

LETTER TO A METHODIST MINISTER
January 11, 2015 –Romans 15: 1-9
The Church of the Covenant

Where does a pastor attend worship on their Sundays off? I don't mean, where do we worship when we are away on vacation; I mean, where do we worship when our vacation is in "Porchville", a "stay-cation", when we're still in town? When I served a church in Des Moines, Iowa the additional problem was that it was a smaller community where everyone knew one another. So when the Presbyterian minister showed up in a church unannounced the vibe would be –"What's wrong? Why isn't he worshipping in his own church? There must be trouble in the Presbyterian Church." So I would try to pick a church not in our denomination, slip in and out of the back pew unannounced and unrecognized. So one Sunday I went to First United Methodist Church in Des Moines and had such an experience there that I wrote a follow up letter to the Pastor, a LETTER TO A METHODIST MINISTER...

I parked on the street and went up the many and multiple steps on the impressive portico of the large-domed Methodist Church. It was formal and formidable, built in the era to try to impress, but it now came off as distant and off-putting, no easy access. And frankly, you couldn't even tell that the church was "open for business" because quite literally even though it was ten minutes of 11:00 when the service started, there was no one, no one else, going through the front door. When I opened the heavy wooden front doors they sort of creaked and groaned open and I entered into a Narthex area with a staffed Welcome Center. Immediately, I was set upon by several people, because they all knew I was a visitor, because only visitors enter through the front door; the rest of them park in the jumbo parking lot BEHIND the church and enter through the CE wing. "Was I a visitor?" "Where did I live?" "Was this my first visit?" –they asked, breathlessly. They stuffed a whole pile of literature about the church in my hand. All I had wanted to do was to sneak in and out, worship God, and go home un-recognized and unidentified as a visitor. No such luck. On the bulletin it said, "The Friendly Church" and indeed they were, in a way VERY, very, very friendly. I think an alert immediately went out over the Secret Service-like communication devices –"Visitor has breached perimeter in section 7 –code 12, all friendly people run to section 7 immediately!" Now I chose not to identify myself as the pastor of the Presbyterian Church for the above-stated reasons. And my desire was to sit in the back, anonymously; but NOoooo!, I was escorted up the side aisle to the third pew from the front by a very chatty, very friendly usher, who clearly had had training in being friendly and in engaging first-time visitors, and seating visitors in the "friendly section". Not next to screaming children, nor in the mugwump section, nor taking the pew of august Mrs. So-and-So whose family had sat in that pew for 5 generations. The dowager from Downton Abbey would exclaim, "My dear, frankly, you are sitting in MY FAMILY PEW." No, I was seated where everyone around me greeted me, shook my hand and welcomed me. It came time for the time of welcome and I think people were pole-vaulting over pews to come and shake my hand. It came time to fill out the fellowship pads, passed up and down my pew, where I was supposed to fill out my name and contact information. But I didn't want to do it, so passed it empty to the delightful older woman to my right, who turned it back to me, and with a rather school-marmish voice, said, "No, no, dearie, you are supposed to fill out your name and address here." Which I then dutifully did. Great service of worship, great choir, and a great message. I was waiting with baited breath for the moment the benediction was intoned to escape and dash up the side aisle. The minister said "Amen." And I pressed my way past the kindly woman out into the aisle, where I was immediately circled by a bevy of friendly people inviting me to attend the fellowship time in fellowship hall (which I really didn't want to do). But, I dutifully complied and found myself sipping coffee in a room filled with friendly strangers—not exactly what I wanted to do with my time whilst on vacation. I then escaped down the front steps and into my car and "punched it" just in case I was being followed by more friendliness. I got home, took off my preacher

suit, and put on my cut offs and old stinky yardwork T-shirt, intending to do some therapeutic gardening on my vacation, when, yes, you guessed it, the doorbell rang, and there were two lovely ladies from First United Methodist Church standing on my doorstep, with literature and a small loaf of freshly baked bread to give me as a gift. They inquired if I had attended church that morning and I demurred that indeed I had and then invited them into my living room, where I finally confessed that I was the Pastor of Central Presbyterian Church in Des Moines and not likely to be joining First United Methodist Church. They were very kind, rather than being irked that they had made a visit for no purpose other than to see an old curmudgeon-ly Calvinist in his yard clothes. But the one woman said to me, "This isn't about wanting you to join our church; this is about welcoming you as Christ would welcome you." After offering them a glass of ice water (a sign of me being one of the frozen chosen) they got up and left. I thought a lot about what she said after that. I thought about my experience that day and then wrote a very complimentary letter to the Methodist Minister, thanking him for the service, his message and the warm and friendly greeting I had received and how well organized that greeting truly was. But I concluded the letter –"As I am currently employed at Central Presbyterian Church I am not currently seeking to unite with a new congregation. But if I ever did, I would certainly want to come and attend yours. Faithfully, The Reverend Dr. Stuart D. Broberg, Sr. Pastor and Head of Staff, Central Presbyterian Church, Des Moines, Iowa."

Visitors to a church are a lot like I was. On the one hand, we just want to sneak in and out, worship and observe the church, in a way without being identified as a visitor. But also, in a stark contradiction, we want to decide how friendly, or not, a church truly is. We don't want to be identified; but we want to be warmly greeted –a conundrum. If it feels too friendly, it might actually be off-putting, as in, are you really interested in me or are you just interested in recruiting a new member and getting me to give you money. Sort of like the line in the old movie, "Animal House", about fraternities –"We'll let you in, because we need the DUES". So how friendly should we be? Should we play it a little coy, as in, maybe we *might* let you in? Or should we engage in unapologetic, unbounded friendliness? I kept coming back to the kindly lady's comment –"This is about welcoming you as Christ would welcome you." It really is the essence of our scripture for today from Romans, "*Welcome one another, therefore, as Christ has welcomed you.*" (Romans 15: 7) So we are left with the question, **HOW WOULD JESUS WELCOME US???**

Well, for the joy that was set before Him, He willingly went to the cross for us. He gave up His heavenly throne in order to humble Himself, be born in the likeness of men, and to empty Himself, and take on the form of a servant. What other King would give up His throne for me? He was obedient unto death upon a cross. He suffered all manner of indignity and humiliation for us. Unashamedly, unabashedly, He expressed His love for us. Without any coyness or reserve, He went to the cross to demonstrate how much He loves us. What other god would abandon heaven to do that for me? He is the father waiting for the Prodigal to return home who without decorum, without gravitas, embarrassingly, rushes out to meet His returning son. He is the Good Shepherd searching and searching until the one sheep enters the fold. He is the One who risked censure because He would eat with publicans and sinners. It is sad, almost, to think of how much He would humble Himself in order to express His welcome to us. And they took Him and stretched His arms wide on a cross, and nailed the hands of life and blessing there. How much does Jesus welcome us into His Kingdom? THIS MUCH –with arms wide open, He will welcome you... I think its OK to be almost foolishly welcoming to people in Jesus' name. Because, upon reflection, I think that is the way He has welcomed you and me. Church of the Covenant, you are a VERY, very, very friendly church. Thank you that you choose to welcome others as Jesus has welcomed you. Amen.

*By: The Reverend Dr. Stuart D. Broberg, The Church of the Covenant, Washington, PA
IF THIS HAS BLESSED YOU, PLEASE PASS IT ALONG TO A FRIEND!*