

Weaving the Spiritual Fabric
Faithfully Facing the Future
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(Text in Red signals to change slide)

Ten years ago, in 2000, I made my second trip to Israel. One of our stops was outside the Knesset - the seat of Israel's government. Has anyone been at the Knesset? At the entrance to the >grounds of the Knesset is a huge menorah. Cast in the menorah are various scenes from the Hebrew Bible that remind the Israelites of their history. Some of these scenes you would expect...the story of creation, the great Exodus from Egypt, Moses bringing the law down from Mount Sinai. But one panel might surprise you. >It is one depicting bones...those dry bones in the valley that are the subject of Ezekiel's vision. Ezekiel is brought out by the Spirit of God and set in the middle of a valley full of bones, dry bones, many, many dry bones. And God asks, "Mortal, can these bones live?"

>Many would say these dry bones are a fitting description of our Congregational churches today.... ..nothing more than a pile of dry bones, a relic of the past, no life left in them. >>Declining attendance, >aging populations, and >financial struggles are but a few of the challenges in many churches today. Megachurches around the country seem to be money and people magnets while those of us with a historical legacy seem shunted to the side....we're not glitzy enough, not resourced enough, and too set in our ways. We're out of touch with culture, and too slow to identify and respond to the human needs around us. We're no longer called hypocrites. We're called >dinosaurs, museums, relics. Indeed, all over

the country, churches are challenged to keep their doors open, their ministries vital, their message a living hope. >Mortal, can these bones live?

>The religious landscape is shifting, whether we want it to or not. In 1950, there were >80,000 mainline Protestant churches in America. >Today, less than 72,000. In terms of membership, >twenty years ago 60 % of Americans said they were Protestant. >By 2008, it was only 50%. >8% did not identify with any religious tradition. >Today, that number is 15%. >And in terms of age, >95 % of those 70 and older claim some religious affiliation. >Only 84% of those under 30 claim to be religious. Here's one more for you. >The median age of church goers is 52. I'm sure you've seen this reflected in your own Congregations. You probably don't think of it in terms of numbers but in terms of ministry and relationships. Where are the young people? Why do we have to compete with Sports on Sunday? We can't get people to fill our committees. The church isn't as full as it used to be. I don't know how we are going to meet our budget. Sound familiar? >Mortal, can these bones live?

But let me remind you of the rest of the story about Ezekiel. God asks, "Mortal, can these bones live?"

Ezekiel isn't entirely sure how to answer. He equivocates, saying, "O Lord God, you know."

Then God directs Ezekiel to prophesy to the bones: "O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones, I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall

live. I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you and cover you with skin, and put breath in you and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord.”

Ezekiel did as commanded and suddenly there was a noise, a rattling and the bones came together, bone to bone. ...there were sinews on them, and skin had covered them, just as God said; but there was no breath in them.

Then the Lord said to Ezekiel, “Prophecy to the breath... ‘come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain that they may live.’” Once again, Ezekiel obeyed, and the breath came into them, and they lived.

So what to make of Ezekiel’s vision in this time and place? Can God rattle our bones and give us breath from the four winds? I think we are in a time of incredible opportunity. What kind of opportunity depends on how you answer the question God asked Ezekiel: “Mortal, can these bones live?”

Of course these bones can live! >With God’s Spirit, there is nothing to keep you from reaching your God-given goals, if you stay close to your spiritual purposes. Of course these bones can live! But it means embarking on Godly change. It means embarking on Godly change.

>And that is why the Center for Congregational Leadership was created... to help churches find new and revitalized ways of being the church in today’s challenging times. By the way, >this is my office, and >my balcony...>and me. I am honored to be the Dean of this new ministry of the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches. What makes it

new? A number of things. >First, and least important, I am not physically located in the >NACCC offices in >Oak Creek, Wisconsin. >Instead I am located in Olivet, Michigan, on the campus of >Olivet College. I call the >Oak Creek Office the Mother ship and >I am the satellite. Olivet College, by the way, was founded by Congregationalists in the 1800's. I am located there because, broadly speaking, >the ministry of the Center is education...Congregational education for >seminarians, >continuing education for clergy, >leadership development for churches, and >lay ministry training to name a few. >Second, the Center and Olivet have created a new partnership together. By basing the Center at Olivet, the college and the Center can share resources to help each other. >Third, and most importantly, this ministry is new because it recognizes and gives importance to the role of education in creating and maintaining church vitality in this rapidly changing world. By the way, if you are on Facebook, you can become a fan of the Center.

