

Neshoba TBD: by Christopher Douglas

Pulpit Guest, July 10, 2011

Participating in "Guest in the Pulpit" and any other opportunity to speak in front of the congregation is my absolute favorite activity as a member of this church as I am in love with the sound of my own voice, but it comes at a cost. Namely, having to think of something which will be of interest to you, and trying to find the time put those thoughts into some form which will fill the assigned time slot in the Order of Service while trying to be a Daddy to Bijou and Arlo, a husband to Jiffer, trying to tame the jungle which is my back yard, feed the beast which is corporate America...you get the picture

Hopefully, once again, I have met the challenge, but not without some considerable consternation caused to the worship committee, our guest musician, our office manager and my wife and worship associate Jiffer, not necessarily in that order, and to whom now, I offer a sincere blanket apology.

There's a cartoon strip about an ex-Jock sportscaster named Tank McNamara that used to be a favorite of mine. It is still in existence, although I haven't read a paper in some time that carries it. One of my favorite strips lampooned the masochistic nature of runners, more specifically Iron Man Triathletes. In this little 3 panel ditty, the payoff comes with a tortured looking participant pathetically imploring a race official "Tell us we can't wear shoes!!!" The aggrieved official replies wearily "Ok, you can't wear shoes."

In some ways this reminds me of Neshoba.

We're an adolescent UU church on the Buckle of the Bible Belt, nestled off the beaten path of what is now an abandoned road, a stone's throw from a mega-church where it is rumored that God himself goes to church every Sunday.

"Give us money problems and tell us we can't light up our sign!!!"

I had lunch recently with a founding member of this Congregation, and he said, and I'm paraphrasing here, "Damn it, can we stop focusing on all the negative and the HARD TIMES *crap* and focus on what we do well and what we're capable of?"

In the words of our recently discovered to be Natural Born President "Yes we can."

Let's do that. Let's focus on what we do well and what we're capable of.

### **#1: We take care of each other.**

Just last Friday I had to go to the ER because of my back. Again. Jiffer wanted to go to a furniture store to look into the option of getting me a recliner to try to make me more comfortable as I recover, but didn't want to face the great American Furniture Store and Curio Emporium with the kids by herself. Chrysti Hogan came to the rescue. With Zero notice on a Friday night, she came to take me home from the hospital and then went to the furniture store to help Jiffer with the kids while she shopped.

**#2: We do a great job for small church at providing a robust and diverse slate of programs & activities for all ages.**

Just this past week Neshoba put on the following events:

Boot Leg Waterpark

Potluck

Mental Health Art Group

Improv Theater Troup for Kids

Neshoba Women of Wisdom Monthly Meeting

Volunteer Appreciation Party

Neshoba Yard Sale

Bella Luna Bliss Monthly Meeting

The Men's Monthly group meeting normally would have been this week but is being moved out later in the month for a special function.

That's just the fun stuff. I'm not taking into account all the committee meetings that went on this week and through the course of the month that give a person an opportunity to become involved in the life blood of the church.

There isn't sufficient time for me to enumerate all the educational and social programs we offer at Neshoba, but suffice it to say, for a congregation our size, it's very impressive.

**#3 We have fun and we celebrate life**

I think I can speak for everyone who attended the Carolyn and Cynthia's birthday party that a good time was had by all. I know that dancing with my little girl while Dave Orland sat in with the band on piano on "Angel from Montgomery" was not only the highlight of my evening but one of my top 10 lifetime moments so far. I got Goosebumps writing about it and I have them right now.

**# 4 We support social justice efforts with our \$\$ and our feet.**

This has always been a congregation focused on issues of social justice, and while I am tempted to name drop some of our more high profile members who make those endeavors their life's work, I will refrain from doing so, lest I accidentally omit someone or make the mistake of making the contributions of those who are not engaged in those efforts full time seem less significant.

