

The Joys of Starting a New Church

OZZIE SMITH



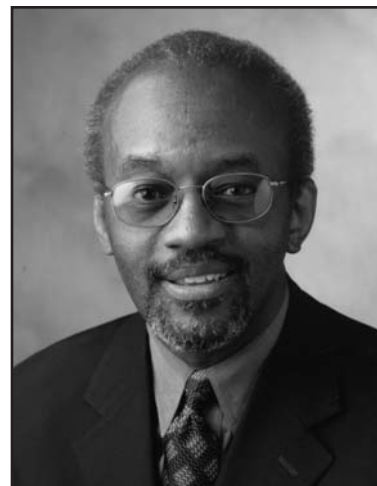
*My brothers and sisters, whenever
you face trials of any kind, consider it
nothing but joy. . . .*

—James 1:2a

FEW THINGS COULD affect a novice and naïve pastor-in-learning as a new church start. Nothing is as challenging as leading and preaching to pews where there are yet to be people. Whether one is fresh out of seminary, a seasoned associate, or a pastor in transition, a new church start is much like building an ark before floods that may or may not come. It is a jarring joy.

Such has been the taste of my journey since Easter Sunday 1996. If you can imagine uncertainty being joyous, a new church start fits the bill. If you can sense not knowing as comforting, a new church start is a joy. If you can believe misunderstanding and being misunderstood as par for the course, a new church start is certainly all that. Then you can begin to understand what seasoned your senior pastor's sermons on Sunday mornings. Then you realize how she or he tolerated your own state-of-the-art dogma and airtight idealisms about church oughtness. You can resonate with Jesus' words, "Foxes have holes, birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." Yet it is a joy. You now have a chance to pull off an ecclesiastical creation in your own image. You enter your own Jerusalem. You get to see how ministry looks on you and how you look on ministry. It is a joy.

From where will the people come? What will keep them when they come? Why did they come? Why did you accept the invitation to be the founding pastor in the first place? All of these questions come as you seek clarity in your call—or as much



clarity as is possible. You realize why Moses broke the first tablets and later went back for more. You understand Jonah's reluctance. You understand that your best homiletical hunch is, at best, taken under consideration. You can relate to Esther's affirmation, "if I perish, I perish." Why? Maybe you will realize that it is not about—you, but it is about God!

The greatest joy, perhaps, was realizing that I really did not want to pastor an existing or "established" congregation as I once thought. Instead I have been allowed to see firsthand how the Lord fills empty nets of an inexperienced fisherman. It is a blessing to witness God's awesome surprise week after week. It is humbling to see that the congregation actually returned for another worship service. It is a joy.

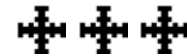
Finally you learn to trust God rather than your own understanding. It is a joy! You learn the burden and the blessing of being exposed as resident theologian-in-training. You might even notice that sometimes the effort is, in effect, the result.

Howard Thurman once said, “To be victimized by error and to continue making choices of integrity, is to grow in grace.” In other words, as often as we would like every decision to be theologically thorough and Christologically clear, they are often not. To expose oneself to the reality that making a move and a mistake can often be one in the same. I have learned to not take myself so seriously. I have learned afresh the awesome power of prayer and the weakness without it. I have learned that theological education is a necessary and powerful means, but not the end. I have learned that God is truly in charge of this thing we call ministry. It is God who has made us and not we ourselves. I have also learned that my misery has sometimes been my ministry. The very things that have caused frustration have also brought fruitfulness. Lastly, I count it all joy at how God sends new inventory to the shelves of a pastor-in-learning—morning by

morning new mercies I see. All I have needed thy hands hath provided. Great is thy faithfulness Lord unto me. In looking back at the past five years of this joyous journey, I observe in the words of Howard Thurman, “O God, how you must love your job, help thou me to also love mine.” I would not take anything in exchange for this journey—I count it all joy.

Starting A New Church

- 1. IS ABOUT GOD AND TRUSTING IN GOD AND NOT IN YOURSELF**
- 2. MEANS LIVING WITH UNCERTAINTY**
- 3. CAN BRING ABOUT A JARRING JOY**



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Would you like to experience the joy of starting a new church? Or would you like to know about the many different new church start possibilities in the United Church of Christ? Contact the Evangelism Ministry Team at 216.736.3827 or e-mail Dave Schoen, the Evangelism Team Leader, at <schoend@ucc.org>.

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