To be perfectly blunt about it, when people engage in church, they want to be spiritually fed. And when they give of their time, they want it to make a difference for the better...tangibly and significantly. We are being challenged to express our values of faith, freedom and fellowship in ways that change lives! >To change lives, our faith must be vibrant, relevant, hopeful and joyful. >Our freedom must lead people to love God with all their heart, mind, soul and strength. And >our fellowship must be about encouraging each other's ministries and vitality in this unique way we call Congregationalism.

Churches both big and small are in transition. >It is your current task to discern your role as the contemporary church so that you are >flexible, obedient, open, trusting and >ready

to follow Christ where ever he may lead you. ...>It is your task to rediscover who you are as a gathered community and then...>fully own your past and create your future.” >Mortal, can these bones live? Yes!

>State and regional associations across the country are identifying two key things when it comes of fellowship among churches.

>First, the model of gathering for a business meeting and finding fellowship in the process is no longer working except for a faithful few. It is harder and harder to get people to serve on committees and in positions of leadership. People are “meetinged out.” They go to meetings at work, at their children’s schools and for their extracurricular activities, for the town, for their professional associations. And they come away drained, tired, feeling put upon and, worst of all, as if they have not accomplished anything meaningful. Business is no longer the well-spring of fellowship it was in the past. And for so many of us church folks, church has taken on the feel of every other meeting we attend...an obligation, worthy yes, but an obligation that is more tiring than fulfilling. No wonder people are checking out. I am convinced that society has become more secular and less tied to church because the church doesn’t look or act much different than secular society. Yet, I am also convinced that people long for and hunger after what the church has to offer at its distinctive best: refreshment, renewal, meaning, purpose and hope...the deep things of the Spirit.

>Second, If the church is to distinguish itself as a place of purpose and importance in this skeptical and information burdened world, it must find new ways of being the church. The world wants to see and know God and feel the joy and love God holds out. Gathering to

receive the treasurer's report and have a bite to eat, as necessary as each is does not express the higher purposes we are called to and, too often, gets in the way of being about those higher purposes. >Churches that are revitalizing are recognizing this and changing their ways. How? Let me give you a few examples.

>The New York – New Jersey Association is just a handful of churches...15 all together mostly centered around New York City. The Association meetings were struggling. Attendance was poor and dropping. Only the "regulars" came and even then, less and less. Member churches were getting smaller and struggling financially and pastorally. So the Association began speaking of disbanding altogether. But one person said, "no! We need each other. We need to help each other. That is our business, helping each other. We need tools, education, information." And so the next fellowship meeting was called for a purpose... What did they do? They held a workshop on leadership in the Church...how to foster it, what kinds of leaders the church needs, how to identify and encourage leaders. People came. They left with information that inspired hope for their churches. They were learning from each other, being inspired by each other, and forming deeper fellowship bonds and connections. They were helping to empower each for strong and vital ministries.

>A second example comes from Michigan. One of the benefits of having the Center based in Michigan is that Michigan is home to over 60 NACCC member churches. I travel among them and listen to many stories...some stories of success but often concerns and worries. Last Fall, in three different venues, I heard people talking about bylaw changes and church restructuring. They needed to do it. They wanted to do it. They were afraid to do it.

They didn't know how to do it. Of course, this got my wheels turning. I telephoned the moderator of the State Association to tell him what I was hearing. And I made him an offer: I would host a one day gathering on governance at the Center if he would find out if there was interest enough and get the word out. Now doesn't a full day gathering about church structure and bylaws sound like an absolute snoozer? Who would waste a whole Saturday doing that? I don't know, but 45 people did, and laity outnumbered clergy two to one. Why? Because people are recognizing that when business interferes with ministry and discernment, things need to change; not that we throw out order, discipline and business but that those things must support the ministry of the church, not overshadow it. It was a wonderful partnership between the Center and the Association.

There are other partnerships happening as well. This past January, the Center partnered with >Oneonta Congregational Church for a four day seminar on Congregational History and Polity. It was part of the 100th anniversary celebration of that church. They hosted and provided meals and I brought in the Faculty and facilitated the logistics. Twenty people attended.

>Last Fall, the Center hosted a seminar on >stewardship. Last month, >I helped a church explore a new and simpler way of transforming lives, and >this Fall, the Center will host the 7th Congregational Symposium. The theme is "Congregationalism: Leading from the Wilderness. It acknowledges that we are not longer the influential institution we once were and there are both challenges and opportunities in that. Mark your calendars for October 28 – 30 in Olivet Michigan.

