

The Presbytery of Elizabeth I Refuse to Lead A Dying Church

Presbytery Learning Experience – June 24, 2014

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Choosing Now Rather Than Later

1. Opening Remarks

We have come to the last of our learning experiences drawn from the book “I Refuse to Lead a Dying Church.”

We started last September, in an operating room, as a surgeon defied conventional wisdom to pioneer the world’s first surgical procedure on the heart....choosing life over death.

In November, we listened as a panel of presbyters described ways in which their churches are choosing community over isolation

In January, we considered revolutionary movements we’ve lived through, and considered choosing bold over mild...as stirring lyrics from Les Miserables called us to walk behind the ploughshare, and put away the sword. “This is the future that we bring when tomorrow comes.”

In March, we imagined ourselves in a space capsule, blasting off in a spirit of frontier adventure, encountering challenges we never expected would happen, and splashing down to wonder what the world is waiting for, from us.

In May, we got playful! Using images and tactile materials to deepen the relationships among us, choosing joy over drudgery.

Today, we come to a final choice.....choosing now rather than later.

- 2. Choosing Now...to warm us up to this topic, I want you to take about 30 seconds to make a list of 10 things you’ve been putting off....that pile of clutter you’ve intended to clear, the book that sits unopened, the card you intended to send, the conversation you know you need to have. Just list them as they come.....starting NOW**

Before we go any further...look at your list – what would be the two easiest items to tackle....share with a partner.....GO....

If you were to make a deal with yourself to take care of those two easiest tasks, immediately...you might find new energy, a sense of manageability, having a wee bit of control where our lives can sometimes seem entirely unmanageable and out of control. Choosing now with the easy stuff builds resilience for the things that are harder to tackle.

3. In his chapter about choosing now rather than later, Paul Nixon quotes the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who said,

“Actually time is neutral. It can be used either destructively or constructively, I am coming to feel that the people of ill-will have used time much more effectively than the people of good will. We must come to see that human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability. It comes through the tireless efforts and persistent work of those willing to be co-workers with God, and without this hard work time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation. We must use time creatively, and forever realize that the time is always ripe to do right.”

4. Paul Nixon says, “If we understand the work of our church to be less urgent than what the Freedom Fighters were about in the 1960s, perhaps we do not clearly understand the salvation we have been called to offer.”

- Where is our holy urgency, when it comes to bringing the gospel to the many people around us who live in isolation from God and neighbor?
- Where is our holy urgency, when it comes to the legacy of human suffering that comes from poverty, oppression, discrimination, violence?
- Where is our holy urgency about connecting with the 1 in 5 people in our country who now boldly declare “none” when asked to identify their religious affiliation...or about the 1 in 3 under 30 who fall into the category of the “nones”
- Where is our holy urgency about creating communities of inclusion and welcome, when 90% of our denomination is white, while 64% of the US population is white?

Let’s look at Nixon’s list of choices again....

Life over death

Community over isolation

bold over mild
frontier over fortress
joy over drudgery
now rather than later

5. What does your church's procrastination list look like? In the next minute or so, make another list....this time list the actions your church is putting off
6. Nixon lists reasons churches procrastinate...As I read it, notice which ones ring true for you.

Money....pastoral care of current members....not enough workers to do the things we already do...helping our current pastor make it to retirement first....helping our new pastor get established before introducing major change....we want to do a self-study first... we need to wait for the matriarch or patriarch to die first....there's a new condo development coming...then we will have the people we need.

There may be some truth in each of these reasons, but there is also a danger that these reasons will become excuses to delay action.

So.....what one or two things could you tackle immediately? Discuss in triads.

7. **Choosing now**...Return to Joshua 3:1-3, 13-17, using images from the Scripture to speak to our challenge to choose now over later.

"Camped out" a time of preparation, staging, discernment. What might this look like, for us?

- a) Presbytery Cabinet has begun to explore the possibility of a season of Sabbath, a break from the usual activities, in order to make ourselves available to God and one another in different ways and in different groupings
- b) New Beginnings – An assessment tool of church and community that leads to a decision about the church's future story; Paul Nixon cautions

that a whole generation of Israelites lived and died in the wilderness, wandering around for 40 years waiting for a vision. For some churches that are stuck, camping out while waiting for a vision can be another way of procrastinating.

c) Prayerful Listening - A Story from the 221st General Assembly

As their final piece of business, the Congregational Vitality Committee of the 221st General Assembly (2014) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) sent its commissioners two-by-two into the streets of Detroit.

“Go with a listening posture,” they were told. “Pray to see whom God desires for you to see.” When the commissioners returned two hours later they had stories to tell.

Alice and Summer Bower went to a coffee shop and then a jewelry store. “A 26-year-old woman from Liberia owned the store,” said Bower. “She was excited to talk with me about Detroit, how it is coming back.”

As the two began walking back to the Assembly they had an encounter with Mitch. “For some reason I was drawn to him, so I said ‘hello’ and asked him how he was,” Tondora said. Mitch started talking and eventually he brought up his faith, talking about how good God is, she said. And then the conversation took a turn.

“He began to describe how angry he was at God because his mother had died,” Tondora said, choking back tears. “He was ministering to us.”

Bower and Tondora told Mitch they were in town for a church conference, that they believed God had ordained this moment — for the three of them to be together. “He was speechless,” said Tondora. “Then he grabbed my hand and kissed it.”

“Follow the ark of the covenant....for you have not passed this way before”

- a) Relearn how to talk about our experiences of the divine...not just the clergy, but all of us finding our voices and using them to make the case for what difference Jesus makes

“Excellent youth programs, outstanding choirs and really nice people are not likely to be the pathway that ‘nones’ would follow to Jesus.... but they will listen to a lay person share in his or her own words, an experience of God.” - Lillian Daniels

- b) Learn to include stories of members of the congregation in sermons (told by them, in their own words) in sermons, include story-telling at Session meetings, at church gatherings for food and fellowship.
- c) Talk about how we see God at work in our stories and become familiar enough with the stories of the Bible that we can also see and hear and touch the living Word, speaking to our lives and stories today.

“Dipped their feet in the edge of the water”

- a) Leave our buildings (shore) to meet people in other places
- b) Experiment with new forms of church for a changing culture
- c) Presby Innovate: 1001 New Worshiping Communities
(see www.onethousandone.org for examples)

Where is your holy urgency?

- Which of these images connect to your church’s holy urgency?
- What would you need, in order to choose now....in order to take action?
- Who else needs to be a part of this conversation?

8. Closing words: "The flowing waters stood still, then the people crossed over on dry ground....until the entire nation finished crossing over." This dramatic re-enactment of the seminal salvific event of their collective memory came as God's people choose now rather than later. May it be so, for us.