

Deacon Brenda Tibbetts' 2019 Synod Assembly Presentation

In her brief report, our synod bookkeeper Kathy mentioned money. So, as the Call Process Administrator I would like to share a little bit about “Change” and the Church - and I’m not talking about the change in the bottom of your pocket or the change clinking in the dryer!

The writer of Ecclesiastes said, ***“For everything there is a season and a purpose under heaven...”*** Seasons change. Other biblical writers speak boldly that God is about to do a new thing. In the Book of Revelation we read about a new heaven and a new earth. **So why is “change” so hard for the Church? Closer to home, why is even the thought of change so hard for our congregations?**

Even though we like to complain from time to time about the weather, most Minnesotans do like the change of seasons-we’re still waiting hopefully for winter to end! We look forward to the beauty, enjoyment and challenges each season brings. The church’s liturgical calendar also marks the changing seasons of the church year - each season with its own emphasis, its own beauty preparing us to be open to welcoming the next season.

I served on a outdoor ministry camp board for over 8 years. The county health department was threatening to close down the old kitchen for non-compliance. Needs had changed over the years for campers and kitchen crew and the old dining hall simply wasn’t going to cut it anymore. Central to the core of the camp’s identity, the building’s footprint was a limitation. Multiple plans were drawn over and over again, to no avail. We simply couldn’t make the structural changes needed to meet the new requirements. Those “old wineskins” were not going to stretch with the new wine...Along came powerful straight-line winds that knocked around old growth pine trees like they were toothpicks. Suddenly, new “space” was revealed - one with an *even better view* of the lake and *easier access* than all the other buildings. Now, imaginations were stretched and ignited with new possibilities! Today a beautiful facility stands in a spot we could not see before because our vision and line of sight was so focused on *preserving the old* which blinded us to looking for the new.

The Northeastern Minnesota Synod’s School of Lay Ministry recently marked its 23rd year. The program that had nurtured me back in 1997 - 1998 was near and dear to my heart. I’ve served on its Advisory Board for years - first as board member, then chair and now synod liaison. The SLM provided biblical, theological and leadership education for over 130 people in our synod. These past couple of years saw a down-turn in participants even though the programming was still solid, the structure was no longer matching the needs of the new participants.

As new people were added to the Advisory Board, they brought their “*Why do you do this?*” questions, and “What if we tried this?” suggestions. **“Because its always been done this way” was no longer a viable answer - or solution.** Conversations and dreams about this program began to take a totally different turn - one that none of us expected! As conversation continued, the electric excitement in the air was palpable. **We knew the Holy Spirit was surprising us** with some new ways of providing faithful, biblical, theological and leadership training. You will

hear more those exciting changes this afternoon and please check out the display downstairs in the Fitzgerald Hall! We are grateful for 23 plus years of students and learning but as much as I loved that old program, I knew it was time to let go making way for the Spirit to amaze and delight us.

A couple of months ago, I had to sit down with my parents and have “the talk.” We talked about plans they had made about 15 years ago regarding their wishes for their future. Those advance directives - made in a time of calm and deliberate decision making - were resurrected from the safety deposit box as the reality of aging and mounting physical challenges became more and more evident. Spurred on by a phone call saying that a room was immediately ready for my Dad in the local Nursing Home did not allow us a lot of time to think things over. **Change was literally knocking at the doorstep.** Those conversations and decisions can be very difficult emotionally. ***It would have been even harder had we not had those conversations at an earlier time!***

Sentimentality regarding their home, which they built and had lived in for 60 years, was not going to help or change their situation. So we prayed and talked it over. We also shed a lot of tears and hugs. And then my Dad said, of his own accord, ***“It’s time.”*** As a family, we are now living into that *change.*

Change is not without its challenges. But this change was the right decision for all concerned. It was a way to bring about a new quality of life in the midst of situations we could no longer control - but since we had discussed this earlier - long before the crisis occurred - there was a sense of direction, a sense of peace knowing this new room we had not envisioned earlier was now available. It was holy ground season - sensing God’s tangible presence and gracious blessing throughout process of change. Will there continue to be tears and sentimental moments of longing to be back in the past? Absolutely. **But none of us can live in the past - the same is true for our congregations!**

In my call of working with congregations and rostered leaders in the process of change, I am encountering more and more congregations that need to have some of those difficult conversations regarding change, those *“Why are we here?”*, *“What is God calling us to do?”* and *“What do we do next conversations?”*

We make advanced directives as mature adults. *Why?* So as to not burden our children with difficult decisions regarding change. We do the necessary advanced planning. *Why?* So when tough times come, anxiety is lowered because those details and decisions have been prayed about, talked about, and decisions can be made based on what is best and what is right for the whole community.

It comes down to questions of quality of life, the vitality of a faith community, the season and purpose of the congregation’s and rostered leaders’ mission and ministry

...*why* choose to sit in a mostly empty sanctuary only remembering the days when it used to be filled with people, when it can still be possible to be in a filled sanctuary praising God? ***What if*** you could be sitting with new friends in another sanctuary? ***Those new friends are also God’s children - that makes you family!***

You can still bring your memories with you while you being open to new adventures with other brothers and sisters in Christ. **God is with you** as you encounter the challenges along the way. **God has already gone ahead of you** to prepare the way to make change possible.

The early church, fresh from witnessing the crucifixion and resurrection, struggled with change. You can read about it in the Book of Acts. We too, are people of the resurrection. There are seasons and purposes in our lives and in the lives of our congregations.

*If you are sitting in one of those sanctuaries with very few people - all of whom are all worried if the church doors can remain open for their personal funeral - **what if you had some of those why and holy legacy conversations?** Yes, it can be hard to think about **but it is also holy ground. Remember, the resurrected Christ is with you.** Plus, Our Director of Evangelical Mission Pr. Amy would graciously accept your invitation to come and facilitate those conversations to formulate some plans! You are not alone on the journey or in the change of seasons. Your synod staff stands ready to walk with you.*

*Or, maybe you are in a vibrant congregation where passion for reaching out to love the neighbor is electrifying, what are some of the opportunities or possibilities that the Holy Spirit might be leading you to explore by walking alongside some of our smaller congregations? What can we learn from each other? **Where is the Spirit waiting to breathe new resurrection life into our communities of faith?***

A definite season of change is upon the church. The seminaries have done well in preparing pastors and deacons for the 21st century. Now, it is an exciting time for our congregations to do the same.

As we continue to learn and practice accompaniment at this assembly, where might the Holy Spirit be opening our hearts and minds to learn and grow in faith, sharing new ideas, weaving relationships to envision new ways of partnering with one another? **Why?** Because every season brings the purpose of sharing Christ's love by new ways of reaching out, loving and serving our neighbor.

Thank you.

