

A Seat in the Back

March 14, 2018

Everyone knew the best seats were up front. You could hear better and see what was going on. Don't forget the prestige of having front row seats.

Everyone also knew those seats were the most expensive. The more you paid, the closer you sat to the front. SummerFest? The Bucks? Well, no. These seats were wooden pews, and they gave you up-close views of the pastor.

Nancy Reeser, from First (Racine)'s Archive Committee, shared in the congregation's March newsletter that in the late 1800's, their pews were routinely sold to the highest bidder over appraised value. Church records show some pews were appraised at \$14,500! Purchasers received a deed of ownership which could be transferred at death. The annual pew rent (as much as \$100 for a front pew) helped run the church.

With this history, it's no wonder people gradually moved to the back. As children tried to dash forward, their parents would whisper, "No, we sit in the back." Over time, I suspect, a perception grew that the front seats weren't even as desirable. For example, from the back, one could sneak in late or make a quick escape. With the regular use of microphones, it also became less necessary to sit up front to hear well.

Now it is common for the first rows of the church to remain empty during worship. In my own congregation in Denver, the first three or four rows were always vacant. Our pastor took matters into his own hands and moved the microphone stand down the center aisle to the fifth pew. From there, he preached as well as offered prayers or announcements. I wondered whether it would cause people to move even further back to the seventh or eighth row.

Perhaps that pressure is good. What if it prompted us to hold our worship on the church's threshold? Could we be a church poised between being inside our buildings and in our neighborhood? Rather than being cloistered as far into the building as possible, imagine a congregation that is always on the verge of going out into the world.

As we concentrate on congregational vitality in the coming months, our outward focus will be a hallmark for vitality. Congregations that are thriving – not just in numbers, but in discipleship – are as comfortable being the church in the street, as they are in their buildings. These vital congregations don't assume to know what's best for their neighborhoods. Instead, they have listened intently to the priorities listed by their neighbors and have affirmed the spiritual gifts and resources the neighborhood already possesses. These congregations are fully present to accompany their neighbors in their struggles and victories, not to "fix" them.

So feel free to take a seat in the back, but don't get too comfortable. You're going to be the first one out the door where our ministry truly begins!