

The Original Presbyterian Tweets

March 21, 2018

With its standard 140-character limit, Twitter has captured the world's attention. Crafting a pithy message in 140 characters requires skill, but it's not new.

Presbyterians have been tweeting for decades...on our church reader boards. As I drove to the office yesterday, construction along Greenfield Avenue forced me to detour through the neighborhood. I smiled as I read Apostle Presbyterian Church's sign: "Lent is spring training for Christians; Easter is opening day."

I have a tenderness in my heart for those who prepare reader board messages. If you've tried this, you'll know it's not easy. First, it can be logistically challenging. At my church, I slid plastic letter tiles onto glides. On one side of the reader board, this was done just like spelling out words while one is typing. On the other side, however, I had to insert the letters in reverse order, basically spelling each word backwards. Sometimes I wouldn't notice my typos until I stood back to admire my work.

The greater challenge was conveying a smart, short message. We wanted something fresh and clever, believing people would come in because they liked our sign.

Once we used it to build bridges with our neighbors. A restaurant opened in the strip mall across the street from our church, and many of us enjoyed their food. My reader board message gave passersby this option at our shared intersection: "Good pizza, turn left. Good News, turn right." I suspect more people chose the pizza, but our neighbor was quite grateful.

We posted a series of questions to engage people on lighthearted topics. Drawing on the "what would Jesus do?" inquiry, I put up similar questions, including "what music would Jesus listen to?" One passionate passerby decided to spray paint the answer onto our reader board, confident that Jesus would listen to the industrial rock group, Nine Inch Nails. While I am convinced that Jesus loves hymns, Christian rock, gospel, and Christian rap equally, I'm less certain about his affinity for Nine Inch Nails.

If that type of silly question prompts active engagement, I wonder what would happen if we posted the real questions of our day on the sign:

What would Jesus think about abortion? What would Jesus say about incestual rape that leaves a 12-year old with a high-risk pregnancy?

What would Jesus do about gun violence? How would Jesus respond to violent people with mental illness?

What would Jesus say about natural, cyclical climate change? Would Jesus want us to stop polluting the environment anyway?

These questions divide us. But, if we're sure that Jesus cares about the answers, then we can't avoid them. As we respond in love, there are important principles to follow.

First, we need to listen to each other. Let the other person speak first and truly listen, rather than focusing on your rebuttal. Ask questions for greater understanding, not to box someone in.

Seek out the values we share as disciples of Jesus, a man who would sacrifice everything – everything, even death on a cross – out of love for us. Can we find common ground in those shared values that move us forward together?

Above all, we need to move beyond answers squeezed into 140 characters, sound bytes, political commercials, or spray paint graffiti. Those messages might start the conversation, but we can't rely only on them. The answers are too complex and the stakes too high.