Salem and that everything we hear or observe about the inner workings of Salem will be kept confidential. AP: “I assume it was so” HV: “I wanted to say it again”

181P

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I exchange a few words with ZH and gets permission to attend the meeting of her committee next Saturday. She gives me direction to the community center.

I then leave.