

GOOD NEWS FOR A NEW YEAR

I Thessalonians 4:9-10, 5:12-22

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I am a naturally optimistic person; without much effort, I see the glass as half-full. I'm grateful that it's easy for me to see the positive in situations - I realize that it's more of a struggle for some people who are wired differently.

Even so, there are times when I become discouraged. It happens sometimes when I'm confronted with articles, statistics and comments about the church as an institution and about my profession -- both which I love deeply and dearly. Let me give you some examples.

First: several years ago, people who talk about church life introduced a new term. The term described people who call themselves religiously unaffiliated - not necessarily atheist or agnostic, but people who don't want to be a part of any organized religion. Some of them call themselves "spiritual but not religious." If you go to church conferences, you'll quickly discover that this is such a hot topic that there's even a short-hand term for people who are spiritual but not religious: SBNR. Those who are unaffiliated are now called the "nones" - they have no affiliation. In seven years, from 2007 until 2014, the nones were the fastest-growing category in the Pew Religion Survey. "Nones" grew from 16% of the U.S. population to 23%. A huge jump. Those who describe themselves as mainline Protestant -- members of churches like ours, as well as Methodist, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Episcopal -- declined from 18 to 15%.

Now there is a new category. In addition to the "nones", we have the "dones." "Dones" are people who were formerly very active in churches who have now walked out of the church, seemingly for good. There are various reasons for the exodus, some of

which I look forward to talking about at our leadership retreat in February. The last statistic is this one: 1 in 3 millennials (people under 30) who grew up in church say they do not plan to return to church.

You can see why I can become discouraged. In 2015, I heard this comment from a denominational leader in the United Church of Christ. She said to me, “Kelly, I think yours will be among the last generation of full-time clergy.” There are so many churches which are shrinking and dying that most churches now cannot afford a full-time minister.

This is not good news, you may be thinking -- you promised a sermon with the word “good news” in the title, that’s our worship series -- the words “good news” are even on the sign outside. But so far, you may be thinking, this sermon makes us think of false advertising. I’m getting to that. But I think it’s important that we realize what the larger landscape looks like. I think it’s important that we are aware of trends, and that we take the time to examine them thoroughly and talk and think about them. If you’re interested in this conversation, please sign up for the February 20 Leadership Retreat, and if you can’t attend, please know that we’ll be talking about this throughout the year at our All-Team meetings and at Church Council -- all of those sessions are always public.

In light of those statistics, I want to thank each one of you for being a part of a church that is bucking the trends. Thank you for your support of this church -- through your gifts of time, talent and treasure. Thank you for inviting your friends here. Thank you for your new ideas, thank you for your faithfulness in worship, thank you for encouraging me and the other members of our staff. It all makes a tremendous difference.

I believe the statistics and I take them seriously. But there is another picture which I take equally, or more seriously, because it is the picture of a church that is bucking the trends.

It may well be true that many people are leaving organized religion, especially younger people, but last Monday night, 19 women were in our church kitchen cooking together. They were laughing, getting to know each other, preparing meals that they were taking home, and they were also preparing soup that they packaged up and left in the church freezer. That soup joined another huge batch that was made by a family over Christmas. Why? Because one of our members said to her husband, "I don't want more stuff for Christmas this year. I want to do something for someone else." So that family made dozens of containers of homemade soup which we will be delivering throughout the winter -- doorstep dinners for those who come home from the hospital or are facing an illness or have a new baby or similar need.

It may well be true that 1 in 3 young people who grow up in church does not plan to return to it, but let me read you an email Nate and I received this month: "I have been meaning to say this...thank you, thank you, thank you for the wonderful youth programs at ALUCC. Because of Nate and the support from the church, our son is on ANOTHER service trip through OSU this winter break. He is working with Habitat for Humanity in Alabama with a group of kids.

I really think that those summer senior high youth trips from freshman year through senior year in high school were a big reason he has chosen to participate in a service trip through OSU every year since then, going either over spring break or winter break. I don't remember his doing much else with senior high youth during the year because of sports and school commitments, but he would not miss going on a senior high service trip for anything.

