

The Church Must Learn to be the Church in a New Way

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In September 2017, the NBA Incubate Initiative hosted the 2017 SENT Seminar: Equipping Social ENTrepreneurs for Leadership and Change, in Leavenworth, Kansas. Designed for Disciples and their leadership teams who are starting new health and social services ministries, the SENT Seminar covers the basics of nonprofit ministry startups, as well as skills for leadership and change in our global and faith communities. Susan Bernauer, Spiritual Care Ministry for the Homebound, attended as a 2017 SENT Seminar Participant and shares this reflection.



I have been part of many traditional style churches. You know, with buildings and steeples, and with all the people inside. And throughout the years, the cry of these churches has been that the number of people inside is dwindling. “What can we do to get people back and re-create the days when Sunday morning worship was packed and our Sunday schools were full?”

We tried changing the type of music, we projected words on the wall, brought in drums, changed the time and days of worship, and even brought coffee to our seats. Still, our churches remained poorly attended - which hurt, because the bills were not being paid. If the bills aren’t paid, we reasoned, the church can’t remain open, and ministry can’t be done.

Then emerged the radical idea that we were taught as children: “the church is more than a building, it’s the people.” Ministry is the activity of believers, regardless of where they choose to worship. And those of us who understood that, felt denominational standards should be challenged, to ordain ministers to serve ‘valid ministries’ of the church, in places other than the pulpit. In short, to be faithful to the call of Christ in this world, “the Church must learn to be the Church in a new way.”

Those who tried to serve in non-traditional ministries found resistance from the traditional church.

When NBA said they wanted to help new ministries and to provide not only resources, but also a place where new creative ministries could find a “home,” I knew I had found new hope. I attended a SENT Seminar at NBA’s encouragement, and on their ‘dime.’ There, I found, gathered around a common love for Christ, people of a like mind and a wide variety of creative responses to God’s calling on their lives. Each one of us, in our own vastly different settings, had heard and responded to the call “to be the Church in a ‘new’ way:” to *go to people where they were*, rather than requiring them to fit our mold and come into our space; to celebrate diversity and make inclusiveness a common part of our worshiping and serving together; and to see Christ’s church among the marginalized, who want to know the hope that is in Christ, and who want to worship and serve like any other Christian.

In the Marillac Center, where the Seminar was held, there were several beautifully carved statues. There is one of Christ bringing back a lamb that was “lost,” and it reflects for me the purpose of SENT, and the call on the lives of those of us gathered at the SENT seminar. There are plenty of lambs needing Christ to find them where they are, and bring them back into the safety of his fold. Thanks to NBA and their SENT program, those of us who have heard the call to go out into the world and “be the Church in a new way,” now have an opportunity to be able to go forth with God’s word of HOPE.

The NBA incubates new ministries, supporting social entrepreneurs of faith who are serving their communities in a variety of innovative ways and empowering these Disciples-led health and social service projects to focus on growth, impact, and sustainability. Learn more at nbacares.org/incubate or by contacting Rev. Ayanna Johnson Watkins, Director of the NBA Incubate Initiative, at awatkins@nbacares.org.