

“One in the Spirit”

Rev. 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21; John 17:20-26

June 2, 2019

One of the great gifts of pastoral ministry for me (in recent years) has been spending time with congregations in *transition*. When a community of faith is faced with a change—***in leadership, in identity, in the configuration of relationships with other communities***—there is a need for constant attention to the *experience of loss* and to how this intersects with making good on our baptismal and community covenants.

For example, a number of years ago I spent several days with members of a congregation as they prepared for the retirement of a long-serving and well-loved leader. The gathered community was involved in *anticipatory grief*. We spent hours together mining the history of the ministry and sharing stories of the era spent with this leader.

Several people said to me, *“This place will never be the same.”* To which I replied, *“You are right.”* Others added, *“Well, it is time for a change.”* How could they be the place that they needed to be without this leader there with them?

I asked questions to prompt and challenge the group to remember past experiences and what they brought to the table. I asked them ***not*** just to remember their personal experiences in ministry ***but also*** to dig deeply into what was beneath those experiences. ***Could they carry their experiences of love, challenge, and hope into the next era of their ministry?***

You see, it’s common to [sometimes] confuse our *ministry leaders* with Jesus.

Now, I’m sharing this with you because this church—First Presbyterian Church of Concord—is also in a time of ***transition*** and I have been hired to be your *Transitional—or Interim—Pastor*.

I am a Midwestern, middle aged, over-educated, white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant—who happens to be Presbyterian and I’m very happy to be Presbyterian.

Let me tell you a little bit more about myself and my family and my ministry over the past 30 years as well as some brief thoughts about why Interim—or Transitional Ministry --is so important.

To start, I have an unusual and rare last name. It is pronounced, just like it is spelled: Kenefake

It's an old Anglo-Saxon place name (*the ridge above the river!*) in the south of Wales & southwestern England, just across the Irish Sea from Cornwall. It's a real town right on the coast, but rising sea levels are swallowing the Castle that dates back to the Norman Conquest in the 11th century.

There are about 300 people in the world with variant spellings of my surname and we are all related. Some of us live in the U.K. (England, Wales, and Scotland), others in Ireland, and the rest in North America, New Zealand, and Australia.

I ran a marathon about ten years ago (very slowly—just to say I did it!), but I am engaged in more age appropriate forms of exercise and recreation currently. I'm also a sports fan and especially like tennis.

My wife, Gail, and I have been married for 35 years and she is a graduate of the University of Virginia, although she grew up in Pakistan in the 60's and 70's in a State Department family. She has worked in various administrative positions at Colleges and Universities for the past (almost) 20 years. Currently, she is a Software Trainer for Evisions—a company that provides software services to Colleges and Universities. She works from home about half the time and travels the other half—sometimes to exotic (but mostly to not very exotic) places. She does go overseas on occasion—the Middle East, Europe, Fiji (in September).

We both come from families of four children; I'm the second oldest and Gail is the youngest.

We have two children: Mary Elizabeth is 28 and is a 2013 graduate of Wellesley College in the Boston area. She works for an Investment, Research, and Management firm called *Morningstar* where she does Corporate Communications in London. Our son, William is 25 and is a 2016 graduate of Bowdoin College (Brunswick, Maine) and a May 2019 graduate of Brooklyn Law School and is currently studying for the Bar Exam. He is engaged to his High School sweetheart and they will be married on New Year's Eve, December 31st of this year.

We are blessed that both sets of our parents are still living, although Gail's parents are both facing difficult health challenges currently in Florida. My parents still live in a suburb of Kansas City, called Overland Park., which is my hometown.

My ministry has been varied and interesting and we have lived in a number of places around the country, including the south, (even in Scotland!) but most of my ministry has been spent in just two states: Kansas and New York. I've been an Associate Minister, a Campus Minister, a Solo Pastor, a Head of Staff/Senior Minister, a Presbytery Executive, a New Church Development Pastor, a Hospice Chaplain, and an Interim/Transitional Pastor.

