

REPORT TO THE PRESBYTERY ASSEMBLY
Presbytery of Wabash Valley
By The Reverend Raymond J. Fancher, Interim General Presbyter
September 19, 2009

Wow! I trust you realize how many positive, new initiatives we have acted on during this Assembly. **I commend you** for your willingness to risk, your enthusiasm for the future, and your intentionality to live into a new identity and mission as the Presbytery of Wabash Valley.

Today I want to highlight for you **three key areas of our ministry**: (1) You need to know about our interim work, and the Next Steps Leadership team. (2) I want to remind you about God's call to Gideon despite Gideon's fear that caused him to hide, and the writing of a rabbi about our contemporary fear. (3) And finally, as a conclusion to our interim work and an antidote to fear, I want to focus on our presbytery-wide transformation process.

1. OUR INTERIM MINISTRY AND NEXT STEPS

In interim ministry there are no clearly posted road signs indicating the number of miles that remain to the end of the journey. The effective completion of an interim ministry cannot be arbitrarily determined by the pages of a calendar or even a completed checklist of tasks.

So, **how does one know when it's time to say, "Good-bye"?** How does one determine it is the right time for the congregation or the presbytery to move forward in its search and anticipation of its new leader?

Here are **some of the clues I watch for** among the congregations / leaders:

- Have we during our interim work together significantly accomplished the tasks / larger goals we had mutually agreed were important in our interim contract?
- Have the Council and other key presbytery leaders owned and addressed its five developmental interim tasks?
 - Come to terms with its own history
 - Addressed shifts in power and leadership changes
 - Discovered a new identity and mission
 - Renewed congregational linkages and partnerships
 - Committed to new directions and new leadership
- Has there been a significant shift in the systemic issues and culture of the presbytery?
- Are there still sources of resistance and at what level are they?
 - In congregations as well as PWV, I think a good clue can be seen in how many items are included in our consent calendar
- What are the stories we are hearing?
- What is the primary focus of our energy and attention now?

The other clue **I pay attention to is my own level of energy and joy.** Am I coasting or engaged? I want to ensure I am still able to maintain my own integrity with regard to the effort I expend in my ministry.

I wish our Board of Pensions representative, Doug Kelly, could have told you about the **excellent CREDO program our Board of Pensions provides for pastors.** The last part of August I was privileged to participate in that same 8-day program offered for executives. The retreat event focuses on four key areas of life and ministry for us as pastors or executives: (1) Vocation, (2) financial health, physical health, and spiritual health. If you ever receive an invitation to participate in this valuable program, by all means do!

This event came at a good time for me personally and professionally. I think it also came at a good time in the life of our presbytery as well. Following my experience at CREDO I initiated conversations with officers, the Administrative Ministry Team, the Interim Ministry Team, and the Transformation Coordinating Team regarding **the need for PWV to move forward in its search for its next installed executive.**

As many of you know I began my work with you in February 2007 and my interim contract ends the end of December this year. While it is not my desire to leave immediately on January 1, I prefer not to renew my contract for another whole year. I do not want to leave the presbytery in a lurch, so my hope would be to renew our contract in 3-month increments—if that is the will of the presbytery.

In light of the ending of our interim contract and in response to the conversations I initiated with officers and other key leaders, **our officers recommended that Council establish the Next Steps Leadership Task Force.** I deeply appreciate their initiative which the Council approved. You've already heard about the Next Steps Task Force and will be hearing more about this group's important work between now and our November Presbytery Assembly at which we would **anticipate naming a General Presbyter Search Committee.**

I am both pleased and excited about the future of the PWV! You are still on the journey, but we have come a mighty long way. Based on the previous action of this Assembly today, the presbytery intends to embrace transformation. I commend you for your commitment and I believe the PWV has demonstrated its readiness to move forward in its search for and eager anticipation of your next executive.

2. GIDEON'S FEAR AND A RABBI'S STORY

I thought I would share with you a wonderful Biblical story about Gideon. It's found in **Judges 6.** Due to the lateness of the day I will not read the entire story. You will probably recall the story of **God's call to Gideon while he was threshing wheat.** To thresh wheat in those days you want to be up on a very high hill where a strong wind can blow. You beat the wheat stalks with a long, solid stick and then throw the stalks high into the air where the wind will blow the chaff away while the wheat seeds fall back to the ground.