I continue to administer the >programs of CFTS and >Lay Ministry training. In Alaska, I will be co-facilitating with Jim Hopkins a workshop on strategic planning. Education is empowering people to revitalize and reenergize and re-imagine how to be God's people in this world that so much needs the grace of God.

These are transformative conversations and explorations. So what about the future?

>When I look ahead here are the trends I see in Congregational churches and some of the questions it provokes as you think about your future.

>First, churches, in general, will get smaller. We are now in the second generation of the unchurched. Many of the baby boomers checked out of church and didn't raise their children in the cradle of the scripture. Those children are now having children who also are not in the arms of the church. They don't know the Christian story. How will you teach the Christian story to people who don't know it and probably won't come in your door to discover it? By the way, don't fall into the trap of thinking small is bad. It isn't your numbers but your vitality and commitment to ministry in the name of Jesus Christ.

>Second, I see that church buildings will demand more and more financial support, leaving ministries increasingly impoverished and this will cause frustration and conflict in the congregation. Those in New England, have already felt this, especially when heating oil reached \$4.00 per gallon. The question for the church of the future is this: How can we use this building to serve our ministries? Must we own and keep up a building in order to be a church? If we didn't have a building, would we cease to exist? Is there another way for us to

be the church and is it a good way? Churches will have to become more creative with their buildings or be a church without them.

>Third, I see churches relying more on lay leadership than paid clergy as many of your churches already are. As churches get smaller and struggle with resources, many will not be able to afford a full-time, seminary trained pastor. For churches, this means creating a more active laity. For clergy, this means holding a full time job and a part time church, or some other work configuration. Clergy and laity will become increasingly dependant upon each other and the difference between the two less pronounced. Leadership training will gain more prominence and cooperative associations with each other, church to church, will increase ministry effectiveness. The question for the future is “How can we share resources to keep each other vital in mission and ministry? You’ve already wrestled with that one and the Ashland revitalization project is well underway.

>Fourth, churches must embrace technology if they are to survive in the future. There is no other way around it. The transition must start now if you want younger people to consider joining your congregation.

>Mortal, can these bones live? How do you answer that question? Before I wrap up – and your gracious attention has been much appreciated – allow me to share a point of personal theology. Not long ago, I attended a clergy luncheon. It was shortly after Easter. I was still in the glow of the celebration of our risen Lord. I had one of those rare moments of unmitigated joy. Don’t tell folks, but pastors often live immersed in bad news, not good. By that I mean, yes, we have the Good Word, but our stock in trade is often in life’s struggles. If

life was always happy, wonderful and great, no one would need us. So when I say it was one of those rare moments of unmitigated joy, I mean I was more in tune with the wonder, the mystery and miracle of faith than I was with the teenager in our community who had just been arrested for selling drugs or consumed with the difficult meeting coming up. The effervescence of faith outweighed the burdens of life that day. Life was good and God was glorious and I was going to go hang out with colleagues for a couple of hours. After we ate our meal, we tossed out the question, "So, how is it with you?" And I discovered that my colleagues were a very dispirited bunch. The recession had been hard on their congregations, and church budgets had been decimated. Other things were taking their toll, too. There was no more Sunday School, the Women's Association stopped meeting because most had passed away, and by many accounts, the future looked bleak for many of those churches. One person said she felt as if she were a hospice chaplain to her church instead of a minister. Another said his church couldn't hang on much longer and he didn't know what they would do. If my *colleagues* were this dispirited where would their congregations ever hear the word of God's hope? So here is my theology for the church as we face our futures together. >We are people of the resurrection. Though we die yet shall we live. I believe the greatest threat to the church is our fear of dying. We're afraid not to change, but we're more afraid of the conflict change often provokes. We want to reach out to others but we don't want to alienate those already here. It's paralyzing for many churches and church leaders. However, when we stop worrying about dying; when we truly believe that even if we close our doors, we will live; when we trust that God is in the challenges and changes we face; when we believe those

things, truly believe them, we will live! Mortal can these bones live? Oh, yes. Oh, yes. We may not look like we do now, we may be so transformed that our ancestors wouldn't recognize us, but yes, these bone can live.

>What then can we say to this? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all will he not also give us all things with him? ...Who shall separate from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ...No in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loves us. >For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, 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. Amen. And thank you.