

Churches on Hospice by Reverend Michele Van Son

I have been blessed with an elderly mentor for most of my life. He sat in the church balcony where we sat when I was a child and was a colleague and friend of my parents. He was also a benefactor and champion of many ministries and civic causes, as well as individuals like me.

When I learned he was on hospice, I was shocked. I felt confused and sad. I had seen him the Sunday before; we chatted about our shared alma mater. I knew his spry-ness faded a bit, but never could I have imagined that he'd be dying so soon. Two questions came to mind: **why didn't I realize** he was so ill and **why would death come** to a man who made such a positive difference?

Friends, many of our churches are on hospice and we don't realize it -- even the very churches we have loved, nourished, and given our whole lives.

Wait, what? No! Churches don't "die." That's like saying God is limited, finite, or temporary. Besides, my parents were leaders in this church. I was married here in the '60s. My children were baptized here in the '70s. They were married here in the '80s. They even brought my grandchildren to this altar for baptism. Why would death come to holy ground?

This is confusing and sad. It is also the way of Creation. Just as my mentor had a long and vibrant life, so, too, do congregations have a long and vibrant life. Just as my mentor died, so, too, will all congregations one day. The congregation, as a vehicle for God's grace and the saving work of Jesus Christ, is recent and will not remain into eternity.

We are experiencing an evolutionary shift that is causing our immediate surroundings to change in undeniable ways. Technology and globalization have created a fundamental shift in many areas of our lives, but none more than *the way we gather* which is the primary purpose of the American Protestant congregation.

This change affects our worship. This change affects our discipleship efforts. This change affects whom we serve, how and why. This change both deepens and expands our understanding of who we are as instruments of God's presence in our neighborhood and world.

There are congregations that have existed for *the time that is coming to a close*.

During *the time that is coming to a close* tremendous, courageous kingdom work happened there because of these congregations. Children were taught in age level classrooms to know and love Jesus. Mission-minded believers pushed boundaries and adopted Vietnam refugee families, brought the homeless into their fellowship halls, and taught scripture in Sunday school classes. These 20th century congregations have nurtured the very disciples and leaders that will build and multiply the 21st century Christians *who will gather in a radically different way*.

God is, of course, always, in the words of Isaiah, “doing a new thing.” Will we ask God to do that new thing in our old walls, with our old songs, and our old ways of gathering that are no longer relevant to our neighbors?

The reality now is that 245 churches in Florida hold weekly worship for fewer than 25 people in a sanctuary built for more than 100 and have not witnessed a profession of faith in over a year. In our district, there are 14 congregations who have this few in worship and haven’t invited a new person into their congregation in years. Some of them have not witnessed a baptism in almost a decade. Regardless of how we gather, the old way or the new, if we are not operating in a financially responsible way and baptizing in the name of Jesus Christ then I ask the painful question... what *are* we doing? Whatever it is, it is not worthy of our task.

An indicator of strong leadership during difficult times is the willingness to do not what is easy, but instead do what is right. Bishop Ken Carter has wisely *and courageously* provided a way forward for Florida through the Nehemiah Project. The Nehemiah Project is not easy, but it is right. It invites congregations to examine their **realistic** potential for creating new wineskins for ministry in the 21st century.

Central to the Nehemiah Project are two elements of the Christian community that we share as United Methodists: support and accountability.

Congregations who need to examine their **realistic** potential for new ways of doing ministry in the 21st century will be invited into the Nehemiah process. We anticipate this process to involve conversation, listening, learning, research, prayer, and lots of grief work both collectively and individually. Each Nehemiah congregation will be offered a trained coach and the resources of the district office to help facilitate this work. This is the support provided.

Each Nehemiah congregation will use the next approximately two years to both determine and demonstrate their **realistic** potential for 21st century ministry. The coach, Congregational Vitality Strategist (me), and DS (Bob) will help congregations establish SMART goals (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and time-bound) to accomplish within the two-year timeframe. This is the accountability provided.

The legacy of my mentor lives on. The causes he championed are better for his work in and on them. His time came to a close, and now the next generation has taken his causes into the future. This critical transition of our life together as United Methodists is now the work before us. Miracles follow gratitude. Will we be grateful for the time we’ve been given? Will we be generous with the gifts God has given us? Will we be bold and courageous and trust that the Spirit of God lives beyond our walls, traditions, and even the wilderness of our hearts and wastelands of our grief?

See, I am doing a new thing!
Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?
I am making a way in the wilderness
and streams in the wasteland.

I serve the United Methodist Church as a commissioned Deacon called to the liminal work we share. I am personally intimately familiar with loss – as well as new life that comes next. We are a people of the resurrection and the road to Calvary is gut-wrenching. I offer myself - my gifts, my hope, my partnership – to you as we walk this road. The difficult, faithful journey begins. We begin it and work courageously in it because it is God's story, it is our story, and we know how the story ends.