

A JOURNEY OF SAYING GOODBYE: LEADING A PARISH
FROM GRIEF TO CELEBRATION

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ABSTRACT

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This project was implemented to aid a congregation and its pastor in the process of getting ready to separate after a positive seven year tenure together. An advisory team created the process by leading congregational meetings which enabled members to engage in dialogue about their grief and move them to celebration,

A survey was done before the first meeting and at the end of the final session to aid the team in determining if the project was successful. Specific questions were designed by the advisory team which allowed members to recall and reflect on their sense of loss and desire to move forward once the pastor was no longer with them.

Four congregational meetings were held and led by a different team member to bring diversity and depth to the discussions. The answers were recorded and reviewed by the team following each congregational session. The team and the pastor analyzed the meetings to see if dialogue was taking place, if people were free to speak, if a change in the process was needed and if this method was actually enabling folks to face their loss and move towards the future.

The advisory group discovered that the congregational gatherings enabled members and community members to grieve collectively. They were surprised by the

intensity of the feelings expressed and believed it set the stage for looking to the future positively. The members also shared ways in which they hoped the church could move forward without the current pastor. The information gained helped the team design the final worship and celebration luncheon. The service infused the many symbols of their life together and drove them to look ahead with optimism.

This project successfully highlighted the need for an organized way to acknowledge grief among a congregation whose pastor is leaving. This model is an excellent tool for other congregations to say goodbye to a pastor.

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CHAPTER 1

DREAMS AND REALITY: WHERE THE TWO MEET AND COLLIDE

“Daryl, I can’t believe it! God truly did give me the delight of my heart and I’m going to be the new pastor of First Congregational Church!” I leaned over and hugged my waking husband as he stirred in our hotel room at 5a.m. that momentous Monday morning.

“Yep, can you imagine us living here in Murphys with the gorgeous forests nearby? And how about that hundred percent vote you received? Is that God saying yes to this or what?” He grasped my hands in his and we smiled in contentedness.

“I can still hardly believe,” I whispered. “After twenty-three months of waiting the day has finally come when I can say it out loud; I’m going to be the pastor at First Congregational Church in Murphys, California!”

“Hey, let’s call the family now. It’s after eight o’clock back home. Who shall we call first?”

“Jordan,” I said. “He wanted to know right away.”

I dialed his number. We spent the next half hour telling our youngest son about the candidating worship service on Sunday, how the question and answer time went, all about the vote - and then he asked lots of questions about California. “I can’t believe you are moving there,” he spoke kind of sadly.

“It will be great,” I told him. “You can snowboard in the winter, rock climb in the summer and we will make sure we have a guest room for you when you come.” We concluded the call and then looked at one another trying to decide whom to call next.

“You know, Bonnie,” Daryl uttered, “How are we ever going to tell the folks back home at St. Peter’s? Not only are you leaving as a beloved pastor, but I am leaving as the minister of music and I don’t think folks have any idea this is in the works.”

“I don’t know, but I’ll call the conference office and talk to Marja and get her advice. She is used to this sort of thing and she will know what we should do. We especially need to do it right away before the word gets out on Facebook and folks from St. Peter’s find it out that way.”

Thus began the difficult journey of saying goodbye to my parish of seven years. I called the conference minister that day. “Marja, I’m calling to let you know that the church in California has called me as their next pastor and I wanted to ask you how I should let the folks back home know about it.” We chatted a bit about the process I had just been through and she congratulated me.

“You have to prepare a letter that goes out to all members as soon as possible. Do not discuss it with anyone until you have sent those letters. You can meet with the council president and tell her the same day you are ready to mail the letters.”

“You aren’t serious, right?” I exclaimed. “I can’t tell these folks in a letter that I am leaving them after seven years! That’s a slap in the face to them and it’s so impersonal.”

“I hear you,” Marja said, “but this is the way it has to be done. Everyone has to hear it at the same time or you will have a mess on your hands. This is the way we advise it to be done and it works nicely.”

“I just can’t do that,” I told her. “I have built up a reputation of transparency and trust and I can’t just send them a letter – at least not to the council members and the search committee who brought me here.”

She reiterated her instructions and I hung up the phone feeling deflated. “Daryl, you are not going to believe this, but I am supposed to let the parish folks back home know I am leaving by sending them a letter! I can’t do it that way!”

This was the beginning of a process where my certainties were challenged. I firmly believed that God had led me to a place of delight, was going to allow me to live into a new vision for ministry, and say a *joyful* goodbye to my old parish but it was slowly falling apart at the seams.

I went online to look for material about how pastors say goodbye to congregations. Almost everything I saw were detailed instructions about how to write the letter, how to meet with the staff and the council, how to explain oneself, and to realize self-care was necessary during the process. I could not find anything that described how to speak to a congregation in any way other than a letter or general announcement by the conference or denominational staff.

It seemed ludicrous to me that I was to simply send a “dear John” letter to the small congregation. So with reticence and totally out of character for me, I decided to disobey the conference process and handle the matter differently. Lawrence Farris in his book, *Ten Commandments for Pastors Leaving a Congregation*, states, “Sometimes

leaving a pastorate, especially a good and faithful one, can feel like nothing so much as a death.”¹ Daryl and I both felt that this parting of ways would be more like a death for St. Peter’s than a celebration.

I called the pastor emeritus, Rev. Bob Muise, and told him the news. He was not surprised because he had served as one of my references and was one of my most trusted advisors. He thought, too, that a letter might cause anger about being told of my leaving in this impersonal way. He asked what I wanted to do.