But Gideon is not threshing wheat upon a high hill, but underground in a wine press! And the only reason for this bizarre behavior is because **Gideon is scared to death**. He is hiding out from his enemies, the Midianites. Gideon is suffocating on his own fear and all the dust and debris generated from beating stalks of wheat underground where no wind can blow and liberate. And God calls Gideon out of hiding, out of his suffocating fear. God calls Gideon and sends him to liberate Israel from the Midianites.

I am amazed at how much fear there is in our world today. **Lots of folk are suffocating on their own fear**. Three or so years ago my wife, Sheryl, attended a conference in Colorado where one of the leaders was a Jewish rabbi who lives in New York. Ever since that conference she has received his monthly newsletter. Most recently the rabbi returned to his home and family in Israel for a year-long study experience. I was struck by the story the rabbi recently shared. **He and his 90-year old father went to visit the Jewish death camp at Buchenwald**. He described the metal sign posted above the entrance to the camp from those tragic days of death. It read: **“Each to his own fate.”**

That’s the word we hear preached day after day in the culture around us. It’s in the gruesome headlines of war or senseless violence, the latest tragedy in the community, or the variety of game, dance, and reality shows where folks get voted off the island. **“Each to his own fate.”**

“Look out for #1.” “You can’t trust anyone.” “Take care of yourself first.” That’s the language of fear. Many people give in to this fear, allow it to control their lives. “We’ve got to protect ourselves, our interests, and our community,” they say. Sadly, many in our own congregations have begun to accept this belief, especially when it comes to finances. I often hear us ask, “What’s in it for me or for our congregation?” As we talk about money, we speak about “our money.” No! The money or other gifts we have are God’s gifts to us to be used for the common good—not for ourselves alone!

Gideon’s fear, Buchenwald’s motto, and “what’s in it for me?” stand in such marked contrast to our Reformed/Presbyterian “connectionalism,” our unique understanding of community. This is what Eric Herzog was pointing to in our 2010 budget presentations. That’s the symbolism of the recent \$15,000 gift from GA to assist us with our legal costs. The amount of the gift is not significant; what it says is the PWV is not alone, and that message is priceless in today’s self-oriented culture!

3. TRANSFORMATION: GOD’S CALL FOR US TO GO

And the radically strange world in which we find ourselves today is a major reason for the church to engage in transformation. Someone recently asked me, “What is this transformation stuff all about? What is transformation, anyway?” The best answer to that question is found in Paul’s letter to the church in Rome.

Listen to the initial verses of **Romans chapter 12** from Eugene Peterson's *The Message*:

“So here’s what I want you to do, God helping you:

Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for God.

Don’t become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You’ll be changed (*metamorphosis*) from the inside out.

Readily recognize what God wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you.”

The word used for change in this text is only used twice in the New Testament. It is found in the gospel when it describes Jesus’ transfiguration upon the mountain. And it is found here. It is the word from which we get our English “metamorphosis.” Paul says we “will be changed from the inside out.” The caterpillar gets changed into a butterfly. God intends for us to be so dramatically changed that the end result will not even look like what we are now. That’s transformation, and it is God’s doing!

Those of us who teach interim education have come to speak of “triple loop learning” (Robert Hargrove’s *Masterful Coaching*, pp. 110ff) borrowing from **Laurie Ferguson**, an ordained PC (USA) Minister of Word and Sacrament, a psychologist, who practices Master Coaching.

1. **Single Loop Behavior.** When faced with the need for change, our first response is often to continue our **same behavior, but do it better.**
2. **Double Loop Behavior.** If we’ve come to the place where we think change will be mandatory, then our tendency is to **try to do things differently.**
3. **Triple Loop Learning.** Metamorphosis happens, true transformation occurs not when we simply try to do better what we already do, nor when we only try to do things differently, but rather **when we change!**

Just as God called Gideon, God calls us still. God calls us to go “in this might of yours” and set some people free. Even when we are suffocating on our own fear, God calls us and sends us into the world to fulfill God’s mission. May we, like Gideon, discover God patiently waits upon us, and God always equips us for the mission on which God sends us. God continues to transform us into new people and new communities. Amen.