On the second Sunday of each month, which is Potluck Sunday (today!), we donate the funds from our collection plates to whichever charitable/social justice organization is next in line of the pool the Social Justice committee has designated based on preferences made by the congregation in a recent survey. It's our hope that there will be a larger than normal number of people in attendance looking forward to food and fellowship after the service. You saw this demonstrated today.

There are undoubtedly more areas where I could play the role of cheerleader, but then, I'm preaching to the converted.

107 members strong, plus an undocumented, but deeply appreciated number of what we will call "Friends of Neshoba."

So much going for us, but we're the best kept secret in the religious and social justice community in Memphis and beyond.

**The time has come for that to end, both for our own wellbeing and for that of our fellow man.**

I don't know if you've been keeping an eye on what's been going on in the Tennessee Legislature lately, but unless you're a straight white male non-union Gun enthusiast, this state is hostile territory, and that's no exaggeration.

I came to Neshoba 4 years ago because I am a Unitarian Universalist. I was transferred to Memphis by my company and I wanted to be a part of another UU congregation. Most of Neshoba's work was already done as far as recruiting me was concerned, I just had to decide whether Church of the River or here was a better fit for me and the family that Jiffer and I were starting. In an eye-opening conversation with our previous settled minister, I came to see that I'm probably in the minority if you poll people as to why they walk through our doors.

I've been doing a great deal of thinking about that conversation lately and asking myself some questions:

Why do people seek us out?

What are they looking for in a church and a worship experience?

Who should we be trying to attract?

Why do they stay?

If they don't, why not?

Are we asking these questions of the people who come through our doors, perhaps in the form of a survey? If not, why not?

They say a little knowledge can be a dangerous thing, and nowhere is that more the case than the Internet, but, when used properly and in the proper context, it is an incredible source of information.

A 2008 study from Outreach magazine which is a resource targeted at Ministers and others interested in Church innovation and growth yielded this quote: **“People want to feel good about who they already are. If Church is too challenging or not entertaining, they’ll move on.”** So says Philip Goff, Director of the Center for the Study of Religion and American Culture at Indiana University.

That’s a snippet of the what (as in what do people want in a church and a worship experience), now what about the whom?

To whom should we be marketing ourselves?

According to Gallup surveys, the number of people who say they attend church at least once a week hovers around 30% year after year, **but the number who say they "never" go to church continues to climb.**

The tally of "Nevers" varies from 16% in Gallup surveys to 22% in the General Social Survey, conducted by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago, to 32% in an Ellison Research survey this year.

**The newcomers to the “Nevers” come from the pool of people who once attended monthly or a few times a year. Many slide away from church to find other answers to their spiritual quest or another church where the preaching or music or family programs better suit their style.**

How about this from a 2009 US News and World Report:?

**“The... fastest-growing demographic on the American religious landscape (are) those who claim no religion whatsoever.**

According to a comprehensive national survey released (the week this article was published) by the Program on Public Values at Trinity College, those identifying with no religious tradition, or as atheists or agnostics, account for 15 percent of the population, up from about 8 percent in 1990. **"No religion" Americans are the only religious demographic that's growing in every single state."**

Now, to just about any other denomination who is reading this, this is bad news. This is a good time to be a UU church in search of new members. People are tired of Doctrine and Dogma and “Thall shalt not.”

We know that Agnostics and Atheists and people who don’t like religion and don’t like church still like to have a community. They’re right here in this room!! Let’s go get some more of them to join in all of this wonderfulness!

How many of you have seen the ads that our friends the Congregationalists place in the Memphis Flyer each week, profiling someone from their ranks? They don’t name names, but they say something like “She’s a Harvard Educated Lawyer. Her partner is a Doctor. Their children believe they are a family. We do too.”

Let's run our own Memphis Flyer Ad: "Don't like Church? Neither Do We! Neshoba UU." I am being a little facetious here, but you get my drift.

