

Manchester Message column, November 2020

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Lessening the Distance

In the last Manchester Message, Police Chief Scott Will and I discussed policing in Manchester. At the same time as our examination of policing practices began, City staff and I started asking ourselves questions about the environment of our community here. We are a diverse community and fortunate to be that. Those of us who serve in Manchester City government need always to work at creating an atmosphere where all those who live and work here feel like they belong.

From that point of self-assessment, several of us felt a need to examine the social and emotional health of living here. Two questions for us became: “Do our residents feel like they belong here?” and “Does it feel like home?” Seeking answers, we sought guidance.

Our small team asked a retired pastor to offer facilitation. Pastor Dave, a Manchester resident, was the senior pastor at Kirkwood United Methodist Church and was one of that City’s healers, during Kirkwood’s difficult years of recovery from their City Council shootings. We have started meeting with Dave on a weekly basis and have adopted a book, *Community, The Structure of Belonging*, by Peter Block, as our guiding reference.

In one of our first meetings with Dave, he used the phrase, *Lessening the Distance*. While used in a casual reference at the time, it’s meaning offers a clear and important direction for our City team, and certainly for me! **That phrase reminds us that local government, and we as individuals, must work to lessen the distance (and differences) that exist amongst us. We must value our uniqueness and respect those things that make us different.**

A diverse community is much richer and healthier when all feel welcomed; when all feel like they belong. Our study has just begun and we have much to figure out, so our insights, at this point, are few.

You need to be part of this examination, too. Like me, you who live here have awareness of what it feels like living here. I hope you have trust in City government. Do you sense a common cohesiveness between residents and local government? Do you feel like you belong in this community? If you don’t feel like you belong, then there’s a distance to lessen. We must find ways to come together!

“Belonging” implies some degree of ownership, i.e. something belongs to me (or us). If we feel that we belong to this community, then we have a stake in it and are apt to

nurture and build on it. I'm reaching out to you to ask, "Help us make Manchester better."

As City government focuses on ***Lessening the Distance*** for its residents, all who live here can accept the same challenge. Our questions to answer are what can I do for my next-door neighbor, on my own street, or in my school or church? Our lives of isolation have been magnified by the COVID experience. Individually, taking steps that lessen the distance with someone else offers a simple reward that is quite huge: we feel better about ourselves. And, distance has been lessened between two individuals!

The phrase, ***Lessening the Distance***, is acting as an important compass for me now. City leaders have their sights on that direction, too. When we started meeting as a team, we started without a known outcome. Our City Administrator, Police Chief, Deputy Chief and Alderwoman Huether join me on this team. I told them at the outset that I had no vision for an endpoint. In fact, we weren't even sure of the group's goal. But, the journey and its work felt right to us. An early outcome and a big one, has been an awareness that one of City government's most important tasks is to lessen the distance and differences that exist amongst us. When our differences are valued and appreciated our connectedness is strengthened. That makes us a stronger community.

I have referenced the word, "home" several times. For me, that word describes that place where I have my strongest sense of connectedness, emotional and physical. Home is that place where I most feel like I belong. A strong, healthy community must offer that same sense of well-being, connectedness and acceptance for all its residents. I especially appreciate hearing someone say, "I love living here." That expression clearly implies that they feel that sense of belonging to this community. It's their way of expressing, "Manchester is my home!"

I hope you feel like Manchester is your home. It feels that way for me. But, it may not feel like that to you. Who of you feel left out? If you are not feeling welcomed or feel your voice is unheard, please talk with me. E-mail me. Call me. Staff and I will listen. Confidentiality will be assured. I don't want anyone to feel such separation.

Besides hearing the voice of those feeling left out, please share your ideas that would better grow community connectedness and value of all. See my e-mail and phone number below. Communicate with me. My next Conversation with the Mayor is Wednesday morning, November 18 at 7:30 a.m. That's a good time to talk!

Thanks for allowing me to be your mayor!

