THE ROUNDABOUT WAY

According to navigation systems there are different routes to every destination. One can choose the fastest or the shortest route or eco-friendly route. These choices can direct one to their destination, but one can argue about which route is the most direct or the most efficient.

I think of the Israelites and their journey through the wilderness when God's navigation system took them the "roundabout way."After years of exile, following the ten plagues, and all the issues between Moses and Pharaoh, "God does not lead them by way of land, even though it was nearer. God leads them the roundabout way of the wilderness!" The people get stranded in the desert for forty years while there was an easier and a more direct, nonstop route to their destination, the Promised Land. One wonders. What was God thinking?

This roundabout way may not make sense to us, but it seems it makes sense to God. We, the Church, have been on a roundabout way for the last many years. We cannot deny that the Christian faith today is living through a messy and chaotic time. We are trying our best to keep our churches flourishing with no avail. Many of us have tried strategic planning, a myriad of musical styles, a variety of approaches in preaching, creative liturgy, accessibility, welcoming all people and more. We continue to hold rummage sales, as in Phyllis Tickle's book, the *Great Emergence,* in which she suggests that the Church goes through a "rummage sale," a turnover, a revolution, every 500 years, cleaning up and discarding what was, in order to birth what is, and transforming what was, to make it relevant for the day.

But it has not been easy. We have been living with anxiety and grief as we worry about declining church attendance, the aging of the church, and the loss of influence in the wider culture. We fret about the dwindling finances in the church, the lack of children and young people in the pews. We are anguished about our congregations' life spans. We mourn when local churches end their ministries and close their doors. We grieve that many of our efforts don't bear fruit as we are uncertain about the future of our beloved churches. We are exhausted of the struggle and of the many layers of loss and grief with which we have been living for years.

I don't share this to depress you. I share it to acknowledge our shared anxiety, our common grief and our collective exhaustion. I share it to remind us that even in biblical times anxiety and grief were in the background and foreground of one's existence. The Hebrew word for "anxiety" literally means to "melt with fear or dread". And the word grief finds its root in the Latin "gravare" heavy, weighty, gravitas. It seems where there are humans there is anxiety and grief. As the author of Proverbs declares, anxiety in one's heart weighs them down. Yes, we have been weighed down.

It is in this context that we do the ministry of Jesus Christ today. On this roundabout way there is not one clear answer to the church's struggles or to what the future holds. There is no one way, right way, or one answer. We have to figure it out as we go.

This roundabout way is not only frustrating it is also liminal, chaotic, and messy, as Rev. LaTrell Harrison reminded us a few weeks ago in her article. This roundabout way produces discomfort, anxiety and grief, putting us on edge where we find ourselves bickering and grumbling, whining and complaining, distrusting and blaming. Interestingly, a transitional interim journey often unfolds in a roundabout way as we hold garage sales, explore new possibilities, and experiment with restructuring and revising for a new time.

If you are wondering what is going on during this transitional time in the life of the Conference you may consider that God is taking us the roundabout way which is not always comfortable, easy or smooth. Transitional time is roundabout. Its navigation takes us to re-think and re-vision toward resurrection and new beginning. For, isn't that what faith is about? Doesn't God call us individually and collectively to turn around and begin again, to transform and reform time and time again?

Such is God's navigation system. It may not be the most comfortable or the most direct route, but it is the most faithful and the most meaningful as we trust the Spirit who holds the navigation and the journey in heart and hand.

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