I told him that I wanted to call some folks and tell them and then send the letter to everyone. We were a small congregation and it would not be too much for me to contact the leaders of the parish personally. He agreed that this would be the best route, but he did understand the dilemma of folks gossiping about it.

By now my anxiety was beginning to take over, and I called Rev. Dick Berg, another colleague and member of St. Peter’s. I shared that I wanted to call the leaders first and then send the letter out the same day. He concurred this was the better solution and he felt I should do what came naturally to me. “You have always been able to trust your personal relationships with folks.” He reminded me that the members and I had walked through many joys and storms together and this would be honoring them as well as paying attention to my own sense of integrity.

It was difficult to defy the conference instructions but I felt it necessary to tend to this very first part of saying goodbye with tender loving care. I discovered that at least one pastor agreed. Farris stated it well when he said,

The departing pastor often shares some of the sadness and sense of loss even as these feelings are mingled with expectation of what lies ahead. One temptation on

¹ Lawrence Farris, *Ten Commandments for Pastors Leaving a Congregation* (Grand Rapids: William B. Erdmans Publishing Company, 2006), xi.

the pastor's part is to mask the pain of this loss with excitement about a new position and its possibilities, flee as quickly as possible and to let others clean up whatever mess or hurt is left behind. But pastors who have sat with the dying and their families know that such illusory denials do not work. And they are not what God intends when parting comes.²

This is exactly what I was experiencing. I loved these people and I cared deeply about how this news would affect and change my old parish and their lives. I knew that God expected me to provide nurture and leadership even while leaving this beloved congregation.

I began the process of saying goodbye by calling each member of the church consistory, the personnel members, the staff and the head of the outreach ministry. I told each one that a letter would be going out to the entire congregation that day, but I wanted them to hear the news personally from me. I did ask them to refrain from discussing it with others members of the church until they had received the letter and as far as I know, they all honored that request.

The reactions, however, did surprise me. There was more anger than I expected, more tears and less enthusiasm about my new call. Some folks felt "the process" (of being informed by letter) is contrary to the way the church is organized. Our polity resides within each individual congregation and so one person stated that this stance by the conference seemed unreasonable.

One member stated, "I feel as if I have been left on the dance floor by my lover."

"What did you expect?" Daryl asked me. "You have been with them for seven years and we are just starting to grow the Divinity Café and we recently began a Sunday School program involving all ages. They are probably wondering "What now?"

² Ibid., xii.

Daryl was right. This was not going to be easy or painless. I needed to find a way to be present in their loss, authentic about my joy and sorrow, and figure out how to continue to be the pastor until the day I left. The books, the manuals, and the articles from many denominations left me bereft of a sensible, caring and theological grounding for saying goodbye.

I set about putting together a plan on how to say goodbye. It was remarkable to me that at the same time I had this need in my congregation, I was to choose a doctoral project involving my current parish. In dialogue with Dr. Joel Mason about having to change my original project since I would be leaving in three months, I had the powerful revelation that guiding the congregation through a journey of saying goodbye would be a faithful walk of integrity and an important step of growth for us all.

Serving this parish had been a journey for me and I often taught the members that following Jesus was a lifelong path. It was with this paradigm that I began to formulate a project that would be a “journey.” As the plans began to unfold I knew I needed a team willing to help chart the path which was beginning to look a lot like turbulent waters. Loren Mead states it aptly. “Any congregation going through the complex issues that come when one pastor is leaving as another comes – any such congregation knows that such a time is scary, is challenging and is full of potential.”³

My optimistic nature would surely find the potential but I realized I was in the midst of people experiencing grief. A good transition was not going to be accomplished in a one-time meeting, a nice letter, or a simple goodbye. It was going to take work, tenderness and discovering how to continue leading in my last three months. I was

³ Loren Mead, *A Change of Pastors: and How it Affects Change in the Congregation* (Herndon: The Alban Institute, 2005), x.

determined that I would give this passage the same energy I had given my day to day pastoral work.

The challenge of my ethical decision to break with the structure of my conference, because of my knowledge of this particular congregation, caused me to struggle. Perhaps in the future, conference authorities need to pay attention to author Ingram Parmley's admission. "Terminating a relationship is not accomplished by an announcement. It is a process, an ongoing sequence of event, feelings, actions and interactions."⁴ I echoed his sense that, "Making the decision to leave and announce it to a congregation is the beginning of the process, not the end of it."⁵

Things happen to me serendipitously that I am often not able to collate in my brain until long after events have transpired, but my decision to choose a new path of saying goodbye, engage the congregation every step of the way, use my doctoral project as a tool and then to read a particular book all coalesced to prepare me for the separation process. I had just finished reading the book, *Beautiful Souls: Saying No, Breaking Ranks, and Heeding the Voice of Conscience in Dark Times* by Eyal Press.⁶ Press says, "We've all arrived at junctures where our deepest principles collide with the loyalties we harbor and the duties we are expected to fulfill, and wrestled with how far to go to keep our consciences clean."⁷ In addition to being driven to create a new process that would underscore my theology that 'goodbyes are an important part of our discipleship as

⁴ Ingram C. Parmley, "Reflections on Ending Ministry in a Congregation" in *Saying Goodbye: A Time of Growth for Congregations and Pastors*, ed. Edward D. White (Herndon: The Alban Institute, 1990), 45.

⁵ Ibid., 45.