I know dollars are always an issue with a congregation this size and with the challenges we face, but if, as a congregation, we make the decision and the effort to be an outward facing church, we can take advantage of myriad free and low cost opportunities to raise our profile in our community.

Please forgive me, I've lost the origin of this citation but I don't think that detracts from its impact:

**"One of the primary differences between effective and ineffective churches is the primary direction of their focus. Ineffective churches are inwardly focused - almost exclusively. Effective churches are primarily outwardly focused. Ineffective churches consume all given to them (leadership resources, finances, location, facilities, etc.) with centripetal power.**

Does this ring a bell with anybody who attended our last Congregational meeting? We talked about how our committees are going wanting due to burnout, people having to jump over to the Ministerial Search and Transition committees, and our budget issues which were directly related to our lack of growth, which, in this congregant's opinion, has to do directly with Neshoba being too inwardly focused.

**(Going on) Effective churches multiply resources given through the release of centrifugal energy into the world. Effective churches are about "them," those outside the church. Ineffective churches are about "us," those inside the church."**

This is, in my opinion, where we are folks. We are, to a far greater extent, an "us" church than a "them" church. That's not an indictment or a condemnation. It's simply a statement of one congregant's opinion of where we are. I know where I'd like us to go, and I don't think I'm alone in that sentiment.

If, with every effort we make, we ask ourselves, "how does this lead us to being an outward facing church" we'll get there. If, with every event that we hear about, or every social justice opportunity that arises, we ask ourselves, "how can we leverage this as an opportunity to raise Neshoba's awareness in the community and attract people to us" we'll get there.

The title of my message today... (By the way, I hesitate to use the word "sermon," as I'm not ordained, even by one of those mail-order churches in the back of Rolling Stone Magazine, so I feel that would be a little pretentious on my part)

The title of my message today is "Neshoba: To Be Determined."

Some of you may have read that as meaning "what we are supposed to become is still out there ahead of us." Others of you might have interpreted it to mean "we're a scrappy, determined bunch who have overcome a lot to get where we are, and are willing to hold on to each other even more tightly to move this church where it ultimately needs to go to be a healthy, thriving congregation, and an integral part of our community. "

Others of you might have thought, "If he's going for the double-meaning thing, that's REALLY cornball."

Still others may have thought "Dude had NO idea what he was going to talk about until about 6 days before it was his turn in the pulpit."

Guilty as charged on all counts...

Anyone finding any other interpretations should see me after, because I wasn't clever enough to read anything else into it.

To use a well-worn cliché, Neshoba is at a crossroads. Perhaps it is not the first at which it has ever stood, and it probably won't be the last. I have already enumerated a great many of our strengths, as did Cynthia in her "Neshoba at the Halfway Point of the Transition" Sermon a few weeks ago. Truth be told, her Sermon was the inspiration for my message today.

Much of what we have going for us would be the envy of any congregation of any size, UU, or otherwise.

In any event, we are at a crossroads.

We have to decide over the next few months what kind of congregation we want to be going forward from today in order to grow and thrive, and what kind of settled ministerial candidate best helps us do just that.

Do we want to remain an inward focused congregation that takes care of each other, and does its best to do some social justice efforts backed by small groups within the congregation who have interests in those high minded but disparate areas while we struggle along at our current, or God forbid, lower membership numbers trying to support our building and grounds and current programs and activities until we run through our savings, and then face some really, really tough decisions?

Or do we want to be an outward focused congregation where we unite under a larger single vision of what Neshoba stands for, aided and lead by our new settled minister, putting ourselves out in front of the community at large at every opportunity, on the news, in print, at social justice events, very high profile, letting them know that a liberal, welcoming religious community exists literally in Memphis's own back yard? People will come to our doors if we do that.

It's our decision. It's up to us which road we pick.

Can we do it? Do we have the will and the skill and the sheer pig headed determination to become the church many of envision we can be?

Yes we can.