Why is Interim Ministry important? Primarily because we in the church have learned (mostly the hard way) that it is important to have some space between installed pastorates, so that congregations can have an opportunity to reflect on their recent history, understand how their community and congregation are changing, and make some thoughtful decisions about the kind of leadership they need to do effective ministry in the future. And I'll be assisting you through this process. It's tailored to the needs of every congregation—there is no “one size fits all” way of doing this. Every church is different and unique.

The Interim Pastor also serves as a set of “fresh eyes” with regard to the ministry of a particular congregation. I'm not eligible to be considered as your next installed Senior Pastor, so I don't have any incentive not to be perfectly honest with you—in a pastorally sensitive way, of course.

I'm here to do two important things at the same time: to do all the things that your previous Senior Pastor did (supervise the staff, share in the pastoral care work of the church, help to plan worship, preach, teach on occasion, be visible in the community, etc.), but also to shepherd you through the Interim process which usually takes about a year. We're going to walk and chew gum at the same time!

My tenure will largely be determined by how long your candidate search process goes—sometimes it goes quickly and sometimes it doesn't!

But regardless of how long an eventual search goes, I want to say clearly, that even though times of transition can sometimes be stressful, they can also be times of great growth and discovery.

My only goal is to do everything I can to “prepare the way” so that your next installed Senior Pastor can have a fruitful and meaningful ministry with you in this place for years to come.

I’m honored and excited to walk with you through this important transitional time. We’ll have some fun, try some new things—and (hopefully) grow in faith.

I want you to think about this briefly in terms of our Gospel reading from John 17 this morning where Jesus says:

*“May they all be **one**. As you, [God], are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us.”* – a teaching that applies not just to transitional ministry, but to everything that followers of Jesus do.

Someone recently told me that there are *38,000 different Protestant denominations in the world* and suggested that this number is a sign of energy and diversity. I'm not so sure. I don't idolize my denominational family, but I believe it is a good and faithful thing to remain together.

At the table of the *Last Supper*, Jesus prayed for his disciples, including all of us who, because of those disciples, have become believers too. May they *“all be one . . . so that the world will know that you sent me,”* he prayed. For Jesus, unity among his disciples is an instrument of the evangel itself. I'm haunted by that claim.

Jesus, you see, appears to prioritize our unity enough to save it for last. John 17 is the final scene of Jesus’ last meal with his disciples. First, he prays for his immediate community. Then, in this Sunday’s reading, he prays for all those who will come to believe—the future Christian community. Maybe Jesus saves this prayer for last because he knows that the *unity* of his followers will be what we struggle with most. He prays for us because he knows we need it.

For example, Teri McDowell Ott, Campus Chaplain at Monmouth College in Illinois, described how hard the pursuit of unity in the church is, by saying:

“I’ve been actively involved in my county’s ministerial association since I moved here. I value the ecumenical spirit of the group, as well as our joint worship services and mission projects. A few years ago they elected me president (after I told them that as the only woman in the group I’d serve in any role but secretary).

Our monthly meetings consist of the progressive mainline Protestants and one Catholic priest, but as president I feel duty-bound to invite all local pastors to participate. So I've reached out to the Baptists, the non-denominationalists, and the Pentecostals, who typically don't respond to my emails or return my calls. It's hard not to assume that I would have better luck if I were, like all of them, a man.

Sometimes I've surprised them by stopping by their church offices, and I have convinced a couple of them to attend a meeting. But after they come once and get a sense of us, they don't return. And honestly, I am relieved when they don't come back. It's hard when they are there. We are more cautious as we talk. We avoid theological issues that might spur debate. I enjoy myself less.”¹

{Insert Richard Rohr quote from: Meditations @cac.org, June 2, 2019, “Unity and Diversity”}

Yet Jesus still prays. Jesus wants us all around the table—to better articulate our beliefs, to challenge and be challenged, to have the chance of changing what needs to be changed in the body of Christ.

May they all be one. Note that Jesus does *not* pray that we all *think* and *act* alike. He does not pray that we all *agree* or that we *ignore injustice*. He prays for us to be *one*, as he and [God] are one. He prays that we be in *relationship* with one another. But it's hard, really hard, and it's not going to get easier.

So, keep those prayers coming, Jesus. We're *never not* going to need them!

¹ Teri McDowell Ott, *The Christian Century*, May 19, 2019