

The Presbytery of Elizabeth I Refuse to Lead A Dying Church

Presbytery Learning Experience – May 27, 2014

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Choosing Fun Over Drudgery

Opening Comments:

Several years ago, I attended the Annual Recreation Workshop in Montreat, NC. This annual event has been going on for over 50 years, and pulls together pastors, Christian Educators, and folks who make a living (and a calling) from recreation.

Upon my return, as I expressed to my mother how much fun the week was, she asked, “But did you learn anything?”

It occurs to me that some of you may be thinking, similarly, about a presbytery meeting that includes ‘FUN.’

But did you learn anything?

Did you accomplish anything?

What place has FUN in a gathering of the Presbytery
of Elizabeth?

Well, it turns out, all those years ago, at the Annual Recreation Workshop, I did learn a thing or two. I learned it is good to rest in the curve of God’s smile, but not for its own sake....not just to have a good time....Instead as we giggled and chuckled and doodled and danced we connected with God’s creative, loving, laughing, smiling side. As we sang and prayed; listened and watched, imagined and created relationships grew and community blossomed among us. In a week packed full of creative expression, we were released into a deep sigh of joy and gratitude.

Barriers broke down, defenses relaxed, and we experienced the qualities that are good in one another, ...and it was fun. Is this what they meant, centuries ago, when they confessed that our chief end....our primary purpose...in life, is to glorify God and enjoy God, forever?!

In his book, “I Refuse to Lead a Dying Church,” Paul Nixon says, in our culture, most people will choose fun over drudgery every time.

Nixon's book challenges us to bring an element of fun into everything the church does, from worship to small groups, and into some of the most challenging tasks that churches face, like stewardship and evangelism, and leadership development. What if we made it fun?

In the spirit of fun....we're going to travel downstairs and re-convene around tables, where you are invited to play with God and each other.

Around Downstairs Tables:

In the center of each table, a collection of "toys": play-dough, tinker toys, Dominoes, matchbox cars, crayons or markers

Choosing fun over drudgery, says Paul Nixon means COMMUNITY. Adults, fun happens when we build relationships. And every time the church gathers is an opportunity to do that.

Take 5 or 10 minutes at the beginning of a meeting, or a small group Bible Study, or a pot-luck dinner, or a mission activity for intentional relationship building:

- Name one good thing about your day.
- Share a joy or concern for which you need prayer.
- Answer a question that connects your life to a passage of Scripture
- Show a work of art or play a piece of music and Invite people to simply share what they see or what they hear.

The idea is to get people talking to each other about something other than business.

Let's try it.....

In the center of your table is a box that contains slips of paper.

When I say go, pass the box around the table. When it gets to you, pick a slip of paper out of the bowl and respond to the question written on the paper. If you don't like the question you drew, you can put it back and draw another. All of the questions have to do with how we experience rest, renewal, and delight.

Ready? Set? Go!

The Questions:

As a child, what were your favorite ways to play?

Where do you go to find rest?

How do you know you're having fun?

What nourishes your soul?

What is the fragrance of delight?

When you have time off, what are your favorite things to do?

Who shows you how to play?

What activities or practices do you find renewing?

When have you experienced a deep and life-giving connection to others?

What color or colors do you associate with joy?

Who or what gets you laughing?

After 10 minutes, come back together.

Words of summary and transition:

Some will say...this is not why we are here...we are here to learn something, or to accomplish some business ...But remember we are not doing this for its own sake; we are not choosing fun for its own sake...but because it is a pathway on which we just might find God, enjoy God and be re-stored, re-created, re-connected to the life and the love God intends, not only for us, but for all.

Nixon says Choosing Fun Over Drudgery requires INTERACTIVITY. This means involving everyone, engaging everyone, so that whatever we are doing as a faith community is connected to our lives.

- One-sided communication is not fun
- Study that never moves out of the world of the Bible is not fun
- Meetings that holding nothing more or accomplish no more than making decisions about the church are not fun

- Worship that keeps us inside our own heads, or in our own private experience with God, or reflects traditions and practices understood by those who regularly attend, but not by new-comers....is not fun.

Fun comes through interaction. Through making connections. It comes from within and beyond us, as we open ourselves to one another and God opens something new and unexpected.

Now look at the images and objects in the center of your table. Pick one that speaks to you....about your life, about God, or one that pleases you, sparks a memory for you, brings a smile, and talk with the others at your table about why.

After 15 minutes for sharing, come back together.

Statement of summary and transition:

Nixon emphasizes the value of generating joy and positive energy in everything we do...staying connected to who and what we love is one way to do that.

Teaching Elders: look at Nixon's list of suggestions about how to choose fun over drudgery in worship....get your people talking about this list, and see if some fun doesn't start seeping into your worship life.

Nixon also names stewardship, evangelism, and recruitment as among the typically most dreaded, drudge-full tasks of the church.

And challenges us to make them fun. How, you ask? While Paul Nixon offers a couple of stories, the way to do it where **you** are requires imagination.

Imagination....how often do we allow time or space for dreaming or musing, or being taken where we thought we could not go?

The movie, ***Finding Neverland*** is the story about how the play-write J.M. Barrie created the story of Peter Pan.

In the scene we are about to view, Barrie has his first encounter with the family who will become the inspiration for the story.....and engages them in an experience that ignites and invites their imaginations.

[View film clip - 4 minutes)

“Portheos dreams of being a bear and you say he’s just a dog? What a horrible candle-snuffing word. That’s like saying he can’t climb that mountain, he’s just a man. Or that’s not a diamond, it’s just a rock Just.”

A candle-snuffing word that also snuffs the imagination.

When it comes to choosing fun over drudgery, I wonder how many of us identify with young Peter,

“What did you bring me over here for, this is absurd....it’s just a dog...”

We are just presbyters....This is just a presbytery meeting

Is it? Are we?

With just a wee bit of imagination, what might we see, what might we dream? Who might we become? What part might we take up in the grand drama/play God has been writing among humankind and now writes among us?!

With a wee bit of imagination...what might we turn around and see?

Invitation:

Pop open the tub of play-dough at your table, pass it around and have everyone take a wee bit. Play with it and recall how J.M. Barrie imagined....not a dog, but a dancing bearLet yourself imagine, not a presbytery at work, but a presbytery at play.

And complete the sentence - Imagine a presbytery that.....

Closing Statements:

- The Cabinet has been thinking and talking about how we might engage people, and time and resources in ways that are more life-giving than business....more fun than drudgery.

- We've been thinking about our need to deepen our life together in Christ and restore the interconnectedness that is at the heart of our theology and polity.
- We've been wondering how experiences of rest, renewal and delight might transform our lives and our congregations.
- We've begun to plan for a season in which the presbytery brings people together, not only for those necessary tasks that we do because we are Presbyterian partners but also for experiences that bring rest, renewal and delight, as Presbyterian play-mates who love God and neighbor.
Can I get an amen?

So....What have you noticed, through this play-time? What sparks of imagination flowed, at your table? Please take some time to document on your evaluation form, what you noticed and what you heard, through our play time today. We'd love to hear what you are imagining. As we choose fun over drudgery, may we not only rest in the curve of God's smile, but may the relationships that blossom and grow among us bring new connections, especially among younger generations and diverse cultures, who long to experience God's love.