Just think of the groundwork you each have laid for giving time and talent on service trips! And...our son has gotten two of his other friends to join in on this trip, so you have created a ripple effect too. “

Nate and I were so grateful to receive this thank-you note, but the thanks belong to you all of you as well. I want you to know what a difference it makes that you support a full-time Director of Youth Ministries, that you support the youth fundraising efforts. We are not just making it possible for a group of students to have one week of meaningful experiences. We are creating men and women of character who will shape the next generation. We are creating the world's next leaders.

Despite the odds, despite the challenges, I remain positive and optimistic about the health of this congregation. Let me share with you a few more examples as I look back at 2015.

It's good news that we were able to complete our “What If?” mortgage reduction campaign, and refinance our remaining debt. My thanks to all of you who give and who work towards our financial health. My hope for 2016 is that we can continue our efforts in stewardship education, letting all of our members and friends know that their money is being used wisely, and that more of us can learn the spiritual practice of sacrificial giving. Our Bequest Committee will continue its efforts to let members know that leaving money to the church through wills and planned giving is a wonderful way to continue to support our ministry and mission. I have performed hundreds of funerals in my tenure here, many for people who spent decades here. This is where they or their children were baptized, confirmed and married. I know they love this church, yet we have not done a good job letting people know that bequests of any size will help us build a solid financial foundation.

It's good news that we continue to grow in mission and outreach. I wrote in my annual report that mission is the heartbeat of this congregation. My thanks to all of you who make the Good Neighbor Thrift Shop an incredible source of goodwill and mission funding. For the second year in a row, many of our members participated in a Habitat for Humanity build (and that is continuing in 2016), we were the lead support church in fundraising for that house as well. We tried something new in the summer, called a Day of Service. This one-day mission blitz made it possible for many new volunteers to participate in projects with our mission partners. I hope to continue that effort this summer with a whole Weekend of Service.

It's good news that we started many new small groups in 2015. Thanks the Membership Team for spearheading this effort. We have stitching groups, dining-out groups, travel groups and more. My hope for 2016 is that we can better publicize all of our small group opportunities, so that it will be easy for people to know how to connect to them. My overall goal is that every person is invited to be a part of a group, whether it's choir, worship band, Bible Study, prayer group, Mom's Groups, volunteering, teaching, ushering, or serving on a team. Some people may say "no" and that's fine, but the more connected we are to one another, the stronger we are as a congregation.

Our Stephen Ministry program creates bonds of caring that wouldn't otherwise exist. I'm thrilled that Denise Mathews is going to Stephen Minister Leader Training this year, and I look forward to us starting a new class for new Stephen Ministers in the fall.

The church, ideally, should be a place of relationships, of mission, of worship, and of learning. In 2015 we continued to educate our children and youth, thanks to many volunteers and the leadership of Julie and Nate. We also continued to make great strides in our offerings in Adult Education. I want to thank Lou Suarez for his volunteer

leadership in this area, and all who teach and participate. If you have not tried one of our adult classes or book groups, I encourage you to do. From CrossTraining on Wednesday nights to Sermon Roundtable on Sunday mornings, there truly is something to interest everyone. And we're always open to new ideas for classes and forums. Our best-attended class in 2015 was the class Jim Edwards taught in the fall on understanding the peaceful roots of Islam. Far more than just an interesting class, it turned out to be a respectful dialogue with many members of Cleveland's Muslim community, and the kind of conversation that can change minds and change our world for the better.

One of the most memorable books I read in 2015 was the book, *The Road to Character*, by David Brooks, in which he distinguishes between resume virtues and eulogy virtues. In other words, are we concerned with the fame and fortune we can find on the career path, or are we also concerned with the development of our character -- the kinds of virtues that may not be mentioned in a resume, but will be remembered after we're gone? It occurs to me that there was a time when church helped people with their resume virtues. If you were the chair of a committee at your church, that might help you achieve a promotion at work. That may have changed, for a whole host of reasons, but this hasn't changed. The life we have together in the church can help us build character and eulogy virtues, the kinds of things money can't buy.

I am nothing but optimistic about the future of this congregation, and abundantly grateful to be a part of this church at this moment in our history.