

Introduction

How does one know when to celebrate? I once celebrated a marriage that should have been an occasion for mourning. And I can vividly recall my elation upon receiving a business loan that ended in economic disaster. I've seen joy turn to sorrow, and tears turn into laughter, so often that I've lost confidence in my talent for telling good news from bad. So it was that, at the close of a bitterly cold day in February 2015, only my lack of agility and trepidation over how the future might unfold enabled me to resist leaping high into the air and clicking my heels together. Three notable events occurred that day; they mark not the end of the story but a moment when the story of the creation of All Saints' Episcopal Church of Bentonville, Arkansas, has briefly paused so that an account can be shared.

Correspondence with a county sheriff seldom brings good tidings to the average citizen, but on this morning the news was excellent. An e-mail message from the Benton County sheriff assured me that he had signed a contract with the jail's food service supplier to provide hot meals to the prisoners under his charge. A seven-year struggle to remove the Benton County jail from the very short list of jails in the United States that serve only cold food to their prisoners had finally met with victory. It was the culmination of a process that began with my startling discovery upon arriving in Bentonville that, in the hometown of Wal-Mart Stores, Inc., the county sheriff couldn't find it in his heart, or in the county's

coffers, to feed its prisoners much of anything but cold, stale sandwiches. The events following my awareness of the prisoners' plight led to a confrontation with a sheriff that almost ended in fisticuffs, the eventual election of a more enlightened sheriff, a rallying of our congregation around the idea of cooking the meals themselves, preaching, teaching, articles in the local paper, a heated Facebook exchange over a graphic depiction of the jail's typical meal of bologna on white bread, a trip to the Arkansas State Capitol to meet with the jail standards commission and copious conversations and e-mail exchanges with the keepers of the jail. And so it was that the parishioners of All Saints' savored the sweet taste of victory and the county's most unfortunate citizens, barred from life's most basic amenities, could at least taste the comfort of a hot meal.

On that same cold morning, Walmart announced that it would immediately raise the hourly wage for their lowest-paid employees from the federally mandated minimum of \$7.25 an hour to \$9.00 an hour, and then to \$10.00 an hour the following year. The announcement was met with wide-ranging reactions. Labor groups found the increases inadequate and gave credit for the rise in wages to the persistence of workers and their allies. Economists noted that a more healthy economy and a tightening job market naturally leads to an increase in wages in order for companies to retain qualified workers and maximize profitability. Explaining the decision, Walmart CEO Doug McMillon said, "What's driving us is we want to create a great store experience for customers and do that by investing in our own people." The *New York Times* said the action "appears to be an attempt to stem employee turnover and to respond to pressure for higher wages from politicians, labor groups and employees." There is no doubt that the move was prompted by many factors, but I couldn't avoid smiling at the news and taking some satisfaction in the quiet role that All Saints' had played in the decision. Walmart decision makers are less influenced by a *New York Times* editorial than they are by a conversation on the Bentonville square, a thoughtful sermon, a column written by a local clergyman, or the well-placed comment of a compassionate and determined Walmart

associate. Behind the scenes, courageous Christians were having an influence.

In the evening of that same day, I drove across town to a meeting of the Benton County Interfaith Alliance. The Alliance is composed of representatives from Jewish, Muslim, Christian, Hindu, and Bahá'í traditions—a notable assemblage of religions anywhere, but an extraordinary gathering for a rural county in Arkansas. The world's largest retailer, with a presence on every major continent, was responsible for bringing their employees and their suppliers, along with their distinct faith traditions, to this unique community. A few months earlier, at an interfaith Thanksgiving celebration, Hindu, Muslim, and Christian clergy held a sacred scroll aloft while the rabbi knelt down and read from the Torah. It was a remarkable evening, and one that I could scarcely have imagined eight years ago at my first, and last, meeting of the Bentonville Ministerial Alliance. At that gathering the group voted to change its name to the Bentonville Christian Ministerial Alliance—in order to clearly differentiate themselves from other faiths and purposely exclude the variety of religions beginning to make their presence known in this corner of the Ozarks. And now, having completed the design development phase of a building program for a stirringly beautiful modernist church building, the people of All Saints' Episcopal Church find themselves in serious conversation with the Jewish congregation of Etz Chaim concerning the prospect of building an interfaith center, where both congregations can worship under the same roof. There is even the possibility that our Muslim brothers and sisters might join with us in the creation of a center where all three Abrahamic faiths could gather as one.

The likelihood that three major endeavors, on which our church has worked for years, could come to fruition on a single day seems remote. Yet despite its improbability, this moment in time provides a suitable platform from which to delve into the story of how we arrived at this juncture. As implausible as the triptych of events occurring on that single freezing February day seems to be, so were the fantastic series of events that unfolded in the eight years leading

up to that day—occurrences that stretched and shaped an ordinary group of churchgoers into a people of God with a heart for justice and inclusion.



