

# Presbytery of Newark Stated Meeting December 3, 2006

## Installation of General Presbyter

### ***GIVING BIRTH TO TRANSFORMATION***

*Ezra 3:10-13 & Matthew 13:52*

*Preached by The Rev. Robert N. Burkins*

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When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the Lord, the priests in their vestments were stationed to praise the Lord with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, according to the directions of King David of Israel; and they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the Lord, "For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel." And all the people responded with a great shout when they praised the Lord, because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid. But many of the priests and Levites and heads of families, old people who had seen the first house on its foundations, wept with a loud voice when they saw this house, though many shouted aloud for joy, so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people's weeping, for the people shouted so loudly that the sound was heard far away.

*Ezra 3:10-13*

And he said to them, "Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old."

Matthew 13:52

I NOTE WITH INTEREST our thematic expression for this gathering of Presbyterians: "**The Presbytery Of Newark: Together Transforming Lives, Congregations, Communities And The World.**" And my spirit resonates with this thematic expression because more and more, as I view the cause of Christ, I am absolutely convinced, that, if the church is to survive and recapture its spiritual and missional relevance, it will be because of the church's willingness to lose itself in the process of radical transformation. We must candidly confess and confront the fact that the church today is not and cannot be the same church that you and I knew in years gone by. All over the country in fact, the word "church" is being erased from the sign boards of our religious institutions, and denominational distinctions are rapidly becoming a thing of the past. The church is changing.

Analysts and church theoreticians may treat my position with disrespect and disregard. Others may choose to argue with me. But I have come to contend this afternoon, that if the church of Jesus Christ is to regain its relevance and be in position to serve this present age, the religion that we practice must be radically new and radically different. We need radical transformation.

What I am suggesting is significant because it portends that if the church is to be viable, vital and visionary, the church must bring an end to its romance with the past. You must hear me clearly today, - for I understand that some things never change. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever.

We may as well face the reality, that ours is a corporate culture. That fact alone comes as no shocking news - but what it means is, that while we are looking at the cross, the culture is working with calculators and

## II

computers. By and large, most of the world in which we live is more concerned with what goes on in high rise structures of business and commerce, and is not all that concerned about what goes on under the shining steeples of our synthetic spirituality, or beneath the bronze crosses of an increasingly irrelevant church.

Argue with me if you please, but our communities have churches on every corner. And while we are shut up on the inside, people are passing by on the outside unconcerned and unaffected by what we say or what we do. We have not been able to house the homeless or redeem the hopeless. While we do church work, the blood of our children is running in the streets all because of a society that values guns more than it values life. For all our posing and posturing we still watch while our schools have lost the capacity to educate. And this points to the fact that the church, that ought be engaged in seeking the deliverance of others, spends most of its time seeking to save and deliver itself. And, unless this happens the church will find itself upon the shelf of some museum of religious antiquity, - forsaken and forgotten as a relic of our spiritual past. We are in need of radical transformation.

People are hurting and there appears to be no relief in sight. And the thing that I've come to understand as I view our emerging world is that nobody wants to be involved in something that is designed to put them to sleep. Nobody has time for do nothing organizations, dead-end committees and meaningless task forces. What I discover is that nobody cares about our internal politics and nobody wants to hear us tell them how to go to heaven when we have not told them or helped them get out of the hell they are living in right now. We need a radical transformation which means that we must end our romance with the past.

I dare say that few of you would disagree with me concerning the need for transformation in our personal lives, our congregations, our communities, our Presbytery, our denomination, our country, and indeed our world. But the rubber really hits the road, and the feces really hit the fan

when we are called upon to trust the spirit to bring that radical transformation to birth.

In many ways our own Presbytery bears a striking resemblance to the experience we undergo when riding a commuter train. This experience has always been peculiar to me. You are familiar with those trains where half the seats are facing one direction and half are facing the opposite direction. Which essentially means that some of the passengers looking out the window will see where they've been while others will see where they're headed. What this means, is that some of us have an historical perspective of the train ride and others have a futuristic perspective of the ride. Some see the world through the lenses of what was; and their mantra is the Seven Last Words; "We've Never Done It This Way Before". You've heard their rationalization: "If It Ain't Broke, Don't Fix It". They rely heavily on tradition. And sometimes traditionalism is the enemy of innovation. Robert Bellah, in "Habits of the Heart", pointedly makes the distinction between tradition and traditionalism. He says traditionalism is the dead faith of the living; while tradition is the living faith of the dead.

