

Between fear and exhilaration

by Tim Moore

With my college-age children enjoying a longer Christmas break than exists in high school, we drove up to West Virginia for a day of skiing once the holidays had passed. With school-age children back in class the slopes were generally clear for us to ski wherever and however we wished.

After a couple of easy runs, my three were ready to head to the top of the mountain. As I stood at the top of a steep black diamond slope a brief wave of fear swept over me—as it always does when I return to ski after nearly a year’s absence. What am I thinking? Can I still do this? One false move and I will surely break something. A moment later I lived into the fear, pushed off and in seconds felt the exhilaration of flying down the slope.

I’ve felt similar moments in ministry.

Driving to a home or the hospital when a death has occurred and feeling inadequate. What if I stumble and say something wrong? What if I talk out of my anxiety instead of listening through my attentiveness? Can I fully be present for this family?

Greeting a dozen homeless overnight guests to our meetinghouse and worried we are not prepared. What if someone has a medical or mental crisis? What if there is a need we haven’t anticipated? Will we welcome these neighbors as guests around the table, or as needy people we have to help?

A cross-cultural event, a one-on-one conversation with a troubled teenager, a community event for children, standing in the pulpit the Sunday after a momentous event in the country, a social justice march. In one way or another such opportunities give me pause: What am I thinking? Can we still do this? What if this fails? But then, a moment later, I live into the fear and push off. And soon there is the exhilaration of doing ministry in ways that really make a difference.

I’m wondering if transformative ministry hovers in that area between fear and exhilaration. If the ministry we are engaging through our congregations always feels safe and comforting, maybe it is because not much is happening. If the stakes for failure are higher, maybe the rewards are also.

January is a good time to briefly assess a congregation’s annual plan. What do we plan to do this year? Why are we doing these things? What’s the purpose? What difference will it make? Is it time to end one ministry or begin another?

What could we do, should we do, in ministry that would take us to the edge of our comfort zone and truly be a walk of faith? Is there one thing we should consider that might fail big time, but would be worth attempting for the cause of Jesus Christ?

At least once a year a congregation should stand at the top of a mountain with all the skills and the passion to accomplish the task at hand if only it would overcome its fear. Attempt great things. “Perfect love casts out fear” (I John 4:18). Happy New Year!