

Building the Neighborhood: Reflections Upon our Annual Gathering

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This past week our Annual Gathering Planning Team announced its opening of registration under the theme of Building the Neighborhood. I wanted to share some reflections upon this theme and our sacred gathered time together this coming June.

Fred Rogers is famous for having said “Always look for the helpers. There will always be helpers.” Having just made my way through the recent documentary on Fred Rogers’ life and ministry (with tears shed of course), this particular quote seems to always resonate with me. While our theme is not necessarily a “Mr. Rogers” theme per se, it does have some overtones of his work and ministry. During hard times in this country, it was his voice that taught generations of children what it means to both love a neighbor and need a neighbor. Reflecting upon loving a neighbor and needing a neighbor stands at the heart of our conference annual gathering this year.

Under the guiding scripture of the Good Samaritan story, we are reminded that there are helpers along the way when there is suffering, pain, or injury to God’s beloved humanity. Sometimes we are the ones to offer care and help. Other times we are the one who has been wounded and is in need of a neighbor to carry them to a safe inn of respite. In the Church, this form of loving a neighbor or needing a neighbor has been expressed and deepened through various forms of ministries from outreach, poverty elimination, creation care, youth ministry, discipleship, LGBTQ inclusion, and on. Not every one of our congregations expresses or engages in these questions around neighbors in the same way. And, that is the beauty. With God’s help, together, we are building the neighborhood....the kin-dom of God.....as we bring each of our own gifts of the Gospel to this task.

I am deeply grateful for an Annual Gathering Planning Team who worked extra hard at seeking to find ways to include as many of our different expressions of God’s church as possible in being a part of the conversation about how we need

one another as neighbors. This means that if you are a conservative church that there will be something for you at this gathering. This means that if you are a liberal church that there will be something for you at this gathering. And while those are somewhat arbitrary lines of demarcation in a rather divided society, we as a conference are attempting to share a different narrative than our national one. We seek unity among division, hope among despair, and dialogue and active listening rather than domineering over others.

There is great hope in building the neighborhood together in spite of our differences. It demonstrates our willingness to stay at the table even when it would seem easy to give into our fight or flight mechanism and walk away. There is great hope for our future in this conference as we continue to have these crucial conversations about what it means to be the people of God in this time and place. And so....it is with all of this in mind that I invite you to join me, your board of directors, and your siblings in Christ for a wonderful two days of reflection upon loving and needing a neighbor. We will be invited into amazing worship and preaching, dynamic workshops and conversation opportunities, and a wee bit of business. I look forward to seeing you there and may God's grace continue to surround you as you serve in ministry within your communities.