⁶ Eyal Press, *Beautiful Souls: Saying No, Breaking Ranks, and Heeding the Voice of Conscience in Dark Times* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012), 5.

⁷ Ibid., 5.

Christians', I loved these people. I wanted them to know how much I cared, how important it was to cut the ties that had bound us together for seven years. I was aware that successful parting was important for them as for me. I also trusted their ability to care for me and one another as we had grown in our ability to be community for each other and the neighborhood. Heeding their guidance in this route was a must.

One other area haunted me as I rejoiced in my new call. I had started an outreach ministry to refugees and over the years had built relationships with hundreds of persons arriving to our community amid the stress of leaving their homes, families and cultures. I was deeply connected to their leaders, to other service agencies and was a strong advocate for refugees. How would they take my leaving? Who would lead them into the future? How could I possibly communicate about my departure when we had so many languages among us? This led me to ask our team of leaders on this "journey of goodbye" to help me sort it out and be present for this important ministry long after I was gone. I was vitally interested in passing this work on with grace and for my sake, a knowledge that the ministry would continue.

The final area that marked the way in which I chose to lead us in parting was that I did not want to be considered a "lame duck pastor." Hugh Peniston says the very same thing. "It was a matter of great pride to me and important in the process, that I was truly the pastor of the church until midnight the last day."⁸ I believe that people continue to need worship, pastoral care, celebrations of births and deaths, and guidance in the day to day administration of the parish. My own needs of packing up and shifting my attention to a new parish would have to take second place to my role as pastor.

⁸ D. Hugh Peniston, "Saying Goodbye to My Parish" in *Saying Goodbye: A Time of Growth for Congregations and Pastors*, ed. Edward D. White (Herndon: The Alban Institute, 1990), 59.

The separation began with prayer, phone calls, and letter writing. Engaging the entire congregation in a journey of goodbye was one of the best decisions I made.

Although the road was not without bumps, it was a blessed and revealing season for us all. The *dream* of beginning anew in ministry elsewhere was exciting, the *reality* was hard work!

CHAPTER 2

NAVIGATING THE PATH: THE LAY ADVISORY TEAM TAKES CHARGE

“Hi Shirley,” I mustered as much cheer as I could, knowing she was grieving and sad that I was leaving.

“Oh hi,” she replied. “I was just thinking of you and I’m feeling very sad this morning, Bonnie.”

“I know,” I told her. “Me too. What seems to be the toughest part for you?” I asked.

“I’m scared of what is going to happen to us. We are a small church and you have been our strong leader all these years. What are we going to do now? Who is going to want to come to us? No one can fill your shoes!” she sighed. “I’m worried what will become of us.”

“Shirley, I know this is hard but I have an idea that I think might help all of us through this process and I am wondering if you might be part of a project that I am doing for my doctoral dissertation. I am trying to put together a path whereby we might grieve together, discuss the issues with each other and then come to some sort of equilibrium in this hard time of saying goodbye. I’m excited about what this could do for us.”

“What do you have in mind?”

“I am putting together a lay advisory team to help me plan some meetings with the whole congregation to dialogue and process what we are going through. Would you be willing to be on the team?”

“I would love to,” she replied. “What do I need to do?”

“I want a team to go over my vision of the project but I am asking for your input and suggestions about it. Can you come to a meeting on December 6 for about an hour and a half to work on this? I can explain more then.”

“You know I will help you anyway I can but this is going to be very emotional for me, so if you don’t mind a few tears now and then, I’m glad to help.”

I thanked Shirley and then proceeded to call other parishioners who I thought might be willing to serve on the team. I was surprised at how readily everyone said yes. All of them thought the doctoral project might be a perfect match for our journey of saying goodbye to each other.

St. Peter’s is a small, close-knit community of progressive Christians who were now facing an unexpected turn of events. I had been their pastor for over seven years and was now leaving to serve a parish in California.

The congregation is over one hundred years old and has changed its former distinctiveness. Where it was once the great towering church for the educated and elite of the local college, Franklin and Marshall, and considered “the church” of the Lancaster Theological Seminary, it was now a tiny remnant of faithful believers who were determined to make a difference in their neighborhood.

Over my years as pastor there, the parish began to change and looked entirely different than when I arrived. The congregation had lacked enthusiasm and even the buildings were worn and weathered. Classrooms were filled with junk from floor to ceiling, cobwebs stared at me as I entered an upstairs chapel; the smell was musty and very little sign of anything new existed. While I was there, we had embarked on a path to

create spaces where ministry could happen. We installed an elevator, air conditioning, a new sound system and created a narthex where folks could enter and be welcomed.

Preparing our building enabled us to look to the surrounding community and determine where ministry could thrive. We also discovered that by helping one refugee family in the same block as our church, we opened the door to a ministry that is flourishing today. Lancaster City is an ideal place for refugees to relocate and, with the aid of Church World Services, the parish aided over a thousand refugees to resettle there during my tenure as their pastor. This ministry changed the lives of the members of St. Peter's and had a profound impact on my own life.

Suddenly, it seemed as if everything was taking a new turn as I announced that I would be leaving to take a new call in California. Even though I often commented to the congregation and its leadership that I would most likely seek to go elsewhere when our son graduated from high school, they still seem shocked.

The congregation had just recently voted to continue to contract with me as a full-time pastor even though the finances were meager. I had written two grants that year and a number of large gifts were given to the church; 2013 was looking bright. However, as soon as I announced my leaving, the leaders immediately began talking about whether or not they would continue to have a full-time pastor or even continue as a church! It is probably an understatement to say that this congregation had relied heavily on its pastor for leadership in the past seven years.

