

**“YOU ASKED FOR IT: CHURCH GROWTH AND CHANGE -  
RUIN OR RENEWAL?”**

**A Sermon by Rev. Richard Clewell**

**Fairmount Presbyterian Church**

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**Scripture: 2 Corinthians 5: 17-21**

In our continuing summer series, “You Asked for It,” we turn to a question raised which asks, “How can we grow our church at the same time keeping our theological integrity and distinctive approach?” Does growth mean making change? If we take “diversity,” “reaching out,” “welcoming and affirming” seriously, will we drive away people in our already diminished congregation?

I must admit that the first thought that came into my mind as I considered this topic was the old joke, “How many Presbyterians does it take to change a light bulb? Change! What do you mean “change?” However, I will attempt this morning to offer a few observations and suggestions which may assist us as a congregation to deal with the reality of the culture in which we live and to be faithful in our calling to follow Christ our Savior and Lord.

Almost two years ago a church growth strategy taskforce was formed to explore what church growth would mean for Fairmount and to recommend to Session some future possibilities that might address growth issues. The Session is now developing a church growth plan which will emerge following months of deliberation, input from the congregation by surveys and focus groups, and final adoption by the congregation. This work is both exciting and very challenging.

In order to frame my comments this morning, I turn to the Apostle Paul who in his second letter to the church at Corinth states the following: (Read 2 Cor. 5: 17-21). Those who call themselves Christians, i.e. the church, through reconciliation with God are in the process of life becoming new as the old ways pass away. As Christians experience God’s reconciling relationship with them, they become ministers of reconciliation to the world in which they live. They recognize God’s grace and become God’s ambassadors for the reconciliation of people to the Lord. This is the underlying cornerstone of the church in the world in any age or time. If you are looking for a constant this is it. As we approach concerns about growth and change, this continues to be our on-going calling.

So, let’s first observe what has changed culturally in our time from the glory days of the mainline church. The signs of being in a different world are all around us. There is a secular mindset – it demonstrates itself in the assumption that our needs can all be met through the secular pursuits of science, politics and economics which are governed by scientific principles. These disciplines provide the perspective from which people

view their lives and determine meaning and purpose. Materialism, consumerism and militarism are the gods of this secular age. This is where people look to discover happiness and security. The idols of the new car, the shopping mall, American flags, and yellow ribbons are what our culture worships and they have impact in shaping those involved in the church.

This stands in stark contrast to the cultural support the church received for its beliefs and practices in the past two centuries in this country. Once there were blue laws to limit conflict with Sunday worship and there was daily prayer in schools. Additional cultural support of Christianity came in an attitudinal assumption that being part of a church was the right thing to do. It was the way you provided your children the nurture they needed. It was the way in which you served your community. It was the place you could make the connections that would further your career. These factors and others provided an environment in which the church could count on a steady source of members, simply because church membership was the thing to do.

This is no longer true. The decline of the importance of religion means that the various cultural supports for Christian beliefs and practices have disappeared. Some of the reasons involved are the diversity of faiths now practiced in this country, the increased secularization of society where people look other places than the church to provide for their needs, the simple reality that not going to church is an acceptable way of life, that the perks that used to go with church membership no longer pertain. The result is that the church is now left to itself to reach and involve people without relying on supporting cultural forces. We have come perfect circle and are again very much in the position that the early church experienced.

What is God up to in all of this? What is happening through the challenge to old understandings of the church brought on by our post-Christian, post-modern world? Could it be that the church itself has become too reliant on someone else, namely the state culture, to further its teachings and values and to provide its members? Could it be that the church has become so much a product of the age that it has lost a clear sense of its own unique role and purpose? Have we become a church in name only without passion or purpose? Are we open to the possibility that the struggles of these times are God's way of calling the church to be, to do what it is supposed to do in this world? Maybe in this time God is offering us a great opportunity to discover anew what God has called the church to be. Rather than bemoan the apparent demise and ruination of the church, we need to welcome the challenge of making this church carry out what the Lord wants it to be. This is the on-going work now of the session and our congregation.

