

McCabe United Methodist Church
Missional Church Consultation Initiative (MCCI) Weekend

Going Off-Script with a “Script”
10/01/17 Pastor Jenny Hallenbeck Orr

Thank you so much, Sue – and thank you to the entire MCCI Team! This has been a holy, challenging, and inspiring weekend, indeed.

As I get started, here, I just want to tell you to pay no attention to the printed title for this “response”. It no longer makes sense. Instead of talking about “going 'off-script””, I'm going to start by reading you a story – a *history...* our history.

What I'm about to read was researched and written by one of our very faithful, long-time members, Barb Egan. Barb wrote beautifully about McCabe's start and I'd like you to listen – *really listen* – to it. As I read, just a note of interest, for our first couple of decades as a church, McCabe was called “First Methodist Episcopal Church.” So... take a listen to a bit of our early history as a congregation. Here goes:

“In the 1870’s, Bismarck, Dakota Territory, was a small but growing frontier town with eighteen saloons supporting its rough and tumble lifestyle. By the time Rev. James W. Bull arrived in 1879, the saloon keeper, not ready to hear any words of criticism or correction, had already driven out of town two Methodist evangelists and a Methodist preacher.

“Rev. Bull, though, had better luck, thanks to his cheerful personality, energetic preaching style, and powerful singing of hymns. Preaching on the streets and sometimes standing on a beer barrel in front of a saloon, Rev. Bull gained enough of a following to conduct church meetings on the upper floor of the fire hall, at the same time soliciting donations for the building of a church. Even the men-gathered-in-front-of-the-saloons helped.

“The story goes that in one instance, when Rev. Bull spoke of building a church, one of the gamblers in the gathering said, 'No Methodist meetin' is done 'til it takes a collection. Come on now, let's give'em a lift to start their meetin' house. Let's pass the hat.'

“Rev. Bull also solicited donations from neighboring communities, as well as in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Iowa, raising about \$4,000, in all. Thus, he was able to purchase lots at Fifth and Thayer ... Rev. James Bull served as pastor from 1879 to 1882, McCabe’s formative years. The church he and his parishioners built was dedicated debt free in 1889.

“Fifteen pastors served First Methodist Episcopal Church of Bismarck during its first twenty-five years, 1879-1904, most for tenures of only one or two years. However, the church’s record book for each of those years shows that all fifteen pastors had a part in growing the church’s membership, an important step in the establishment of a great church. The railroads had opened Dakota Territory for a flood of land seekers, and the coming of so many settlers created a great urgency for churches to care for the spiritual needs of the newcomers.

“In the North Dakota Annual Conference’s 1904 Year Book, the presiding elder wrote, ‘The non-Christian and the non-church goer seem to be awakening and assuming a greater interest in the church. In other words, the influence of the church is reaching a larger number of souls in the different communities than ever before.’

“A good number were joining First Methodist Episcopal of Bismarck, but the westward movement didn’t end at Bismarck. Some stayed for a while and then headed farther west, so there were names in the ‘removed’ column of the yearly membership record as well. Still, there were more gains than losses, and the church saw a good pace of growth.

“Rev. Louis Magin, an energetic young bachelor recently graduated from Boston Theological Seminary, served at First [Methodist Episcopal Church] of Bismarck for six years, 1904 -1910 — long enough to see the church grow from 66 to 149 full members and long enough to see the church’s second building erected, where there would no longer be a need for children to sit on the window sills in crowded spaces; instead, there would be room for hundreds to be seated on the curved oaken pews of the new sanctuary.”¹

I've known for months that I would be giving a little speech in response to the MCCI Report... and I'm not supposed to use a script for this speech. But, as you heard from Sue, things changed a little bit this weekend and what

¹ From the “MCCI – Historical Document for McCabe's Self Study” by Barb Egan.

I'd planned to say this morning went a different direction. Frankly, it went the *right* direction. It went the *best* direction. It went *God's* direction.

The rule was that I was not supposed to use a script for this speech, but, as you just heard me read, McCabe United Methodist Church got its start with a preacher who spent a lot of time around drinkers and gamblers... so, I'd say I'm okay to break a rule or two here this morning.

Friends, it is our history as a church to bring the saving love of Jesus Christ to anyone and everyone who doesn't already know about it. For goodness sake, the first pastor of this congregation stood on beer barrels, preaching the good news of Jesus' love to drinkers and gamblers! And those drinkers and gamblers appreciated that preacher enough to take up an offering to help him build our first church building!

And what about that note that the next building – on 5th and Thayer downtown – was built so children would no longer need to sit on window sills in order to learn about Jesus. Imagine that! *So many children and young people* desperate to learn from us about the love of Jesus they had to *sit on window sills* because there were not enough chairs. Wouldn't that be an amazing abundance!

Well... friends... somewhere along the line – maybe as folks began to sit comfortably in the beautiful oaken pews of that building on 5th and Thayer – we began to get a bit too comfortable. We began to lose sight of that urgency to share the saving love of Jesus with anyone and everyone.

Like many churches, we here at McCabe have been in decline for years: our worship numbers, and our numbers of children and youth have been steadily going down for decades. New people *have* come to be with us, and we are grateful, but the new people have not outnumbered those who have left, through death or for other reasons.

Somewhere along the way, we got comfortable in *our pew*, and *our worship service*, with *our friends*... and we forgot to invite new people to our pews – new people who do not yet know the power of Jesus' saving love.

Somewhere along the way, we forgot that the God we experience here is meant to be shared: with our friends and neighbors, for sure... and even, like our very first pastor, it's meant to be shared with the likes of drinkers, gamblers. (Oh my!)

We need to get a little less comfortable and return more focus to our roots: we need to return to that history of sharing the saving love of Jesus Christ with anyone and everyone. Because, friends, that history of ours is the very mission of our Christian faith... the mission of making new disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

It won't be easy. We're all going to get a little uncomfortable. So, thank the good Lord for Pastor Dennis' incredible reminder that with God all things are possible.

With that good news – and with these recommendations from our MCCI team – we can build a foundation for fruitfulness in God's kingdom. And that foundation will help us become the church God has been calling us to be for generations.

We may or may not need beer barrels to stand on as we share the saving love of Jesus Christ in new ways, to new people... but we will need to get a little uncomfortable, we will need a *lot* of prayer, and we will *most assuredly* need to look first and foremost to our great and glorious God for vision. Amen?

Now, as you are able, would you please stand for the benediction.

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the power of the Holy Spirit, be with you this day and always. As we go, let's lift our voices to the great God of heaven by singing number 451 in the red hymnal, "Be Thou My Vision."