One of the keys in working through the path of saying goodbye and developing a process whereby we could move from shock to grief, to acceptance and then to celebration was understanding my own sense of pastoral theology. I knew that my

shepherding perspective would aid us as we shifted into unknown territory. I believed that “walking along side folks and hearing their stories” would continue to be a dynamic force in this passage.

Hiltner states that “pastoral theology comes out of the shepherding perspective.”¹ He goes on to emphasize that pastoral theology enables us to use a critical method that is consistent with our own critical theological method.² I like his take on this and agree that we come to our pastorates with a plethora of experiences and views that influence our leadership, our methods of inquiry and our ability to describe and assess the changes taking place. I was often amazed that my seminary training had been mostly geared to methods of historical criticism and assimilation of material with little attention given to the acknowledgement of the models of leadership and diagnoses. One of my colleagues told me early on that the greatest gift a pastor possesses is the ability to diagnose the congregation both in a systematic perspective and in a personal one.

I knew this congregation and we had become a flock who nurtured one another and shared our stories. My own giftedness of truth-telling could benefit us all. I assessed that what was needed most was a *process* to make this transition one that would propel both them and me to joyful future ministry.

THE SCOPE OF THE DOCTORAL PROJECT

The project I envisioned engaged members of St. Peter’s in a series of meetings where they could address fears and concerns regarding my leaving. All members of the parish would be invited to participate in group meetings with guided discussions. Lay

¹ Seward Hiltner, “The Meaning and Importance of Pastoral Theology,” in *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology*, Ed. James Woodward and Stephen Pattison (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 2000), 28.

² *Ibid.*, 29.

members would lead these gatherings and the Lay Advisory Committee would help determine the nature of the questions. I would train the Lay Advisory Committee (will be referred to as LAC throughout) in how to listen to narrative stories and ask open ended questions.

The project actually started with the LAC holding its team meetings in December of 2012. The congregation met three times in January and once in February of 2013. A final celebration was held with me on February 24.

MAJOR STEPS OF THE PROJECT

First, the LAC met and reviewed the plan and scope. They set dates for the group meetings and designated leaders for each session.

They decided on four major topics: where are we now, having heard the news of our pastor's leaving? What have we done these past years? What do we hope for the future? What can we celebrate? The plan was to ask open-ended questions and take a survey at the beginning of the project as well as one at the final session. The LAC decided to create a liturgy for the final session which would then be used in the liturgy at the culminating celebration service.

DATA GATHERING

The LAC met after each session and reviewed all the stories and conversations and answers to specific questions. The survey results were recorded by several members of the LAC and discussed as to the ways in which they were helpful or surprising. The project leaders used the information to gauge if the congregation was indeed moving from despair to acceptance. Analysis took part on several levels. The LAC noted what groups and ages within the congregation were represented in these conversations. They

kept records of who attended the meetings. A variety of instruments to gather data was used, such as writing responses on newsprint, having attendees fill out forms, and having games and discussion around tables.

We invited people to tell what they were feeling and thinking, even delving into how hard these conversations felt. We emulated the model of asking open-ended questions. I explained to the LAC the idea of ethnography and why this would work in our setting. Moschella states, “Ethnography as a pastoral practice also draws from narrative models of theology and care. Narrative models recognize the importance of storytelling as a hallmark of human experience.”³

She goes on to add, “The pastoral practice of ethnography can bring a congregation into an analogous co-authoring process.”⁴ This is exactly what transpired, not only with the LAC but the congregation as well. Through storytelling about *who we were*, *who we are now* and *how did we become who we are now*, we gained the tools needed to dialogue about our journey together and an appropriate way for it to end.

LAY ADVISORY COMMITTEE

The LAC included folks from the age range of 20’s to late 70’s, diverse economic strata, a variety of educational training and careers, and a mixture of theologies. They all seemed eager to be part of this project as they perceived themselves being a great help to the congregation.

³Mary Clark Moschella., *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2008), 5.

⁴Ibid., 6.

We embarked on the trek to discovering just how to live through the sorrow of saying goodbye. The LAC were eager and supportive, I was fearful, the parishioners were full of questions; but we started the process trusting God to guide us.

The Team Members of the lay advisory team were: Brian Snow, Kathy Kunkel, Diane Koon, Dick Berg, Pastor Bob Muise, and Shirley Henderson.

Brian is in his twenties and although he is not a member of the congregation he participates fully in the life of the church. He is a single dad with two young children who attend worship and Christian education. He is a hospital chaplain and has completed seminary and is on track for ordination. Brian has a strong connection to the young people in the city and often invited me to accompany him to music events downtown. Brian lives “outside the box” bringing a new approach to almost everything he does.

Kathy is the county controller and has been a long time member of the parish. Her family has a long history of supporting the church and the social hall is named after them. She has served as the treasurer of the consistory (the governing body of our parish), is married and the mother of a daughter who is in graduate school. She is usually guided by her heart and her emotions easily spill over, but her intellect enables her to approach things from a balanced perspective.

Diane is the director of the Headstart Program ⁵(Head Start is a federal program that promotes the school readiness of children ages birth to 5 from low-income families by enhancing their cognitive, social and emotional development), in Lancaster and the vice-president of consistory. She is married and the mother of two college age youth. She is very analytical and brought a practical side to the table.

⁵ Office of Head Start, <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ohs>, (accessed June 2013).

