

The Future of the Church

7/9/17 - First Christian Church of Orange, Orange, CA

Scripture: *1 Timothy 4:12-15*

“Let no one despise your youth, but set the believers an example in speech and conduct, in love, in faith, in purity. Until I arrive, give attention to the public reading of scripture, to exhorting, to teaching. Do not neglect the gift that is in you, which was given to you through prophecy with the laying on of hands by the council of elders. Put these things into practice, devote yourself to them, so that all may see your progress.”

Good morning! Thank you for the opportunity to share with you all this Sunday. When Pastor Dayna reached out to me, I was humbled and honored. Soon after that, I was anxious and confused about what to say. But, soon after that, I was reminded of what was most on my mind. There is nothing like parenting to bring you to your knees and I am grateful that God chose to use one of those times of prayer to help craft a vision of a message within me. I hope that I will be able to communicate it with as much passion and clarity as I have when I hear the message in my heart. So, please join me as I pray, “May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts, be pleasing in your sight, Oh God, and may we step beyond our comfort to a place of growth, change, and new possibilities. Cast your morning glow upon us today, oh God, as we see new beginnings. Amen.”

Now, I am going to ask you to do something a little different this morning. I would like you to form some conversation clusters around the sanctuary – probably of no more than 8 people – and I would love to have you discuss the following question:

“What will the Christian Church be like in 50 years? – not just ours, but all Christian churches”

You will only have a few minutes to bounce around some ideas before I call you back to our corporate experience. So, let me repeat the question (do so). Begin!

MAYBE: Interact and hear thoughts of groups – if a flip chart is available, have David jot down the ideas as they arrive

Prior to this morning, I reached out to several families with children and youth in our congregation and I asked them, “What would your child/youth like FCCO to be like when they are adults?” Here are some of the things I heard from them:

- * We should be “greener” as a congregation
- * We should have an increased commitment to youth activities
- * We would upgrade the playground with bigger monkey bars, bigger slides, curly slides, a fire pole, and a climbing net
- * Youth would be more involved in worship, serving as worship leaders and providing sermon themes
- * We would have a Labyrinth
- * We would have air conditioning (timely)

Not a bad list, I would say.

In the letters to Timothy that we have in the New Testament, Paul is a mentor speaking to his mentee, Timothy. Timothy was having a difficult time. He was trying to fulfill his mission and being looked down upon because of his age. The passage we are focusing on this morning is one that has made an impression on me for a long time. In fact, it first made an impression on me when I could relate to Timothy's situation. I was a young minister with incredible zeal and a passion for making a difference, but it seemed that wherever I went, someone older than me got in my way. They told me my ideas were good, but now was not the time, or that I was trying to take too much on, or the church was not in a position to move in that direction because we were doing well to keep the existing programs going. My personal favorite was a response similar to this: "Ha! Sure thing kid. Good luck with that one. When you've been at this for a while you'll understand why that will never happen."

I felt patronized, minimized, disheartened, and small. Truth be told, even in the first few years of ministry, those experiences marked the beginning of the end of my life as a professional minister. I was young, but I saw the handwriting on the wall. The want ad read something like this: "Associate Pastor needed. Creative thinkers not interested in tradition, hierarchy, or the status quo, need not apply." I got the message. I was welcome to bring the gifts God had given me, but only as long as they would be used to help support existing ministries or programs that had become traditions within the institution.

Some of the programs were really struggling, though, and barely making it. I could never understand why there was such a strong desire to hang on to those programs, either. Why was the church so committed to offering a program that clearly wasn't in the best interests of the congregation or wasn't being embraced or utilized by the community? I soon found out the answer, and the answer was the second nail in the coffin of my ministry career - "We've always done it that way." This was the flipside of "we've never done it that way before" - what some have called the 7 last words of the church.

Clearly, those experiences led to some major life trajectory changes. I doubted my calling to ministry. I doubted my capacity to read people and foster relationships. I doubted my competency as a professional. I doubted my ability to provide for my children, if God were gracious enough to bless me with any. I doubted God's care for me and involvement in the world - especially the church.

So, when Nanci Carol got the opportunity to complete her Master of Fine Arts at DePaul University in Chicago, I was all in. I had a reason to leave ministry. I had no job when we were loading the moving van, but I knew that I was going in the right direction for me because it meant change and the church was behind me. I had been minimized by the church and told that my voice was not important. It might be someday, but it wasn't yet. I would have to wait my turn.

So, I waited and I watched. I watched programs squander and end. I watched churches financially strangle themselves trying to maintain staffing patterns that made sense at one time, but no longer made sense. I watched churches struggle to maintain buildings that were being used 3 times a week. I watched the hair in the pew either get whiter or begin to disappear, altogether. I watched fewer and fewer youth and young adults darken the doors of the church because we were irrelevant, uninteresting, and too stuck in our traditions. I watched and I waited.

But, something interesting eventually happened. Much like Pinocchio, I somehow became "real" during that time. I guess I had lost enough hair or earned enough initials after my name that all of a sudden people were paying attention to me again. They sought out my voice. They asked me what I thought - AND, they listened to my responses.

