

Reflection by Paul Turner, Industrial Areas Foundation

It's a tough time to be a mainline congregation in America today. Lutherans, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, United Methodists, you name the mainline denomination, and chances are it's in decline. The United Methodist church, at last count, was losing roughly 100,000 members a year. It feels like a miracle is needed to turn these long-standing trends around.

And yet, after several months of work in Las Vegas (of all places) and two recent days with a group of United Methodist congregations from the Las Vegas Valley, I have reason for hope.

The 30 some odd souls who came to the Fellowship Hall of Green Valley United Methodist recently represent well the heart that's still beating among America's mainliners. They were Brown, Black, White and came from across the Valley. They skewed older but not old. They are, each in their own ways, trying to find that "secret sauce" to build and maintain growing church communities in a period of rapid decline.

One of those leaders was Rev. Eve Williams of Advent United Methodist in North Las Vegas. Her church sits in a zip code hit hard by the mortgage crisis of 2008. Advent, like so many mainline churches, struggles to find members and maintain relevance in a world where allegiance to a denomination is largely gone. People church shop today in the same way they might purchase a car or a major appliance. Under that kind of market microscope, churches struggle to stand out, stay relevant and be true to their counter cultural mission.

On this particular weekend at Green Valley the lay leaders and pastors present were gathered around this critical question of what it means to be the church today? They were brought by Nevadans for the Common Good, (NCG) a diverse federation of congregations and organizations who have pledged a significant amount of money and time to build a common good in Sin City through engagement in non-partisan, small "p" politics.

They're drawing on a 78-year organizing tradition in the United States that began in 1940 when famous provocateur, Saul Alinsky, built the Back of the Yards Community Council (BYCC) among the Lithuanian immigrants who populated the community made famous by Upton Sinclair in his book, *The Jungle*. Alinsky's work led to the formation of the Industrial Areas Foundation, the nation's longest standing organizing network with over 50 local affiliates across the United States including NCG in Las Vegas.

While mainliners are in decline the IAF has been in a period of rapid growth for over 50 years. Institutions that have embraced the democratic practices taught by the IAF have seen growth, new life, new leaders and renewed energy for the work of the Church.

The time comes for the gathered group to learn the foundational practice of organizing; the one-to-one, relational meeting. Re-learning the lost (or dying?) art of conversation is central to the success of the IAF and, for that matter, just about any modern institution.

I'll model the practice with Pastor Eve. A good conversation can't be explained. It's like parenting. Explanations fall well short of experiencing the real thing. So, Pastor Eve joins me up

front, the audience leans in and we hold court for 30 minutes.

Pastor Eve answered her call in her mid-30's. She packed up her belongings and her young son, and dove head first into seminary at Candler in Atlanta. Living off part time work and student loans, she and her son lived in a one room apartment where, as she put it, "there was more month than money." She eventually earned her Masters of Divinity and began work as an Associate Pastor first in Gilbert, AZ and then Paradise Valley United Methodist in Phoenix.

The Paradise Valley job took a lot of her time but afforded her small family some new-found creature comforts. "More stuff" as she put it. She told a story of presenting her son with some of that new stuff to which he replied, "Mom, I miss Atlanta."

"You miss, Atlanta?" said Eve. "We were dirt poor and you didn't have any of this stuff."

"I know, Mom, but I had you."

The words and the memory caught her off guard as they poured out into the room. For a moment I was reminded of my own father who, himself, was a Methodist pastor and often not home. We sat silently in unspoken recognition.

I probed a little more and gradually our conversation begins to shift to the public, to what's next.

I asked Eve about her vision for the church and if relational meetings might help the church gain vision and new energy. It turns out Advent has a big footprint in their neighborhood. Maybe some of that land could be converted to community purpose? We talk about possibilities, next steps and we shake hands and agree to meet again

I turned to the gathered crowd and asked for reactions. Most were surprised at how much ground could be covered in such a short time. One participant reflected on how surface level her relationships are with her fellow congregants. "Maybe we're not relevant anymore because we're not listening?" she asked.

For the next two hours, they practiced their own conversations. They learned how face to face conversations can transform a bureaucratic institution into a relational one. They learned how relational meetings are the first step towards building a kind of power rooted in and related to Christian love. They began to see the connection between relationships and acting with others in the world as it is.

They made commitments to bring the training back to their churches. They pledged to engage the communities they are part of. They redoubled their commitments to NCG and agreed to meet again.

And finally, they agreed that building these kinds of relationships shouldn't be viewed as yet another market transaction designed to sell or help me get what I want. Instead they began to see relationships as the fullest expression of what it means to be "the body of Christ" and the best chance they have to stay relevant in a deeply troubled world. A small miracle. Just in the nick of time.