

### THE TWO COAT PRINCIPLE

As part of their preparation for our Building Renovation Proposal, several committee members toured a number of recently refurbished and renovated houses of worship. They asked many questions, including things like how long for construction timelines, what architect did they use and costs. At one location they had the chance to tour a beautifully done office and education wing. As they peeked into the sparkling classrooms, one of our committee members asked how often they were used. As it turns out, the space is occupied for a couple of hours of religious education twice a week. Most weeks, that's all. No wonder they are spotless!

That, of course, is not the Saugatuck way. It never has been! Our building has always been a place filled with activity as we have sought to serve not only our own congregation, but the community as well.

This meetinghouse was built in 1832, prior to the founding of Westport itself. When Westport was incorporated three years later, in 1835, the very first town meeting was held right in this room.

From the beginning, this congregation had understood that our greatest material resource, our most significant tool for mission, is this very building. With it, through it, and in it, we are able to provide and support many outreach efforts. As a friend of mine is fond of saying, "Live are changed here!"

This past week, for instance, some fifty or so twelve step meetings were held for recovering alcoholics, drug addicts, families of alcoholics, persons struggling with debt, with compulsive eating, bulimia anorexia and co-dependency—even compulsive cluttering! And these meetings were held in classrooms also used by our own church school, Crafters group and various boards and committees.

This past week fifty pre-schoolers were given love and guidance by the staff of Saugatuck Nursery School, in classrooms that house our own little ones on Sundays.

This past week plans were made for assisting children around the world by the good folks from Save the Children in our Daniels Room, which is also used for our own governance meetings, adults classes, children's choir and handbell choir rehearsals.

This past week dozens and dozens and dozens of retired men met for learning and fellowship as the YsMen came together in Hoskins Hall, where we as a congregation gather for Fellowship Hour, Quiet Days, Stephen Ministry Training and numerous social events.

Over the course of the month the local Amnesty International Chapter meets to fight for human rights, CLASP Homes trains workers who help disabled adults live full lives, the Boy Scouts gather to learn a variety of skills, all in the spaces we use as well for our own prayers and meetings and classes. You've heard me say it before: some 2,500 people a week pass through our doors and use our rooms. Blood donors coming to the the Blood Mobiles we sponsor, children coming to learn about music, hungry folks attending our holiday feasts, New Year's Eve revelers enjoying an alcohol free night on the town. The list goes on and on!

This building is used over and over again, all in the name of loving and serving our neighbors. Sometimes we struggle with complicated schedules. Sometimes folks meet in a space that is less than ideal. Sometimes we have a bit of difficulty keeping up with the cleaning needs—our rooms are not always spotless! But they are used—and used and used.

All of which is very biblical. For the biblical message is very consistent, from *Genesis* straight through *Revelation*. We are called to be stewards of all that we have been given, we are called to use our resources in ways that honor God and help our neighbors. And the more we have, the more that is expected of us. As Jesus said, "From the one who has much, much is expected." (Luke 12:48)

Many people think the words in our scripture lesson this morning are also from Jesus. Many believe it was Jesus who first said, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none . . . ." (Luke 3:11) But in reality—while consistent with thing that he does say—this very well-known saying is actually spoken by John the Baptist.

John was, of course, all hell fire and brimstone. He was a "repent for the kingdom of God is at hand" sort of prophet. But when he calls on his hearers to repent, he doesn't simply mean feel bad about what you've done wrong. He doesn't simply mean confess your sins. Rather he means repent in its original sense: turn around and do things God's way.

John's listeners are impressed, perhaps even frightened. How do we repent, they want to know. What is God's way? What are we supposed to do, how are we supposed to live? John sums it up in what we might call the two coat principle. It's really pretty straightforward. If you have two coats—share one with anyone who has none. If you have extra food, share it with those who have none. If you have money beyond your own basic needs, give it to those who have none. If you have space in your building that you're not using—share it with those who are in need of a place to meet. You see why I say what we do with our building is biblical? We have this great space—to use it just a few hours a week for our own meetings, rehearsals and classes, would be contrary to the two coat principle. But when we do use it the way we do, we are, I would argue, furthering the kingdom of God.

**This morning we are receiving a special offering for our mission work. It will directly support the efforts of the various agencies we support. I urge you to be extremely generous! The need is great! The shelters are full of folks needing help, the children of Bridgeport are falling further and further behind, all is not right with the world, and your dollars will make a real difference.**

**But let us not fall into the trap of pitting missions against the genuine need we have to renovate our building. It is not a matter of either/or. For we as a congregation have many, many coats. And our building, as I have said, IS part of our mission. Our building is one of the most important ways we impact this community! And it needs our attention.**

**It needs to be accessible to all people. Imagine you are a wheelchair bound alcoholic looking for help, trying to recover. You can't get it here—because you can't get into our rooms! Imagine you are a physically disabled child, wanting to attend Nursery School here at Saugatuck, or wanting to attend Church School. You can't. You can't get in!**

**Our building needs to be more environmentally sound to help protect the future for all children. Our building needs to be made safer for the children who take part in our programs. Our building needs to be more flexible, so we can accommodate a greater variety of groups and organizations. Our building needs to be more easily cleaned so that we can have the bright spaces we want, while still welcoming the wide array of outside users. Our building needs a reliable heating plant to keep us warm in the midst of winter.**

**The building renovation plan will allow us to use this building even more fully, it will allow us to do yet more mission and outreach to the wider community. And the monies we raise in the proposed capital campaign and use to maintain and upgrade our spaces will be money spent not just on ourselves, but on those in need as well.**

**Yesterday I conducted a memorial service here for someone who was not a member of our congregation. This is not unusual. It happens frequently. It is another way we serve the wider community.**

**As I was leaving the building to go home, a young woman who I had never met approached me and asked if I was the pastor. I assured her that I was.**

**"I'm in one of the twelve step groups," she said, "I'm trying to deal with my addictions, would you be willing to pray with me?"**

**We spoke for a few more moments, and then I took her hand and asked God to help her as she struggled to remain clean. As I finished, she dropped to her knees, and with tears in her**

eyes, offered a prayer of her own. Right there in the middle of the office hallway. As she got up, she thanked me, and then went on her way. I may never see her again.

Friends, its no wonder that some folks in our community refer to Saugatuck Church as the Recovery Church. It's no wonder that a friend of mine speaks about our Miracle Hallways. It's true. Every day. This building, this precious, precious gift from God, is the site of miracle after miracle, and lives are truly changed. All because our forebears set the example which we have followed of living by the two coat principle.

At least once a week, someone stops me, here at church or at the supermarket, or at a meeting outside, and says, "Thank you for all Saugatuck is doing for Westport." I usually just say "You're welcome. We're privileged to do it." Perhaps I should say "We're just trying to repent and do our part to further the kingdom of God."

Back in the early years of our congregation, one of our spiritual ancestors said, "The Meeting House on any calculation is worth its cost. But when considered in its relation to the religious and moral influence it may effect on society and its connection with the character and prosperity of this village, its value cannot be estimated."

Might that always be the truth. Might we always live by the two coat principle. Might we, as individuals and as a congregation, always work to further the kingdom of God.

Amen

John H. Danner