

Stained Glass, God's Future, and Our Money

Rev. Dr. Katie Hays • Northwest Christian Church (DOC), Arlington, Texas
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For the second time in just under 20 years of ministry, I'm serving a church with a stained glass problem. That's not a metaphor for anything. I mean, we literally have a problem with the stained glass windows that adorn part of our building. They were lovingly gifted to the church by various families many years ago, installed as well as they could be way back when.

But now the frames around the windows are swollen from moisture, the paint on the sills is peeling, the leading droops between some of the colorful pieces after so many years in the blistering Texas sun and icy Texas winters. Wasps have made intricate nests between the stained glass and the plexiglass poorly placed to protect the artwork from hailstones and bb guns. Worse than that, the moisture that the windows so effectively collect and hold is seeping into the structure itself. The stained glass windows are taking down the church.

Okay, maybe they are a metaphor. Because both times this has happened in churches I've served, people have gotten unusually excited about raising money to save the windows, to preserve the past, to cling tightly to our idea of what a good church should look like. The first time this happened to me, I was a little younger, quite eager to please. I threw myself into the effort to raise the 40-plus thousand dollars it ultimately cost to have the windows taken out by an expensively bonded glazier, frames rebuilt, the past perfectly reinstalled. "Look at that," people said when the work was finished. "You can't even tell anything was done." Indeed.

So this time I'm not biting. We know the windows need work, and we have found a contractor who will happily replace them with newfangled double paned storm windows if we will let her have the stained glass to sell to collectors and artists who repurpose the pieces. An even trade, and extraordinary energy savings to boot.

Of course, I'm not the one who gets to decide what decision we make about the windows. And like all church decisions, this one will take a long time to make. But this time, every time it comes up in a board meeting, or a conversation in my office, or a parking lot parlez, I say the same thing, ask just one question, repeated and repeated and repeated. "If this congregation has an extra \$40,000 in its pockets, do we really believe this is how God would ask us to spend it?"

So far, nobody has said yes. Because I think they know as well as we do that we are being called as a community of disciples to invest in the future of God's imagining, not the preservation of the church's longed-for past. We need \$40,000, yes, for our ESL center where we welcome our immigrant neighbors. We need \$40,000 to help local preschoolers get new books in their homes to increase their kindergarten readiness. We need \$40,000 to make sure the senior citizens of our city who are living alone are getting meals and enjoying the company of caregivers who can give their loved ones a break. None of the people I'm thinking of now care whether our windows have stained glass in them or not.

The offering we're sharing in tonight will help fund scholarships for seminary students who want to attend events like this, wherein they learn to speak with clarity and passion about how the church is called to live generously into God's bright future for the world we serve. Be as generous as you can, and add your prayer of blessing to our gifts.