

Buildings for a New Tomorrow
Small Town/ Rural Church: From Canary in the Coalmine to Risen Phoenix

R. Alan Rice
April 14, 2015

An Impropriety Observed

The young pastor sat forlorn at the desk with the door to the study closed. Everyone else had left the building to go back to their homes in the small town. The business meeting of the church had been perfunctory. As “was, is and shall forever be” the custom; the pastor was invited to speak at the end of the meeting.

Without any sense of the impropriety involved, the pastor asked about purchasing new stationary. The current supply was down to a handful of sheets, listed the pastor twice previous and moreover seemed to be a black and white copy of a copy. The treasurer spoke saying – “No, need I will run off a few more copies and you can strike through and write in your name for pastor.” Taken aback the pastor only nodded ascent. With that the meeting was adjourned.

“Ichabod”, the word floated into consciousness from some Old Testament story. “Ichabod” - the glory departed – all that was left was handed down copy of a copy. There was no glory, no majesty, and no expectation of the Presence of the Holy One.

Doing the right thing

The decision makers had no doubt that wasting money on stationary was not the right thing to do. There were power bills to pay and the winter was severe. The roof could not be patched again and the heating system was shuddering with the death rattles. Salary and pension and health care were frighteningly high. The church was hanging on.

For decades and perhaps now two generations, the “right thing to do” for the congregation had been “Value Ethics”. Value ethics is not really about doing, it is about having. The ethics of “doing” is called “Obligation Ethics” There had been a frantic season some thirty or so years ago when “doing” was the standard. Committees, task forces, projects and protests... so much to do. But that was when as Mr Billy Joel would say they wore “a younger man’s” or “a younger woman’s clothes”.

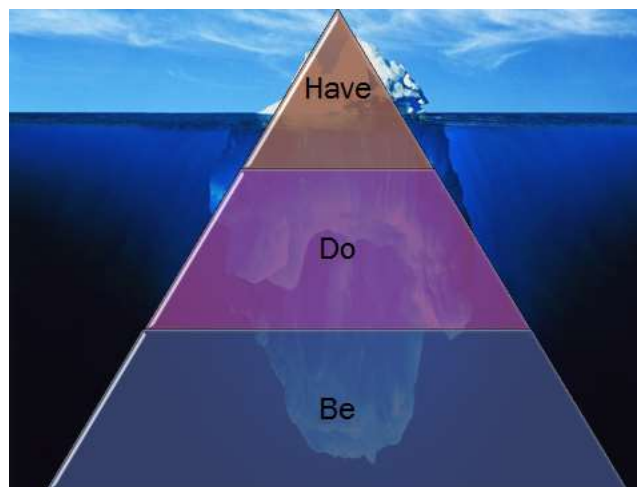
They had overheard the stories. Decades and generations ago the blossoming congregation’s ethical compass pointed not toward “having” or owning, nor for “doing”. The needle aligned with “Being”. They were a not on a mission, they were the mission. They were without a building, without the capacity or staff to do programming or mission endeavors; but together in Christ they were “being the church”. Their ethic was the “Virtue Ethic”; it was about being: being in love with Christ and out of that relationship loving neighbor as self.

But now, it seems what is left is caring for the beloved and sacred cask of a building that at best seemed to have only a few swallows and some dregs of less than abundant life remaining.

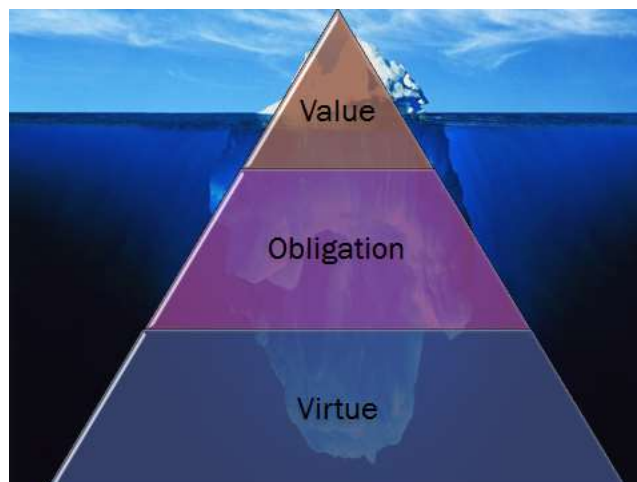
Holding on and taking care of what was handed down had become the shadow mission of the church.