Dick is the head librarian at Lancaster Theological Seminary and also an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ but he has not served a parish for over twenty years. His ongoing experience of church work was a great help in leading the church. He is a member of consistory and is often asked to preside at meetings as he is a gifted speaker and organizer.

Rev. Bob Muise is retired, the pastor emeritus of the congregation, and a great mentor to me. His years of ministry as a pastor give him much insight into the history and beliefs (both spoken and unspoken) of this parish. He was able to highlight the theological implications of the work we were doing.

Shirley is the consistory president and a strong positive force in the church. She is not afraid to speak up for what she believes and will tackle almost anything when asked. She is retired and lives with her husband on a small farm.

This dedicated group of individuals were handpicked by me. I believed I had a great representation of the congregation, community, and I trusted their abilities to navigate through this journey. Although this particular group of people had never been teamed together in this way previously, I trusted their integrity, wisdom and guidance. It was a joyful day when they all said 'yes' to participate in the doctoral project.

Dr. Joel Mason, Professor at Drew Theological Seminary, was my advisor and approved the project upon receiving the prospectus and supporting documents. The process met all the requirements of a doctoral dissertation project and we were set to go!

CHAPTER 3

STARTING DOWN THE PATH

Eagerly I set up the room for the first LAC meeting. I was feeling very positive about this approach and sure the members of the committee would embrace it too. We opened the meeting with prayer. “I am so thankful to all of you for being willing to serve on this committee and help all of us through this process. I am confident we can come through it with joy.”

“Whoa! Pastor Bonnie,” Pastor Bob jumped in. “I do not think this is going to be a joyful process. I know you are optimistic by nature, but there is a lot of pain involved here, a lot of grieving.” The room fell silent and I felt a lurch in my stomach.

“Well, what I mean is that we will have fun doing it,” I responded trying to recover my sense of balance.

“It’s not going to be fun,” his words reverberated in my chest. The others jumped in and nodded in agreement.

“This is a path we are being forced to take,” Kathy Kunkel chimed in. “It’s not like we wanted it.”

Suddenly I was aware that my posture of leading was ignoring the pain present in the room. We were dabbling in territory that was unfamiliar to me. Yes, we had crossed tough times together, but now *I* was the cause of pain. Some of them seemed angry

with me. “Tell me more,” I requested leaning forward to try and grasp the heaviness of the space.

We talked about twenty minutes and the group began to share their own fears, questions and some of us began to cry. “This is going to be harder than I thought,” I muttered.

“Yes,” Dick Berg echoed, “very hard indeed.”

I was beginning to wonder if this long process of saying goodbye was the right thing to do. Lawrence Farris in his book, *Ten Commandments for Pastors Leaving a Congregation*, suggests that it is never good to just “steal away” from a parish.¹ I was trying to follow his path but perhaps I was clinging too hopefully to his notion that “bidding farewell is a mutual experience, one in which the pastor receives blessing as well as offers it. Being so blessed confirms the value of the ending pastorate and thereby empowers both pastor and congregation to move forward with confidence and expectancy.”² This was not feeling at all like a blessing and I had three months to work through it. At that moment, three months seemed like an eternity.

“How do you propose we proceed?” Diane piped up with her usual clarity and task-oriented nature.

“I thought we might hold some meetings and be open and honest about what is going on and in this way we can see what needs healing, what needs celebrating and how we all can move forward. I am hoping you can guide this process too.”

I looked around the room at my beloved parishioners thinking of the comment Daryl had made earlier. “This has been our home, our refuge.” Yes, this church

¹Farris, 27.

² Ibid., 28-29.

community was where people had walked with us when our twenty-six year old son died, the group who helped us raise our adopted son, Jordan, through all his struggles and who championed the refugee outreach even though it meant a ton of work. Now sentiments were high and we were gathering almost as if at a viewing before a funeral.

“Holding a meeting is a good idea,” Brian chimed in. “it will give us a chance to know how people are doing and what they need from you and us.”

The team got to work quickly and affirmed that my idea to move from despair to celebration was a good goal. They set up four congregational meetings and worked on planning the format.

I explained the significance of ethnography and narrative stories and how I believed these models fit well with our project. They were all familiar with open-ended questions, how to create them and how to get folks to engage. The team settled on four meeting times and the topics for each session as stated in Chapter 2 on page 5.³

“I think it would be a good idea if members of the team led these discussions,” Dick offered. “Also, Bonnie, we want you to respond to the same questions after the group interchange is done. That way, we can see how you are doing and care for you.”

Once again, these cherished people were emerging as shepherds themselves. “That’s a wonderful idea,” I exclaimed although I sensed a reticence about divulging my own struggles. They set about the task of deciding who should lead.

“Let’s have a variety of people, making sure we give folks diverse ways of telling their stories. Each of us brings out different parts of the truth,” Diane offered.

³ Appendix. Minutes from meeting, 95.

As they formulated the schedule, the sentiment in the room began to change. Once again their willingness to tackle anything and walk through the hard paths of life was breathing new life into a tough situation.

Even though we had been together for over an hour, they decided to formulate the questions for all the sessions and agreed to meet again after the first gathering with the congregation. (see appendix)⁴

As we prepared to close the meeting, Pastor Bob in his ever thoughtful way, asked, “Bonnie, how is the call to Murphys affecting you spiritually? What is it doing to you as an individual and to your own growth? I’d like to hear about that and I think the congregation would too. Besides, this process is as much for you as it is for us.”