What does this mean for you and me as followers of our Lord Jesus Christ? First, I believe it places the emphasis squarely on being a disciple – a learner and follower of the teachings and way of life demonstrated in Jesus Christ. This learning is not just a head trip or intellectual exercise done in private but is based on wanting to follow Christ in a fuller and fulfilling way, in a manner which gives our lives meaning and makes a

difference in on-going life experiences. It perceives that such a life makes a difference in God's plan to redeem and renew creation. It involves the divine call to be the priesthood of believers. In whatever we do, we deal with this calling as part of what God's purpose is in our living of our faith.

Discipleship is an on-going life process of discerning and participating in God's purpose in creation in our particular time and place. God calls each of us to live as a disciple – no distinctions exist in rank, no in-crowd, clergy over laity, men over women, or adults over youth. Discipleship depends on our response involving both what we believe and how we live; how we think and how we act. Discipleship happens within the community of faith. This community (in our case Fairmount) is essential to forming disciples – it is the bearer of tradition; the story that relates God's purpose, the reconciliation made possible in Christ; the Spirit at work in us and among us as God's presence and power. This community brings together a variety of gifts and experiences that are essential for the disciple process. "It takes a community to form a disciple."

As we look forward to our future, how will we grow and what changes will we experience? I firmly believe that growth is anchored in discipleship. Disciples produce other disciples. This is the main reason for the church past, present, and future. Will we offer to people, both current members and others, real opportunities to experience the transforming love of Christ in ways that impact their greatest needs, heal their deepest hurts, fulfill their highest hopes; in ways that lead them to be the people God created them to be? This is the need expressed in the spiritual search of the post-Christian generation.

The way we have always done things as an institution may no longer mean much in this culture. Our traditions may be hard to understand for people who have been raised outside the church. We will have to leave the comfort zone of doing things the way we always have done them if we are to be intentional about our discipleship. We will have to risk finding new ways to reach out to our diverse core community which has changed radically in the passing decades as the population has moved further east. If we are serious in our intentions to be disciples, we will need to find the best ways to engage the culture in which we live. Tevya in *Fiddler on the Roof* comes to mind as he lamented for "Tradition! Tradition!" as his world changed and forced him to look at what mattered in new perceptions based in what was really genuinely important. I expect there will be some losses of those who cannot make such creative changes to the way the church must relate to the world around it. For the church to grow there must be re-formation, renewal, and rebirth in creative and surprising ways. As disciples, in order to share our faith with others, we need to deepen our relationship with God and others in community through worship, spiritual disciplines, and actions with others expressing God's grace and love.

The roles of clergy must change in priorities, moving from primarily a preaching/pastoral care emphasis to a teaching/equipping of the disciples to do ministry

in whatever venue they contact their world. In discovering their gifts, developing them through corporate study and practice, using them in trial and testing, disciples become more confident and fulfilled. In becoming doers and not just hearers of the word, discipleship finds blessing (James 1: 22-25). In this way they participate in God's mission in our world.

John L. Williams, executive for the Synod of Mid-America, observes, "From a mission perspective our church has no choice but to become multi-cultural. The challenge of mission in racial ethnic communities demands that we move beyond our own cultural security, habits, and assumptions and learn to listen to new voices and see with fresh eyes. Think of the gift of the Reformed tradition with its message of God's love for the world, a love not limited to one culture, one race, or one nationality." We need to build bridges to other cultures in our midst to be faithful disciples and in further development of this community of faith.

So, we stand again on the brink of new realities and changes we may face that disturb our comfort and threaten our sense of security. In our reformed tradition we tout, "The Church Reformed and always Reforming." Too often we cling to the first part and deny or avoid the last part. God is the master of all new things. Will we be dragged along kicking and screaming or will we with hope discover new ways of growing and expressing our faith as learners, followers, and disciples of an ever-creating God? Will the Fairmount emerging growth plan mean ruin or renewal? We are pilgrims together on a journey that leads us more fully into the wonder of God's presence, love, and mission. Remember Paul's words, "If anyone is in Christ, there is new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation. So we are ambassadors for Christ since God is making his appeal through us, ---(2 Cor. 5: 17,18,20). In the context of on-going change, God's way and partnership is clear. Thanks be to God..

Amen

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