For the early Jesus followers living in Rome and the residents of the nations under their sway, the presence of an empire presented a decidedly mixed blessing. The *Pax Romana* offered peace with a steep price. Roman officials maintained order, but exacted crippling taxes and tribute from their subjects. Strict allegiance to the emperor was enforced with the weight of the Roman boot. The kingdom of God that Jesus proclaimed offered a different kind of peace, a kingdom based on compassion and justice, a kingdom that was not of Caesar. The presence of the Roman Empire was ubiquitous. The legions brought with them the culture, the customs, and the commerce of Rome and Rome's influence flavored every inch of the societies it touched.

Yet without Rome, Christianity could not have spread. The Roman network of all-weather roads connected disparate parts of the empire. Paul's missionary journeys followed those Roman roads. International trade and commerce brought with it the opportunity for a fluid exchange of ideas. It was in the international marketplace of Rome and its environs that Christianity eventually found a firm foothold and spread throughout the Empire.

Sometimes I imagine that planting a church in Bentonville feels a little like the early Jesus followers must have felt as they established the early church in the Roman Empire. Certainly Walmart possesses none of the military, political, and ideological muscle that characterized the power of the Romans, but Walmart's economic dominance is indisputable. In terms of revenue, Walmart is the world's largest company, the biggest private employer in the world, and the globe's largest retailer. It operates in twenty-six countries outside of the United States. If Walmart were a country, it would be the twenty-fifth largest economy in the world.

Just as the residents of Rome enjoyed the economic and cultural benefits of Roman citizenship, so the citizens of Bentonville take pleasure in the parks, trails, restaurants, good schools, and museums that would not exist in their community without the presence of Walmart. There is no small irony in the fact that Bentonville has a lovely town square that buzzes with retail activity throughout the year while stores lining the square in thousands of small towns across the United States lie vacant because shoppers flock to the Walmart on the edge of town.

The “Home Office,” as Walmart’s corporate headquarters is locally known, is not located in a glittering, multistory edifice. Visitors are surprised to find that the sprawling red brick building closely resembles a second-rate community college. Entering the windowless, warehouse-like interior, one finds acre upon acre of cubicles, stretching as far as the eye can see, where “associates,” as Walmart employees are called, conduct business with the world. Only when the sun is very low on the horizon does the Home Office cast any physical shadow at all. Yet the presence of the Home Office is ubiquitous across the planet, and, most certainly, in this quintessential company town.



The journalist and novelist Tom Wolfe has explained why he chooses to show up on an assignment wearing his trademark white suit and two-tone shoes: “It is much more effective to arrive at any situation as a man from Mars than to fit in.” Arriving in Bentonville, Arkansas, dressed entirely in black, apart from the white clerical collar around my neck, and holding a fresh mandate from the bishop to plant an Episcopal church here, I understood something of how the storied man from Mars might have felt. It wasn’t long before I also realized that I too might be more effective if I avoided fitting in too neatly in Bentonville. Wearing a black suit and a white clerical collar seemed to help me keep an appropriate distance, but it also served as an entree into Arkansas culture.

Bentonville is a churchgoing kind of place, and a “man of the cloth” is immediately accorded some modicum of respect. Nonetheless, while you can’t open your car door without hitting a preacher, it is rare on the streets of Bentonville to encounter a priest. The novelty of my presence worked to my advantage. From the beginning, I was noticed and curiosity often got the best of the residents. Often, I was asked, “What are you?” or “Are you a preacher or something?” But more often, the collar simply proved to be a conversation starter and allowed me to get a glimpse of the lives of those I encountered. In a larger sense, I eventually was included in the “conversation” the community had about what it was and where it was going. And it has proven to be a very interesting conversation, indeed.

With a population of a mere forty thousand, Bentonville is among the best known small towns in the United States. Its fame, or perhaps notoriety, is attributed to its status as the home of Walmart, the largest corporation in America. The commission I had received from the bishop was to start a church here. Dozens of churches had already sprung up in Bentonville—mainline churches, as well as many of a variety of evangelical flavors. The idea of starting an Episcopal church in Bentonville had been a topic of discussion within the Diocese of Arkansas for over a decade, but many wondered whether a decidedly liberal church could succeed within the conservative religious and political climate here.

The Episcopal Church, whose liturgical style of worship is deeply rooted in an ancient Christian tradition, has moved in a theologically progressive direction over the past century. The typical Episcopalian sees no conflict between science and the teachings of scripture, isn’t a Biblical literalist, accepts the validity of other major world religions, values Christian practice over belief, rejects dogmatism, recognizes the importance of women in leadership roles in the church, fully accepts members of the LGBT community, favors same-sex marriage, and, more often than not, thinks a cocktail before dinner might not be a bad idea. Considering the conservative religious culture that is dominant here, it is easy

to understand why one might question whether Bentonville was “fertile ground” for planting an Episcopal church.