It was thrilling! It was intoxicating, to be honest. I felt valued by an institution that had told me the opposite a few years earlier. I felt powerful. I felt like a part of the club. I felt important. I felt trapped. It was insidious. I became a part of the problem.

The church was looking for answers about what the future could hold and how we could get there, but I was too old to answer the questions. The trends I was most familiar with were things like planning for college educations, 401Ks, professional development, and home improvement. The voice I had to offer – no, the voice I HAVE to offer the church is not the one the church needs to listen to when it comes to what the church will need to be 20 years from now. There is a place for me, to be sure, just as there is for everyone who wants to be a part of the church, but my ability to speak to what the church should be doing to meet the needs of the next generation... well, those days are gone. I had a voice to speak to that, but very few people wanted to hear it when it was ready to be shared. Now that my voice is welcome, I don't always have much valuable to say.

John Pavlovitz, a millennial and an author and blogger concerning matters of faith, writes:

We've outgrown the furrowed-browed warnings of a sky that's perpetually falling.

We've outgrown the vile war rhetoric that demands an ever-encroaching enemy.

Outgrown the expectation that faith is the property of a political party.

Outgrown violent bigotry and xenophobia disguised as Biblical obedience.

Outgrown God wrapped in a flag and soaked in rabid nationalism.

Outgrown the incessant attacks on the Gay, Muslim, and Atheist communities.

Outgrown theology as a hammer always looking for a nail.

Outgrown the cramped, creaky, rusting box that God never belonged in anyway.

Folks, the voices that need to be speaking to the future of the church, have outgrown me. They have insights that I will never have. I might pretend to have a youthful faith that can relate to theirs, but it is a sham. They have a faith that is inspired by technology, gender fluidity, apps, clouds, and narratives that I have never read and probably couldn't understand. And, I'm not old – despite what my sons may suggest.

So, what are we to do? How are we to be prepared to be here as a congregation, ministering in 2040, 2080, and beyond? I have a few suggestions to consider:

1) Remember that traditions are just that, traditions. We may love them, but if they become barriers to anyone feeling that “all means all” – they have to go. Brian McLaren, in his book [A Generous Orthodoxy](#), writes. “As tradition is a gift of the Spirit, its trajectory moves in the right direction, although it has not arrived at its destination.” Our traditions were new ideas once, perhaps led by God's Holy Spirit to reach the needs of a generation. They might have met resistance, but they fought their way through. They move us toward a destination, but when traditions become the destination itself, they become idols that must be abandoned.

2) Worship is a corporate event – meaning all who come have a voice. How are the multiple voices in our congregation shaping worship? I'm not just participating in what has been established, but really

shaping it and redefining it? If we don't have clear answers to that question, I can guarantee that we are not hearing what worship that will sustain us 20 years from now really is. If I walk away from worship every week thinking everything was great, something is wrong. Worship that is going to meet the needs of the future of the Christian church cannot be designed for a 55 year old, cis gender, hetero, white guy. My days are numbered, so if it's about me, that means that the church's days might be numbered, too.

3) Embrace feelings of discomfort. I don't like to think of myself as out of date or caught in traditions, but just like everyone else, I don't know what I don't know. I have blind spots the size of Mac trucks and I need to acknowledge that and allow God's spirit to blow through those who don't look like me, sound like me, love like me, or have aged as well as me. It might feel awkward or like "they are doing something to my church", but that's okay. Mainly because it's not our church – it's God's church. As the exercise folks have been telling us for years, "no pain, no gain." Discomfort means life. Discomfort means growth. Discomfort means that someone or something else is taking control. Embrace that discomfort.

4) And last, we must keep talking to each other, to everyone – because all means all. We have a local congregation comprised of incredibly talented individuals. We have a music minister who walks a tightrope any given Sunday. He's got those who want more drums, more guitar, and less organ. He's got those who want more organ and less drums and guitar. Our sound folks (Paul!) hear every week - The music is too loud. The music isn't loud enough. I'm sure Pastor Dayna hears what she has done well in her sermon and what she hasn't done well in her sermons on a regular basis and Pastor Michelle hears people's thoughts on small groups and her most recent hair color choice.

But, here's the thing. Those of us who are the most outspoken have a tendency to drive the agenda and we need to stop, take a breath, and take a look around. Who is here? Are we hearing all the voices? Who is in our community? Are we hearing all the voices? Who is speaking and what generation do they represent? Are we hearing all the voices?

Children and youth, I promise to listen better to you. Young adults, forgive us for minimizing you. We need your insights regardless of how we might act or make you feel. I promise to hear what you have to say about the future of the church based on what YOU believe is in the church's best interests, not just on what is comfortable or familiar for me. But, I need you to make me a promise, too. Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young. Or, as Paul put it to Timothy, "Let no one despise your youth."

May Christ Jesus build his church through us, for us, in us, and maybe even in spite of us. Amen.