

The Presbytery of Elizabeth
I Refuse To Lead A Dying Church
A Learning Experience: Choosing Community Over Isolation
November 26, 2013

1. Introduction to the Theme

Large-group sharing, popcorn style: Other than the church where, in your church's neighborhood, do people look for community?

Paul Nixon asks, "What if there are people within and beyond our churches who look for community somewhere else because they think they have a better shot of finding it there....than finding it at church?"

Comments from The Transitional Leader:

"Some people think that the quest for meaningful community no longer exists, that people want to keep to themselves, retreat into their own private homogenous, worlds. Isolate. Insulate. But I am not so sure about that. In fact I think people are longing for deep, authentic life-giving relationships. I think we all want alternatives to the rapid, often vapid superficial lives induced by our culture. I think we are tired of contentiousness and divisiveness. We want to be woven, with our fellow human beings into a network that is hospitable, gracious, and reflects the image of God in which each of us was made. I think we are looking for places that nurture our spiritual lives and summon our deepest concern, compassion and generosity."

So....today we will explore:

How might our churches be places of deep connection?
How might we create settings and experiences in which people move
from isolation to community?

2. Warning Signs of Isolation (Paul Nixon)

To what extent do you see these signs in your church? What is your internal response to hearing these signs named?

- People scattered across a worship space that is too big for the crowd present, sitting in isolation from one another
- No systematic design for contacting or connecting with people when they drop out of worship participation for more than a couple of weeks
- A nice coffee time after worship, but a lack of settings where people move beyond small talk to share real hurts and hopes with each other
- Fortress-like buildings erected in another era by people that used to live in the neighborhood, but either died or moved somewhere else, so the building now functions as an alien, intimidating presence in the new neighborhood,

- typically locked up 165 hrs./week
- Ministries to the poor offered at arms-length distance from the people served, rather than as part of a strategy of relationship building that draws neighbors and congregations together in partnership and authentic spiritual community

3. Choosing Community Over Isolation.

Today's challenge: To help people (like many of us) raised in a culture of spiritual isolation to face and change their long-learned habits and fears.

This involves choices in three circles of relationship

- Knowing Others: Relationships to the wider community around the church
- Knowing Ourselves: Quality of community that exists within the church itself.
- Knowing Christ: Grounding our life together in practices that shape community, in Christ

Through intentional development of relational groups that offer deep, authentic life-giving experiences of community on Christ.

Panel representing examples drawn from the congregations of our Presbytery

- Unbinding the Gospel – Westfield – Christine Traeger
- Red Ribbon Fellowship – First, Elizabeth – Jeniffer Rodriguez
- Disaster Assistance – Basking Ridge – Mike Rountree
- Support Group for Released Prisoners – 2nd Elizabeth – Michael Granzen
- Interfaith Hospitality Network/Art Therapy – Lamington – Kris Smith

Questions/Invitations to Panelists:

After the panelists introduces themselves and briefly describe the purpose(s) for which their group gathers, the moderator will ask each of the following questions, with open invitation for any of the panelists to respond, popcorn style, not repeating but adding to insights offered by others.

1. What does the group do, that develops authentic relationships among participants?
2. From what sources or resources do participants draw, to reflect and discuss what God is doing in their lives?
3. How are new people intentionally included?
4. What does the group do, to bless others, within and beyond the church?
5. How does this ministry connect participants to one or more of the three circles of relationship/knowing?

4. The Challenges of Choosing Community Over Isolation.

- The challenge of the habits and routines of existing groups

We are not talking about community for the sake of community. The idea is to build authentic spiritual community that forms disciples of Jesus and engages them in Christ's mission to the world

To questions like, "Can the choir be my small group? Can my Sunday school class be my small group? Can my book club be a small group?" Nixon answers Yes...IF you sit down before or after and share a meal together....IF you work to integrate newer participants weekly.....IF you break into groups of six or so to share what's going on in your life...IF you open a Bible for a time of reflection at least once a month.

If your group does these things....chances are, you'll be going to that deep, authentic, life-giving place where the love of Jesus reaches you, changes you, and releases you to share your experiences with others.

If not...the challenge is to begin to change habits and routines so an existing group can be transformed

- The challenge of vulnerability

In her book *Daring Greatly*, author Brene Brown calls vulnerability "the emotional exposure we face everyday that is not optional." She says, "Our only choice is the question of engagement. Our willingness to own and engage with our vulnerability determines the depth of our courage and the clarity of our purpose. The level to which we protect ourselves from being vulnerable is a measure of our fear and disconnection. She continues: We must walk into the arena, whether a new relationship an important meeting, our creative process or a difficult family conversation with courage and the willingness to engage. We must dare to show up and let ourselves be seen. This is vulnerability. This is daring greatly. Why? Because of influences like shame, perfectionism, and anxiety. For many of us, church has not been a place to learn and practice vulnerability. So, is this a quality essential to healthy relationships....we are now faced with the challenge of creating a congregational culture in which it is safe to be vulnerable to God, to each other, and to ourselves....as Jesus has instructed us to do

- The challenge of leading by example and experience

Former way of looking at church leadership: selecting the right people for the church's committee structure. The way of choosing community is about developing relational groups. These groups will need leaders who know how to convene meetings, facilitate projects, and nurture group members. If you choose community, a major piece of your job as teaching or ruling elder is to pray for, enlist, and train new group leaders. It can't be all on you....but it is on you to lead by example and by your own personal experience.....starting NOW

5. **Conversation in triads:** With two others seated around you, talk about times in your life and/or places and settings in which you have experienced deep, authentic, life-giving community. **AND/OR**

Prayer triads: Connect with two people seated near you. Follow the process, outlined by the leader:

Breathe deeply, exhale and relax. Ask God to let you know one thing for which you could ask for prayer today. It could be anything....gratitude, help with a challenge, growth in patience, love, trust, forgiveness., etc

[One rule: the prayer must be for YOU....not somebody else, but you.]

The leader will ring the singing bowl to signal the end of silence.

Now in one minute, tell the others in your triad how they can pray for you. The singing bowl will signal the end of each person's "this is how you can pray for me" sharing

Now enter a time of prayer, spoken or silent. Together decide how you'll pray and in what order each person will be prayed for. Listen for the singing bowl to signal when it's time to switch. We'll take no longer than 6 minutes for this time of prayer.