On the first day of my arrival in Bentonville, I rented a garage apartment across the street from the local cemetery. After my Australian shepherd, Tyke, and I passed the interview with my new landlord, the landlord and I shook hands and I said, “Freddie, you are my best friend in Bentonville.” Freddie was, in fact, the only person I knew in the entire county. However, Bentonville is a friendly place and my church planting strategy of making friends wherever I went proved to be a good one. I went everywhere. I showed up for music at “picking on the square” every Friday evening in downtown Bentonville. I attended city council and quorum court meetings. I went to Chamber of Commerce and Rotary Club events, fairs, concerts, lectures, plays, and even the Mule Jump at Pea Ridge.

During the first years of our mission, Bentonville still retained a distinctly small town atmosphere, but with a difference. To my surprise, I discovered that there were seven places to eat sushi, and most were good. My puzzlement at this phenomenon was eventually resolved as I realized how extensively Walmart employees traveled. It was not unusual for an Arkansaswyer with a high school education to find herself traveling to China to purchase merchandise or flying to Africa or South America to coordinate the delivery of goods. These small town people often returned from their travels not just with a taste for exotic foods, but with new experiences and an expanded worldview.

Not long before I arrived, Walmart vendors recognized that if they were to do business with Walmart effectively, they would need to open offices nearby. Consequently, if you work for General Foods, Kraft, Kellogg, PepsiCo or one of the hundreds of other suppliers for Walmart, there is a good chance that, if you were going to advance your career, you would be expected to spend a few years working closely with your major customer. As a result, Benton

County began to grow rapidly and a new population of young, educated, and forward-thinking residents began to inhabit the area. Many found the slower pace of life, the mild climate, and the natural beauty of the surrounding Ozarks to be enticing enough to convince them to put down roots. As I was told many times by couples that had moved here from larger cities throughout the country, “This seems like a good place to raise a family.”

It is not unusual to encounter a rich diversity of cultures in America’s large cities, but in a small town like Bentonville it is astounding. Since Walmart does business internationally, citizens from every continent have made their home here. At the last count, I noticed seven Indian restaurants within a mile of the Walmart Home Office. The first Jewish synagogue started in a rural area of the U.S. in a half-century is here. There is a thriving mosque, and a new Hindu temple has been built. Extraordinarily, a Hmong community has settled nearby and their presence is made known at the downtown farmers’ market on Saturday mornings. Perhaps most unexpected, the largest Marshallese community outside of the Marshall Islands has found its way to Northwest Arkansas.

The second largest employer in the area is Tyson Foods. Tyson employs thousands of workers, mostly Hispanic, in its meat processing plants here. Consequently, this corner of Arkansas has one of the fastest growing Hispanic communities in the country. Not long ago, I stood in line at the checkout stand at Walmart behind an Asian couple. After a few minutes, I realized that they were speaking in Spanish. Unable to resist hearing their story, I learned that they had moved to Bentonville from Chile, where there is a significant Asian population.

With rapid changes come challenges for a community, and great opportunities for me to be an agent for change emerged. Within weeks of my arrival, I realized just how responsive the community could be. A new trail that had been built in the north part of town was made of concrete. As a lifelong runner, I knew how damaging running on a concrete surface could be. After a couple of conversations with the city, a gravel path suddenly appeared alongside

the concrete trail. In a climate accustomed to change, a variety of voices can be heard.

One of our early parishioners, Joe, is retired from a Walmart career. At one point, he was responsible for purchasing every shoe that Walmart bought from China. Long before Walmart paid close attention to the conditions of factories where their products were produced, Joe was asking factory owners about the lives of the workers, visiting their homes, and talking with them about how they were treated.

Before coming to Bentonville, I sometimes imagined that in order to get Walmart's attention, I might have to chain myself in protest to the giant Walmart sign outside the entrance to the Home Office. I'll still reserve that strategy as an option, but I have come to realize that I am in a unique position to have an impact on one of the most powerful corporations in the world, and by extension, on environmental concerns, employment practices, wages, and diversity issues by teaching and preaching a gospel of compassion, justice, and inclusion to a congregation of people who occupy positions of authority from which they can directly effect change within the organization.

It is hard to imagine that an ordinary Episcopal priest in a small town in Arkansas could have such an opportunity to make the world a better place. I am daily humbled and inspired by the example of faithful members of my congregation and by members of the larger community who are committed to the task of changing the world from the tiny vantage point of Bentonville.