For non-auditory learners, here are some illustrations for those who like me are visual processors:

The Be-Do-Have Iceberg



A Correlation with Ethics



A Correlation with the Life Cycle of a Church



Shadow Mission

The shadow mission is a facsimile of the true mission of the Church. Like a literal facsimile or paper “fax”, it looks quite the same as the original. However faxing a “paper fax” reduces the originality by degree each time. The issue is not technology. Nor is it about the copy being indistinguishable from the original. Even expertly produced counterfeit dollars have no true value.

The Christ had the painful task of answering the rich young ruler that Jesus loved. The young man asked what he lacked. From all appearance the answer should be nothing as he was seemingly blessed of God, an obedient follower of the Law and had a love for Jesus. Yet the synoptic gospels each report that Jesus said you lack one thing. I contend from the prescription that the “one thing” is authenticity: genuineness, faithfulness, validity that is from being, not having or doing.

Jesus’ response is universal for all aspiring followers. The way and the truth are about being. The answer to the question of doing the right thing is to jettison “having” as your primary ethic. For the Christ the primary ethic was unalterably about “being”, with feeding, healing, and all the rest of “doing well” but credentials of his being.

The Nascent Church Dealt with the Shadow Mission of Doing

Recall with me the nascent Church’s struggle with a shadow mission in Acts Chapter Six. Widows were being neglected. Instead of allowing serving bread to become the shadow mission of the infant church;

the Apostles put a new strategy into place. No more ministry for the Hellenists by the Hebrews. It was to become ministry “with”. The neglected people would have a voice and would select their leaders.

Of prime importance for our discussion, the leadership qualification was “being”, not capacity for the doing. The persons selected were to have the qualities of being persons whom everyone trusts, men full of the Holy Spirit and good sense. The seven that were chosen for this new ministry of “doing” were all Hellenist who were set aside and equipped for this new ministry. Yet we must note that his “table serving” ministry began with a “being” leadership selection process and had remarkable results. Not only were the widows fed but The Word of God prospered. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased dramatically. Not least, a great many priests submitted themselves to the faith. (Acts 6:7 MSG) The Jewish church, Hebrews and Hellenists evolved together by prioritizing an ethic of being.

Small Town and Rural Churches what are our Shadow Missions

Like the well intentioned rich young ruler, are we chiefly consumers with “value ethics”? Are we as the consumer society populating our congregations with hearts aligned with our treasure of “having and holding onto”? Indeed is it true clergy that our internal compass is aligned “up”? Upward mobility, is it our true compass pointing to higher degrees and titles, higher steeples and higher income parishes? Clergy and laity, would you agree, we find it difficult to focus on those “around” and more so on those who are “down”. Is it so? Has a shadow mission of “Having” usurped the call of being?

Or with well-intentioned thoughts, with compassionate hearts and willing hands, have we settled upon perhaps the penultimate ethic of doing for others. Dare we settle into fulfilling duty of doing at the neglect our spiritual being? Can our doing be not only toxic or a least hurtful helping for others, but detrimental to our own selves and congregations as well? Has a shadow mission of “Doing” shifted the compass to a treasure of performance rather than personhood in Christ?

Righting the Iceberg

Shifting small church ethics from a holding on to the past...

Moving beyond obligations ethics of programing, providing and protesting...

Forsaking both well-worn and comfortable paths for the ethic of simply being in ministry with the congregation and community is a fiercesome and fearful thing.

It is not saving the Titanic, it is righting the iceberg.

Righting the Iceberg from the bottom up



Righting our ethics is not a simple step or a short season of repentance.

- It is the radical upheaval that requires letting go of things to make space for authenticity of being.
- It is making space in the poverty of time by sacrificing doing, to focus upon being in relationship ministry with our neighbors and not for our neighbors that is lived out from love God.
- It is being in Christ; being in love with God in an attentive, every-day relationship sought as both the beginning and end, and love praxis especially for the messy middle.