

A Word from our General Presbyter Ed Thompson

Recently, I was at a meeting where the question was asked, “What would your hope or goal be for your church five years from now?” The first answer was “Survival.” I didn’t exactly stop listening at that point, but I kept thinking about that answer for the rest of the meeting and on my drive home.

In some ways, I understand the answer and the thinking behind it. Or at least I think I do. I know churches go through ups and downs. They’ll go through periods when they lose members, when money dries up, when things are tight. The very survival of the church seems threatened. If churches can just survive these downturns, they may well experience an upturn. They may find a pastor they like, a pastor with energy, a pastor who loves them, who appreciates their unique character and strengths, a pastor who doesn’t try to make them into the last church they served, the church they grew up in or the church they read about or heard about at a conference.

So maybe survival means hope. Because if a church survives, then anything is possible. And even if a church doesn’t grow, either in terms of numbers or spiritually, there will be lives that will be touched. Maybe the congregation supports a food bank that makes a difference to the people in that community. Maybe it helps send some kids to summer camp and that experience changes their lives, maybe even leads one of them to go into the ministry. Maybe a visitor, a son or daughter or the grandchild of one of their members or someone from the neighborhood, has their life touched by a sermon and they begin to experience God in a new way. Maybe someone who grew up in the church passes away and leaves them a huge bequest. You just can’t tell what’s going to happen. If the church doesn’t survive, then maybe these things don’t happen.

That scenario may sound like the movie “It’s A Wonderful Life” starring Jimmy Stewart. His character is facing criminal charges and wishes he had never been born. An angel shows him what the town would be like, how different it would be, how much worse it would be, if that was the case. Although the story is fictional, there’s still some truth to it.

But is survival enough? I don’t think we need to focus on numbers, concentrating only on getting more people, more money, more programs, although I don’t think we can completely ignore numbers, either. I’d like to think churches can thrive and flourish. I’d like to think that churches can be vital communities of faith.

Laughter would be one sign of vitality. The first question in the Westminster Shorter Catechism tells us “the chief end of man [sic] is to praise God and enjoy God forever.” Joy in worship would be another sign. Not that there should be laughter in worship every Sunday necessarily (although I suppose that’s not a bad thing) but the experience of worship should create joy or maybe a sense of awe that reflects the presence of God, the experience of God, the love of God. Yes, there can be a need for solemnity at times, but that can also be an excuse for boredom and an overly academic approach to preaching.

I think another sign of vitality would be churches talking about their neighbors. Not in the “Get off our lawn” or “Keep your bikes/skateboards out of our parking lot” kind of way, but in the “I hear Joe down the street is sick. Or I hear that Sally has cancer. I know they’re not members, but what can we do to help them?”

Generosity would be another positive sign. Yes, we need to be careful about how we spend our money and we need to be good stewards of the funds that have been given to us, but vital churches believe in a God of abundance and trust that God has given and will give them everything they need. They do not worry about money.

How would you define vitality? What signs indicate a vital congregation, a healthy church? What would your hope or goal be for your church five years from now? Is survival a good goal or even a sufficient goal? I’m still thinking about that. To be honest, I’m not sure. What do you think?