Pastor Bob’s questions seared right through to that unconscious spot that I had tucked away. This was going to be hard! I was fighting internally to make this process be about “them” but inevitably it was surely about “us.” I often face difficulties in thinking of possibilities and taking time to mourn. My life coach had recently said to me, “Bonnie, pay attention to what your body is telling you. When you get a knot in your stomach, that means something needs your awareness.” She was right. I needed to concentrate not only on the needs of the parish but on mine and our family too.

“You are right,” I answered slowly. “It’s easier just to go on with all the work, the packing, the checking in with you than it is to sit and think about my own loss. Thanks for caring for me and keeping me on task with this.”

I still had one area of concern because I knew that the doctoral project would need to have some method of measurement as we moved from grief to celebration. I posed the

⁴ Appendix – meeting minutes, 97.

question to the group. “Is there a way in which we can discern if we are successful in our attempt to help people move from the shock to celebration?”

“We could do a survey,” Diane suggested.

“But how do you survey people’s feelings? The data certainly is not quantitative.”

“No,” Dick chimed in, “but we can gauge where people are. We can ask some of the same questions at the end as in the beginning and by counting the number of people involved, we can see how successful we are in leading the whole church or just a few.”

The rest of the committee quickly agreed and they set about devising the survey questions. (see appendix⁵)

I was reminded of the section in Loren Mead’s book, *A Change of Pastors and How it Affects Change in the Congregation* where she states, “The point is not to get precision but to get involvement and engagement as the congregation tries to think what kind of leadership it is going to need.”⁶ Loren advocates for a broader picture than just “three or four of the old timers who prop their feet up on the table in somebody’s back office, reminisce about the good old days and decide what kind of pastor they need ‘nowadays’.”⁷

Shirley, who is usually pretty talkative, had been fairly quiet during much of the discussion. “Shirley,” I asked, “do you have anything to add?”

“I’m overwhelmed with what to do next. Even though we need to go through this, my mind is already on to what is next. As consistory president I have a lot on my plate and the conference office is no help!”

⁵ Appendix – questions, 98.

⁶ Mead, 33.

⁷ Mead, 32.

“You are right about that,” Diane chimed in. “I called the conference and they told me it would be the end of January before anyone could meet with us. I told them we needed someone to meet with us now and they said we could work on our profile.”

“We don’t need to do another profile. We just finished a process with Pastor Bonnie this summer saying where we wanted to go, looking at our demographics and vision. We know what we need in a pastor.” Dick’s remarks were promptly affirmed.

“I need to know what we are going to do when Pastor Bonnie is not here on March 1. We need SOMEONE!” Shirley showed her exasperation.

“We could get an interim just until we decide what we are going to do,” Kathy piped up. “Someone to preach and do pastoral care.”

“But how do we get that person without going through the conference? What do you think, Pastor Bonnie?” Shirley turned to me as was her custom.

Another knot in my stomach. I hesitated. “You know, I think I am not allowed to help you with that part of the process. Our conference guidelines are pretty clear about it and ethically, it’s not appropriate for me to give you advice on this. I wish I could but I just can’t do it.” I was making one of the first steps of pulling away, letting go of the flock. Ouch! It was painful.

“She’s right,” Dick added. “Why doesn’t the consistory call a meeting just to discuss this?”

“Great!” Shirley seemed relieved. “I’ll get on that right away.”

“That’s one of the biggest questions people are asking,” Kathy paused as she wiped a tear from her eyes. “What will we do without Pastor Bonnie?”

“Then perhaps we need to give some sort of report to the congregation that the consistory is working on it,” Diane suggested. “It might settle folks down a bit.”

“You know, I am beginning to see that saying goodbye and saying hello to someone else are very integrally intertwined. Why would our conferences think otherwise? I would like to be present in your fears and questions, talk with anyone who needs a visit, and grieve together. I am confident in my ability to avoid making comments about where you need to go in the future, but I surely cannot abandon you now. Let’s pray about this right now.” I was now in the full-blown stage of what Warner White calls *The Priest*.⁸ In his letter to Harry Woolman, White says, “You are a walking image of something deep in the human soul. To understand what is going on in a parish you must be very clear about the difference between the rector as a person and you as a symbol-priest.”⁹ My calling to walk alongside those I served needed to be primary even while abiding by the constraints of the role as designed by the conference. I was once again challenged by the skirmish going in my soul. I needed to try to piece together how to be fully present as the pastor, but at the same time allow the parish to go divergently into the future without me. It felt a lot like watching my children try to swim in the ocean and not being able to help.

My prayer was the only gift I knew to offer at that moment. I probably almost preached a sermon right then and there as I begged God to come to us, console us, lead us and show us the way. I reiterated the ways we had traveled together and the blessedness that had resulted and how we were a people on a journey. I prayed for each person in the

⁸ Edward White, *Saying Goodbye: A Time for Growth for Congregations and Pastors*, Alban Institute, 2002, 3-14.

⁹ Ibid, 3.

room by name, calling forth the gifts in them I had grown to love. This was reminiscent of how I often prayed with them and the tears flowed freely.

“Amen.” Someone whispered softly, “Let it be so,” and we adjourned hugging one another and crying.

“We will get through this,” Shirley breathed. “You have always taught us, ‘It’s a new day.’”

“May it be so,” I thought as my heart strings were breaking. So this is what it feels like to be in the goodbye phase. I remembered that Ingram Parmley had suggested that it might be advisable to seek a skilled counselor for this time. Perhaps she was right.¹⁰ I made a mental note to call Dr. Hazeltine the next day. Could he help ease the pain? I hoped so!

