



THE CUMBERLAND PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

OFFICE OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY



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Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ:

It is Pentecost Sunday 2020 as I write. A week ago, many of us were still focused on COVID-19, making plans for when we can safely open our church facilities for communal gatherings of the body of Christ. Some met together today for the first time in months.

That moment in time now seems like a year ago. Just last week I was thinking on what Pentecost Sunday would bring to us as a denomination. For some time now I have been talking about positioning ourselves through prayer for revival and renewal and leaning into the wind of the Holy Spirit to speak to us, empower us and lead us. We prayed for renewal and revival as a denomination on Ash Wednesday. I have been listening for what God is saying to us since that day. And just like that, like a violent rushing wind that blew across our nation, we once again are gripped by the reality of the injustice and death of an African American man which has ignited a fire in many of our bellies to find a way to stop the killings, stop the injustice so that our brothers and sisters can live with hope, dignity and without fear. Just yesterday I posted on my Facebook page these words: "My mind is flooded with so many thoughts tonight. As a minister, my thoughts are in so many places. Tomorrow is Pentecost Sunday, the birth of the church when the Holy Spirit breathed life into the disciples and the Church was born. Yet, I hear the voices of George Floyd, "I can't breathe." I think of COVID19 patients on ventilators gasping to breathe as the deadly viral fire within consumes them. I hear the voice of MLK, Jr. saying riots are the voice of the unheard as he asked America what it is we haven't heard."

Since Memorial Day when George Floyd died, I have felt the tug of the Holy Spirit all week to say something to the church about this. Thoughts of should I, what would I say, who would read it or does anybody care have crept into my consciousness all week. As I looked at the role of the Moderator in the General Assembly bylaws, I read again that the Moderator shall assess the need for a denominational response to God's call. Also, the Moderator receives a precious gift and great service in the church: the freedom to go anywhere and listen to the mind, heart, and spirit of the denomination and to speak with and to the church. I began to feel that I was on solid ground with sending a letter to the Church.

This morning as I attended online worship with my church and listened to my pastor's message on Pentecost Sunday, I knew that I had to say something to our Church. From the moment he said if you pay attention to this week's events, who knows where to start on Pentecost Sunday, I knew it was time to write this letter. As I listened to his message, these are the takeaways for me:

- How much more can we take?
- The injustice is so obvious.
- We are tired and distracted.

-What do we do with this?

-It's hard and uncomfortable on Pentecost Sunday to come together and wrestle with the images for this day-the Holy Spirit as a dove (symbol of peace and yet our cities are not peaceful); wind representing God's breath (I can't breathe); fire as the all-consuming presence of the Holy Spirit filling us with passion, power, strength (our cities are on fire and voices are crying out "no more").

-If you watch the news and your heart is not breaking, ask God what is so broken in you that you cannot hurt for others

-If you are overwhelmed with all this and do not know what to do, pay attention to the story in Acts 2: Jesus went from rabbi/teacher to an enemy of the state, was beaten and killed. We know the story ends on a positive note with his resurrection. We also know that the Holy Spirit breathed a breath of life and empowered those present to take the gospel to the ends of the earth. Peter, who just weeks before hid in fear and stood silent in his denial of Jesus, is now empowered, finds his voice, preaches a powerful sermon and 3,000 are saved and baptized that day.

-The message concluded with a plea to ask God to break into our broken world and bring wholeness, healing and understanding of one another so that we can live as God made us to be.

I believe that we the Church are at a seminal point in who we are as disciples of Christ called Cumberland Presbyterian. I believe that since our day of prayer and fasting on Ash Wednesday, God through the Holy Spirit has been speaking to us-first through this viral COVID-19 which has disrupted our lives, challenging us as the Church in ways we have not experienced in a very long time, if ever. Now, on Pentecost Sunday and all its images (a dove of peace descending on Jesus at his baptism; a rushing wind of God's breath like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven; and fire, the all-consuming presence of the Holy Spirit empowering us with passion, strength and power), God is speaking to us again in an even mightier fashion, calling us and reminding us of what it is we say we believe.

Let these familiar words from our Confession of Faith (COF) marinate in you. In the section on civil government we find these words:

6.30: The covenant community, governed by the Lord Christ, opposes, resists, and seeks to change all circumstances of oppression-political, economic, cultural, racial-by which persons are denied the essential dignity God intends for them in the work of creation.

6.31: The covenant community affirms the lordship of Christ, who sought out the poor, the oppressed, the sick and the helpless. In her corporate life and through her individual members, the church is an advocate for all victims and all those whom the law or society treats as less than persons for whom Christ died. Such advocacy involves not only opposition to all unjust laws and forms of injustice but even more support for those attitudes and actions which embody the way of Christ, which is to overcome evil with good.

6.32: God gives the message and ministry of reconciliation to the church. The church, corporately and through her individual members, seeks to promote reconciliation, love, and justice among all persons, classes, races, and nations.

My Cumberland Presbyterian brothers and sisters-now is the time to let the Holy Spirit descend upon us as a dove of peace. Now is the time to feel the rushing wind of God's breath like the blowing of a violent wind from heaven which turns our world upside down and shakes us from our slumber, our fear, our complacency, our brokenness or whatever it is that keeps us from being who we were created to be. Now is the time to let the all-consuming fire of the Holy Spirit light a fire in our bellies, giving us passion, strength, and power to live out what we say we believe in our Confession of Faith.

Here is my prayer for the CPC on this Pentecost Sunday.

For those of us who have heard (and listened to) the voices of the unheard and are already doing our best to live out our faith in accordance with what our COF says we believe: help those of us who don't know what to do and are afraid, or those of us whose ears are closed and hearts are hardened. Change the conversation and let the Holy Spirit speak in ways that we all can hear each other, just like the story of Pentecost. May the Holy Spirit descend upon us a dove of peace and kindness.

For those of us who have heard (and listened) to the voices of the unheard but don't know what to do or are afraid: let the all-consuming fire of the Holy Spirit empower us with courage to do what is right and light a fire within us in ways we have never experienced before.

For those of us whose ears are closed and hearts are hardened: may the wind of God's breath like the blowing of a violent wind from heaven turn our world upside down and shake us from our slumber, our fear, our complacency, our brokenness or whatever it is that keeps us from being who we were created to be. Help us to hear the unheard voices and act in accordance with our COF.

God is still speaking to us as Cumberland Presbyterians. On Ash Wednesday, we committed to pray, fast and act for renewal and revival in the Church. I believe we are being called to act in a mighty and bold way and should continue to pray, seeking God's wisdom and lean into the wind of where the Holy Spirit is leading us. That said, I know the Church and its people continue to pray for many things. In that spirit, I invite you to join me in prayer on Friday, June 5, 2020. I will not be leading a time of prayer on a ZOOM meeting (many have ZOOM fatigue). Let us keep it simple. Sometime on Friday, take time to pray for guidance as to what God is saying to us as the CPC, churches and individuals, what God is calling us to act upon and meditate upon the theology of our COF in sections 6.30-6.32.

I invite us all to continue to seek ways to be open to the Holy Spirit engaging our community, attempt great things for God and expect great things of God.

Rev. Shelia O'Mara

Moderator of the 189th General Assembly