

The Presbytery of Elizabeth

I Refuse to Lead A Dying Church

Presbytery Learning Experience – September 24, 2013

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1. Introductory comments about the process and the book

- The premise of the book: God intends every servant of the resurrected Christ to be a servant of life. (repeat)
- Any church can blossom and grow anywhere if it will become healthy enough spiritually and pay attention to the needs, experiences, and sensibilities of those it seeks to serve.
- The author identifies 6 critical choices that are entailed in being/becoming a servant of life
- Show choices on screen

The author also raises an observation: that living churches have a higher proportion of **apostolic leadership** than do dying churches. By leaders we means both pastors and leaders. By apostolic we mean a leader who:

- has had a living experience of meeting Christ somewhere, somehow, and who then out of that experience,
- moves with a sense that he or she is chosen, is called and sent out in life to share something of eternal value with the world and who
- partners with others of similar faith and experience in this endeavor.

I have chosen this book as the framework for a series of learning experiences we will share at presbytery meetings this year because of the resonance of the 6 choices with the intention named in calling me here...that our first year together will focus on cultivating community and restoring trust

AND because this definition of apostolic leadership fits the calling and values into which we are seeking to live. It is my hope that the experiences we share at presbytery meetings will deepen and enrich your reflection on what it means to follow the risen Christ as a servant of life....and will model skills and practices you could carry back to your own context

2. We begin today with the first choice: Choosing Life Over Death

- Jurgen Moltmann quote: [Read it aloud and project it on screen]

“Where Jesus is, there is life. There is abundant life, vigorous life, loved life and eternal life. There is life-before-death. I find it deeply disturbing and unsettling whenever I think about how we have become accustomed to death—to the death of the soul, to death on the street, to death through violence—to death-before-life.”

Invite sharing, popcorn style:

- Where do you find LIFE? What are the places, activities, people that are life-giving, for you?
- Notice, with interest: the variety of settings in which the vigorous, abundant, loved life we find in Jesus is experienced.....where is my faith community in this mix?

3. How Do Churches Find Life?

- Explore this question through clips from the film, *Something the Lord Made*
- Introductory words about the story line of the film:

Based on a true story, set in Baltimore, in the 40s....against the backdrop of the Jim Crow south, the film tells the story of how the wealthy white Head of Surgery at Johns Hopkins and a black, poor carpenter who becomes his lab assistant developed an unprecedented technique for performing surgery on the heart. Defying the conventional wisdom of the day, the two launched a medical revolution AND struggled with societal pressures that threatened their collaboration and their friendship.

Watch Clip #1: We're going to watch it twice.

First, meet Dr. Alfred Blalock and Mr. Vivien Thomas and Listen to their different perspectives about the past and the future, and then watch as Blalock pitches his proposal to his medical team.

Repeat quotes from the film: (quotes will also be on slides)

“You can't separate the past from the future any more than you can separate your right arm from your left.”

“But they are *separated*...by the heart.”

“Or....are they *connected* by the heart”

“NOLITANGERE – DO NOT TOUCH”

Do Not Touch the heart....this was the conventional wisdom of the day; a rule that was considered inviolable; a practice that was deemed essential, for life.....but what if it wasn't? What if this so called conventional wisdom was actually serving as a barrier to life?

Jesus and “Do not touch” - Those who have been following the lectionary this fall are aware that Jesus often bumped up against the conventional wisdom of his day. Listen, as we read Luke 13:10-14.

There it is: NOLITANGERE Do not touch our Sabbath.

Now think about how NOLITANGERE has shown up in your life or in the life of your congregation...when have you worked through change?.....or crossed a boundary for the sake of a greater good?.....or perhaps used your heart to connect disparate pieces?

Watch Clip #1 a second time: This time watch the interaction between Dr. Blalock and Vivien Thomas, and between Dr. Blalock and the other doctors

For discussion, in triads: [Turn to two other people....you may choose those you know well or those you don't know at all and discuss these questions that appear on the screen]

- What does Dr. Blalock demonstrate, as he presents his vision? What qualities of leadership does he display?
- What do you notice about those to whom he presents the challenge?
- What does it take to get past the barriers they face?

Read quote from *I Refuse to Lead A Dying Church*,

“We must invite a coalition of partners who will choose life over death...casting a vision and discovering the bright-eyed people...the people who are energized by the thought of their church living and thriving. [quote will be on screen]

Invitation to respond, popcorn style to the following questions, with brief examples:

- Where would you look, to find the bright-eyed people, in your faith community?
- How might you begin to build a coalition and invite them to invest in what is living, not in what is passing away?

4. **Film Clip #2**

Now watch what happens as Dr. Blalock takes his vision to the O.R. He's built his coalition. He's done his research. Standing behind him are months of experimentation and revision and practice. Now he will operate on a baby....a blue baby whose heart is not delivering oxygen to her body. Notice all that's invested in choosing life....over death.

Show Operating Room Clip

“Choosing life over death”

Invitation for each triad to join another triad and form a group of 6. Discuss the following:

- What 'reframing' of policy/protocol does Dr. Blalock do, in order to be able to concentrate on the life he holds in his hands? What happens?
- What are the risks?
- Why do you think he took them? What motivates Dr. Blalock's choices?

Summary and Closing

Quote from the book: "We are invited to choose life, to be servants of life. We are invited to refuse, ever again, to be servants of death."

What are the implications of accepting this invitation, of making this choice, for the churches of Elizabeth Presbytery?

- It will mean we become a coalition of partners who will tend primarily to what is living, not to what is passing away.
- It will mean LESS time in pastoral care of accumulated membership and MORE TIME building bridges in the community.
- It will mean LESS time in pointless meetings and MORE time developing the leaders that will be taking the church into its future.