

Some Parting Words to Shenango Presbytery

We did not ask for this situation in which we find ourselves. No doubt we share with all Presbyterians significant responsibility for our plight in this present moment. Repentance is in order.

Maybe we can relate to the Apostle Paul (II Corinthians 12:8-10) and his “thorn in the flesh.” He hears the Lord’s words to him: “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” Paul continues: “So I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.”

Maybe we should turn to John 15 and remember that Christ is the vine and we are the branches. Pruning is always in order. “If you keep my commandments you will abide in my love.”

Eugene Peterson writes, “Most of life is not lived in crisis...But crisis has this to say for it: In time of crisis everything, absolutely everything, is important and significant. Life itself is on the line. No word is casual, no action marginal. And almost always, God and our relationship with God is on the front page. But during the humdrum times, when things are, as we tend to say, ‘normal,’ our interest in God is crowded to the margins of our lives and we become preoccupied with ourselves.” [*The Message*, introduction to Malachi]

There are countless other passages which we need for these moments as congregations and as a Presbytery. We can learn from Exodus, Exile and other important stories of God’s action and grace.

South African mission scholar David Bosch says that “suffering is a mode of missionary involvement.” [*Transforming Mission*, p. 177] Speaking of Africa, and lest we get too self-absorbed about our suffering, let us remember our Sudanese sisters and brothers whose distress is at an entirely different level than our own.

Whatever text catechizes or encourages us, none of them will allow us to whine or feel sorry for ourselves. Anger, complaining, cynicism...none of those honor Christ.

As Presbyterians we are in a mess and it won’t be getting better anytime soon. We can easily become angry, cynical and feel sorry for ourselves. Hear two brief stories, very different than our situation:

- Menlo Park Presbyterian church has about 3,500 members and a \$13 million budget. They will be voting this Sunday on requesting dismissal to ECO. San Francisco Presbytery, where Menlo Park is a member church, will dismiss them if they pay about \$9 million. I listened to pastor John Ortberg’s February 2 sermon last night. It is an extraordinarily gracious position that Ortberg and the session is taking in the midst of the folly of church politics. He said, “We will give this [\$9 million) with joy.”
- Another story (from Ken Bailey) about the split in the Episcopal Diocese in Pittsburgh. The Episcopal Church of America has played hard ball with every congregation that wants to realign with the Anglican Church of North America. When a Pittsburgh congregation was put out of its building, they said, “This building will be needed by a new Christian fellowship.” (That in itself was generous because the Diocese could well level the building and sell it for a parking lot.) But as they vacated the premises they decided to paint the education building so as to leave it in good shape. They decided not to be angry, but rather have been unbelievably gracious, never disparaging of those who have forced them out of the building.

I am proud of the response in Shenango Presbytery with its gracious dismissal policy. I believe that you have exhibited the spirit of these two stories, even though our dilemma has been much less

dramatic than theirs. Not that we have always done well in our struggles. It is difficult when you have been so deeply pained by a situation that profoundly divides your congregation. But we must embrace a spirit of humility, compassion, love, patience, kindness...bearing all things, believing all things, hoping all things, enduring all things (I Corinthians 13:4 - 7).

We must remember our Lord's teaching and example and keep focused on what Russ Crabtree, working with the Presbytery Council in recent months, calls our "signature strengths." You can see all of this on the Presbytery website. I will summarize them here. This is what your Presbytery leadership has identified as central to our identity. There was strong consensus on these three items:

- The international partnership with the church in the Sudan...we see that we cannot be absorbed by our parochial condition; rather we need the world Christian community in our time of distress. Our future as a faithful church is most likely to be in solidarity with the church in the Sudan...not the fleeting imaginations of American denominationalism (Janel Bakker, *Sister Churches*, p. 22).
- Focus on leadership development – how do we become the church of the future, not an institution of the past? I would suggest three particular places where this happens in Shenango Presbytery:
 1. Leaderfest – where elders and deacons are encouraged to discern God's will and purpose and lead their congregations
 2. Pastors retreats – building deep community and reflecting on how pastors should be leading congregations in these extraordinary times
 3. Partnership for Missional Church – moving beyond being an "attractional church" to asking "to whom is God sending us in this community and beyond?"(An aside here: you would have no way of knowing this, but of the 172 presbyteries in the PC(USA), none of them do these three things any better, and virtually none of them do these three things nearly as well as does Shenango Presbytery. And it is not like we are experts!!)
- Caring for congregations and pastors...the basic work of the Committee on Ministry ...helping congregations and pastors to work together as a sign, symbol and foretaste of the coming Kingdom of Jesus.

I implore you, remain steadfast to the things that matter. There is much in the culture of Shenango Presbytery that matters, and your Council leadership has clearly identified it. What do you do when disaster strikes? Eugene Peterson [*The Message* introduction to Joel] says that when disaster strikes, understanding of God is at risk. Be clear about who God is and how he acts. Keep the main thing the main thing.

Pray for your Executive Presbyter/Stated Clerk Nominating Committee that they will be able to identify the person with the gifts to lead the kind of Presbytery that has identified these "signature strengths" imbedded in its DNA.

Last June I asked the Presbytery Council to engage Russ Crabtree for an exercise in "succession planning." I am grateful that the Council has chosen to do so and these are the "signature strengths" that they have identified. It is essential to keep focused on who you are and whose you are. There was clear consensus in the Presbytery Council on what is important in Shenango Presbytery. Stick with the game plan.

I look forward to joining some of you for dinner on Friday evening where we can together thank God for his abundant mercy and grace to us. Thank you for your kindness and doing this for Joan and me.

David Dawson
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