

## WORKFORCE

By

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Text: Matthew 9:35-38	Date: 6/15/08	#0827
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John Davidson was an elder at my home church, Wayne Presbyterian, outside of Philadelphia. He was my Sunday School teacher. When I was a senior in H.S. he asked me: Chip, have you considered a church vocation? And I answered: absolutely not. When four years later I decided to attend seminary to be a minister and chose to attend SFTS over Princeton where my pastor on the board of Trustees, John Davidson spoke up for me. In fact, when he had a business trip to the west coast, he went out of his way to visit me at SFTS.

Two years ago on one of my vacation Sundays, Patty and I worshipped at Wayne Presbyterian, the first time I'd been back in probably 20 years. The greeter at the door was John Davidson well into his 90's. I said: you probably don't remember me; I'm Chip Colson. Without batting an eye, he said: SFTS.

When I was at Montreat for my study leave two weeks ago I ate lunch with a minister from Ohio. In the course of conversation he mentioned that he had been on the staff at Wayne Presbyterian in the 1970's, but he hadn't been back in years. I told him I'd visited two years ago and spoken with John Davidson. He replied: John Davidson, you can never forget him?

When it comes down to discussing what Presbyterian elders are to do, we can talk about meetings to attend and committees to lead or we can talk about spiritual endeavor and building up faith in Christ. I'm sure John Davidson attended a lot of church meetings and led many committees, but I wouldn't be in front of you today if John Davidson had not also embraced his primary role as elder: being an ambassador for Jesus Christ.

Jesus said to his disciples as we heard in our NT lesson: "the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few." It reminds you of the story Jesus told on another occasion about the owner of the vineyard who was desperate to get his grapes picked. He went to the hiring hall four times on the same day to get enough laborers so that his harvest wouldn't be lost. All farmers will tell you that harvests do not wait until you are ready; you're the one that has to be ready. In the discussion over undocumented migrant farm labor, a Colorado farmer reported on a news show that he plowed his crop under because his usual labor source from Mexico was no longer available and no matter how much he advertised, he couldn't get enough locals from Colorado to do the work. "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few."

I'm sure we realize that Jesus was not in search of workers with sickles in hand to cut ripe wheat in nearby fields. Rather he was calling for leaders that could recognize the urgent need for spiritual life among the crowds of people on their left and right, in front of them and behind them. It's fascinating how Jesus used workforce language to speak of his spiritual objective. He called his first disciples who happened to be fishermen by saying he

wanted them to fish for people. He told Peter to be a shepherd: feed my sheep he said. This language is just as important today as it was in Jesus' day, because it asks us to respond to what Jesus wants first of all. And that is not to attend long meetings, to organize committees and authorize the payment of bills. Jesus is looking for leaders like John Davidson.

The nominating committee of Faith Church, as you know, is hosting an ice cream social right after worship this morning. The reason is: they want to share with you what they've been discussing this spring. They've been serious about how to change the perception among us of the leadership we need at Faith Church. They think that for too long we have practiced a leadership style that emphasizes the committees and the meetings and the majority votes. Whereas Jesus prefers elders and deacons that are asking the questions what does God want Faith church to be; what does it mean for Faith Church to follow Jesus and how do we do that in 2008; what do we have to change in order to excite the congregation about being in Jesus' workforce? What are the spiritual gifts in this congregation and how do we identify them and bring them to bear for the glory of God? These are just some of the topics on the nominating committee's mind as they began their responsibility to ask for the willingness of members to be elders and deacons in time for the special congregational meeting in October.

I've been pastor long enough to know that at any given time folks are asking themselves: what is it that God wants for my life? How can I serve Jesus Chris today? What is he calling

me to do in and for Faith Church? I've wanted to deepen my life of prayer; with whom can I partner in this endeavor? You may be asking these questions this morning.

Occasionally people broach those questions with me, the pastor, but I always wonder if we as Faith church welcome and encourage this kind of questioning out loud and with one another. I certainly believe that the elders and deacons need to take up this permission-giving as part of their ministry. But I also think that engaging such conversation is basic to the discussion of willingness to be elder or deacon. Yet if it's true that folks flee when they see the nominating committee coming, then we've got to lose that perception and fast. Ice cream is the nominating committee's plan to meet the congregation half way; I hope you'll go your half and, not just eat the ice cream, but engage them about leadership for Faith Church.

Regardless of your political persuasion in this election year, I suspect that many of us have heard of Trinity UCC in Chicago. What have we heard? Snippets of some sermons by its recently retired pastor were reported several months ago over and over. The only reason we heard about them at all was because one of the church members was campaigning to be president of the U.S. When Mr. Obama made his first speech in response, amazingly he defended his twenty year membership in that church, despite calls even then for him to distance himself from it. It's shocking how willing the public is to regard the church merely in terms of secondhand information. It's shocking that we

aren't curious about the leadership and ministry of any congregation beyond its pastor.

Rev. Jeremiah Wright and the choir of Trinity UCC led worship at a conference I attended several years ago. Rev. Wright apologized that he could bring only half of his choir, only 100 could come. It made me think then and now about the ministry in that congregation that caused Mr. Obama and subsequently others to speak up about how they have been influenced by it. It wasn't just the minister's doing. It was through leaders the likes of an elder such as John Davidson.

I conclude with this illustration, because I wonder if we at Faith want to be known in the community just by the color of our bricks or the name of the minister. I'm sure I've preached some sermons in the past that annoyed folks down to their toenails. But are snippets of my sermons how we want to be referred to? Do we want to be known as the church where the pastor burns buckets in the chancel? Or do we want to be known for the leaders we raise up who seek to know what God wants for Faith Church? The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest."