



January 2024

Dear Beloveds in Christ,

This last year has been both wonderful and difficult. It has been filled with joys and sorrows, laughter and tears, connections and disruptions. It has been a time of starting new ministries and, sadly, working with five congregations as they closed. This last year has been both life-affirming and exhausting.

As I reflect on this last year and look to 2024, I hold close one of my favorite scriptures: *For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.* Romans 8:38-39

Sometimes when we are anxious or concerned, we forget to trust that God is present and active. That God is here with us – through all things – and that nothing will separate us from this. We might forget this when we are busy figuring out budgets and salaries, church maintenance and worship attendance. We might have arguments and exhaustion might creep in.

But these verses help us remember that the focus is always on Jesus and God's love for us through Jesus. After all, the church was not created in order to "be church." We don't exist just for ourselves or to keep a business running. Instead, the church exists in this world because we have encountered Jesus. And knowing Jesus, trusting Jesus, loving Jesus, nothing is ever the same. As authors Root and Bertrand write in *When Church Stops Working*, "The church is the gathered people who are in the world, like Paul, and who have experienced the acts of God through an encounter with Jesus Christ." (p. 74)

Root and Bertrand further write:

Paul starts churches not for the sake of churches, not to stave off decline or accelerate growth, but for the sake of forming communities that serve the world by witnessing to God's acts in the world ... It is the community that rehearses and narrates the story of God's acts for the world, waiting together for God's coming again in the return of Jesus. (p. 75)

In other words, the church is a community formed because of an encounter with Jesus and who gather to practice and share what God is doing in this world through the Holy Spirit.

As you gather for your Annual Meetings, I encourage you to have conversation about what it means to be church today:

1. What is God doing in your community today?
2. What does an encounter with Jesus look like for you?
3. How are you practicing what God is calling you to do and to be?
4. What does Romans 8:38-39 mean in your life and your congregation's life?
5. How are we waiting together in the mystery of God's presence now and into the future?

I am grateful for all of you and I thank you for the honor of being your Bishop. May we trust that through all things God is with us through Jesus and God's love shines through all.

God's abundant blessings on your annual meeting and throughout 2024.

+Bishop Shelley Bryan Wee