At our last Presbytery meeting held at the Memorial West Presbyterian Church in Newark, I was intrigued by the inscriptions on the stained glass windows in the sanctuary. For the inscription said, "look up and not down, look forward and not back, look out and not in. Lend a hand."

Yet we know that giving birth to transformation is always preceded by labor pains. In the Ezra passage, the old men who remembered the grandeur and splendor of the first temple and concluded that this new temple paled in comparison to Solomon's temple and in the midst of the celebration they began to weep. On the contrary the young men full of excitement and accomplishment and without the benefit of an historical context rejoiced in the fulfillment of their objective.

Imagine the tension of the young men who have sacrificially given of themselves, offering a labor of love as well as toiled to reconstruct the central symbol of their faith, the temple. Imagine their shouts of joy. But

### III

also imagine the agony of the old men who looked at the new structure with nostalgic disdain, certain that this new structure pales in comparison to the memory of Solomon's temple – that which was, but is no more. Thus, from these men, shouts of anguish ring out. But the tension that rises from these diverse expressions release and meld into one – united in such a way that the different ness of those who see forward – where they're going; and those who see back to where they have been is no longer distinguishable.

This situation is not foreign to us. What some see as a means of celebration, others see as a means of lamentations. One Presbyterian's joy is another Presbyterian's sorrow. Both witness the same reality but draw different interpretations. What does looking back vs. looking forward say to us? This Presbytery event has triggered an historical comparison and a proleptic query. What are the implications for this looking back and looking forward and finding ourselves with diametrically opposed opinions? What happens when the church – congregations, pastors, and, yes, Kevin, even the Presbytery – do not share the same opinion about the journey to transformation?

The challenge for you, Kevin, as a transformational leader is how to take the diversity of personality, the multiplicity of context, and the perplexity of theological perspective and work collegially with us to mold that into an acceptable missionnal design for the Presbytery of Newark, - one that can transform lives, invigorate congregations, bring energy to the work of our Presbytery and propel us into the world as agents of hope.

Kevin, giving birth to transformation will not be without pain and periods of testing. Yet, the challenge is not to be intimidated by the diverse context to which we are called to work. Note that the entire time Moses was leading Israel to the Promised Land there was murmuring, defiance and mutiny. Reneta Weems says that the nation of Israel went kicking and screaming into the Promised Land, and I promise you that we are no different. Jesus in Matthew 13 reminds us that a "scribe who has been

trained for the Kingdom of Heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old".

Jesus reminds us that he "came not to abolish the old but to fulfill it" A wise and faithful leader must always be willing to stand in the midst of differing opinion and in the heat of the polemical debate. To stifle such tension will undermine the creative process and short circuit any possibility for transformation.

Kevin, you are in a unique position as the General Presbyter of Newark Presbytery. Our Presbytery is not perfect. As the prophet, Jeremiah reminded us, "the summer has past, the harvest is ended and we are not yet saved." The hard work of leading this Presbytery and its transformation has already commenced.

- Will you be influenced by the fat cats who make deals over large meals? Or will you hear the cry of the poor reaching out to us and lead us into becoming a partner in their healing and restoration?
- Will you be driven by the success gurus of the denomination who define success by the size of a congregation rather than by the content of the gospel?
- Kevin, will you challenge those of us who need to be challenged; affirm those of us who need to be affirmed; and, when you make mistakes will you own up to them, knowing that God's grace is still sufficient?

I had the privilege of sitting on the Search Committee that called you. We were clear that we did not want an Executive Presbyter who valued administrative detail over laying the foundations for new life. The open-ended question we pose to you today is: Will you live into that call? Or will you be the standard bearer of the status quo? Or, simply a footnote in the annals of the history of Newark Presbytery? Somewhere between those of us who are all on this train with you – those who look back, and those who look forward – the truth is to be found. Our prayer is that you can discern what the Lord is saying and help us together to birth transformation.

## IV

I assure you that your work will not be easy. Leadership is always about change and therefore, it is inherently dangerous. But lead anyhow. Lead, knowing that if God is for you, it does not matter who will be against you. Lead, knowing that greater is he that is in you and in us than he that is in the world. Lead, holding on to the words of our Lord whose promised never to leave us or forsaken us. Lead, until the transformation we so desperately seek comes to birth and all of us are able to see it together.