¹⁰ White, 47.

CHAPTER 4

TRUTH TELLING TIME IS HERE

“Please tell me I don’t have to go to church today,” I moaned to Daryl as I woke up that cold January morning. “I have to put on a smiling face throughout the service and act as if everything is okay. You know I’m not good at hiding what I really feel!”

“Be yourself and you will be fine,” he answered back. “By the way, aren’t you gearing your sermon to address the fact that you are leaving?”

“Yes, it’s a great Sunday to do it. We are celebrating Epiphany which is about living in God’s light and one of the texts is of the wise men’s journey. The Epistle lesson is from Ephesians 3 where Paul talks about his call to ministry and so it all seems connected. I think it all fits very nicely into the theme I want to give, but it is going to be hard to get through it. I do so want to encourage folks that their light can continue to shine brightly on our corner in the city!”

I was right. It was hard and several times I saw others weeping during the service and when I was serving Holy Communion, most of us cried. I emphasized that God is leading them, just as God had been making a way for the Christian church for ages. “The light of Christ is here for us,” I reminded them. “Every day and in every way, God will prepare the path we are to go. It may seem you are lost on the path, wondering who will lead you, but you can trust God and trust one another. Your commitment to serve others

in this place in the city will shine like a beacon that will not only guide your way, but give light to those who are in need of God's tender loving care."

I chose to use our journey of receiving and helping refugees as an aide-mémoire and jostling of their souls to continue to move forward.

We talked about Mary and Joseph being refugees; we have seen the struggles of the Haitians, the Burmese, the Nepalese, the Cubans, the Bhutanese, and we have offered a haven for them. We have watched them begin each day not knowing what would happen. Would they have enough food to eat? Would they be able to work the modern kitchen? How would their children go to school? I can imagine that fear reigned on every level. Yet, because you walked beside them, they were able to make these tough transitions. God is walking beside you now. Cling to that light and know God will show you the way.¹

The service ended and I was both exhausted and relieved. The members of St. Peter's had responded in a loving, caring way and they were not despondent as we headed to the social hall for the luncheon and the first of our four scheduled meetings. As soon as lunch was completed, I called the people together.

The Lay Advisory Committee had recommended that I explain my doctoral project to the congregation so they would know the details and also to receive permission to use their survey materials and the minutes from the meeting in my doctoral project. About thirty people in attended, including children. Our usual worship attendance on Sunday was about fifty so we were glad this many people came. After I explained that we were using the survey as an aide to help us work through the process of saying goodbye, Dick Berg and Bob Muise passed out the surveys. (see appendix²)

¹ Excerpt from sermon on January 6, 2013

² Appendix, Survey, 98.

The committee had decided that I should not speak until this first survey was handed out and completed. They believed that my explanations about my decision to leave could slant the folks' answers. Once the surveys were completed, Pastor Bob asked me to speak about my new place of call and the process I selected to notify the congregation.

I explained that I had been sensing "God's nudges" to move to a new place. I wished I had some great big revelation to tell them or somebody had sought me out but all I could say was that the time was right. It seemed as if the writer of Ecclesiastes had it right: "For everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose under heaven."³

I could not easily explain that it was time for me to go. Author Lawrence Farris said it well and how I wish I would have had his book with me that day. I was madly reading any book I could get my hands on to try and help me discover the navigating tools for this journey. He struck a chord with me.

A common way in which a pastor comes to awareness for the need for a change is through a sense of satisfaction and completion in the present work. As one pastor put it, it's time to think about leaving when one has moved the congregation to greater faithfulness through the right use of one's gifts, and any further growth can only be accomplished through a massive retooling.⁴

I wasn't as sure that I had done all I could, but I sensed a need in both the congregation and me for new leadership. We were stuck it seemed, still struggling to grow. In spite of the tremendous outreach to the neighborhood, I felt the congregants were tired and needed new direction. I certainly was feeling I needed a new place to seek God's guidance. A big part of the decision was that now Daryl and I were empty nested

³ *The Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version*, Iowa Falls: World Bible Publishers Inc., 1989, Ecclesiastes 3:1

⁴ Farris., 8.

and free to go. I had always wanted to move out of Pennsylvania and see the Christian Church at work in other places.

I shared at the meeting that I had looked far and wide to see where God might be calling me to serve. When I discovered the profile for Murphys congregation, I became excited about my gifts fitting in with their leadership needs. Most of those at the meeting did not know that the process had taken twenty-three months. Some of the members asked questions about the town of Murphys, the church building, and the size of the congregation. I answered their questions but I was eager to move on. Suddenly I didn't want to sound too happy about leaving as it didn't feel appropriate to share it there. Dick saw my discomfort and asked if I would speak to the process of notification and how it came to be that I wrote the letter.

Somewhat reluctantly, I revealed that I had gone against the instructions of the conference because I wanted to tell them myself and in person. At this point Dick came to the podium and began the process of reviewing the survey questions. The team had decided that much more information is revealed when folks can dialogue about the questions rather than just write answers. They also wanted to get a feel for the tenor of the people and how they were handling the news of my departure.

The survey results are found in the appendix, as well as the minutes of the meeting but what struck us most was the honesty and openness of the people. They freely shared their sorrow, their questions, and their fears. Across the board though was the deep sense of sadness and wondering, "What will happen to us now?"

The first question: *What was your initial reaction upon hearing the news that Pastor Bonnie is leaving* was revealing. People had ideas that I had never heard before such as, “I knew when she started her doctorate she would leave” or “Daryl and Bonnie have many gifts and I knew we couldn’t keep them for long.”

At this juncture in the meeting I was not allowed to speak so I kept my responses to myself. My first reaction was to jump up and say, “No, that’s not it at all,” but in reality, it didn’t matter why I was leaving, I was hearing their pain.

Loren Mead says that when a pastor leaves it can be an extraordinary time of potential for the congregation even though it is scary.⁵ Right before my eyes I was seeing one of the great strengths of this group - the ability to tell the truth to each other. I knew also, that their foundation was strong and they gave sacrificially to their community. A tad bit of comfort settled over me as I heard them interchange about what was ahead of them. This was the same way they had responded to challenges in the past, discussing, praying and working it out. It felt good that our tool was bringing these truths to the surface.

The second question, *How do you feel about the way in which you heard the news (by a letter)* resulted in a whole range of answers not easily summarized. (See appendix⁶) Dick agreed with the person who said, “There wouldn’t have been any good way to hear the news.” Dick moved on the next part of the survey.

I had sent the letter to the congregation on November 29, 2012 and so they had already known the news for about a month. During December however, hardly anyone

⁵ Mead, 10.

⁶ Appendix, 101-105.

had spoken to me about it. Perhaps it was partly due to the busyness as we had a full Advent season with a Christmas bazaar and outreach functions amid the usual work. Edward White likens the separation to the categories Elizabeth Kubler-Ross uses in her book on Death and Dying.⁷ Was this the stage of denial? Even if it was, this first meeting with the LAC was knocking attendees out of a stupor of incredulity that this could be happening.

This discussion moved rather quickly and so Dick led them to question number three. *Now after a month of knowing that she is leaving, how are you feeling about the news?*

While folks admitted they had adjusted to it a bit more, the room carried the weight of loss, sadness, disbelief and fear. At one point several people started to talk at once and Dick had to ask them to share one at a time. Anxiety crept into their voices and I was squirming in my chair. No other pastor had ever shared with me about this struggle. No one on the conference staff had told me what to expect. Only Chandler Gilbert said it in his journal. I was reading his book where he recorded the process when he told his parish he was leaving.⁸

I am feeling very insecure. I am deliberately, of my own free choice, turning my back on some of the people and tasks I love most in the world. I am leaving behind people who have loved and affirmed me beyond belief. I need to accept that this is scary. And I need to keep returning to the dream of what lies ahead.⁹

⁷ White, 43.

⁸ White, 33.

⁹ White, 33.

Phew! How long would this meeting go on? Could I stay and hold it together? I knew they spoke these truths out of love but did it have to hurt so? The overwhelming response to question three was *sadness*.

Dick moved along in his tender way pressing onward with question four. *What do you feel is the general mood of the congregation since Pastor Bonnie has announced she is leaving?* A general summary of the answers reveals that most people were perplexed. Individuals could see that the mood had changed but they weren't certain what it was all about. Their anxiety about the future and their continued sadness was evident. The major concern seemed to be about what would happen next. They knew that March 1 was not far away and no news of what path they would take had been brought to the table.

Later in discussions with the consistory, the leaders felt glad they had this input. When they asked question 5, *In what ways would you like to be involved in making decisions about the future of St. Peter's going forward,* it became clear that transparency and a great deal of communication was necessary. The leaders would need to keep the congregation apprised of every step if they were to calm the fear. At this juncture, members were asked to sign the surveys so the consistory could see who wanted to be part of the course of action going forward. Almost all of them signed the survey forms.

Dick then asked me if I had anything to add and to close in prayer. I thanked everyone and shared my deep sorrow at leaving them. There were lots of hugs and the children in particular came running to me after the meeting was over. "I'm sad," one of the five year olds said. "I don't want you to leave us." We finally left the church. Earlier I was relieved that the people knew I was going, but now my fears were unearthed like some monstrous rock jutting up through the perfect landscape.

There was an area that I haven't mentioned in the description because it eluded me. Diane, as the secretary for that day, recorded that, "Bonnie suggested that we think about what we are projecting to others about the church during this time."

Interestingly, I don't recall much about that except I do know that some of the folks in the surrounding community had begun to ask me questions. Is the refugee ministry going to continue? Can we still come and play our music at your Divinity Café? Are you still going to be holding English classes for refugees? Who will take your place on all the boards on which you serve?

I remember thinking that I didn't want the outside world to hear all the members' fears and sadness. How I longed for them to remain the shining light in the city. They could be strong and carry on the good work they had begun. In hindsight, I see I was in denial. I wanted everything to be fine. I didn't want people to be upset. I wanted them to bless me on my path and move on to bigger and better things themselves. Once again that dream of a smooth departure was fast becoming a nightmare of loss.

I was struggling. I remembered in my pastoral ethics class all the discussions about self-differentiation. Somehow I had this belief that I needed to squelch my own struggle so I could be fully present for them. In reality, this cheats both the pastor and the parish from an opportunity of healing. Anthony Robinson describes it this way.

Leadership capacity originates less in mastery of information or technique, and more in a deep self-knowledge and courage to live "divided no more." It flows from the courage to live one's convictions. The person and the leader who is not divided between role expectations and the soul, but who integrates the two, leads from a place of inner wholeness and congruence.¹⁰

¹⁰ Anthony Robinson, *Leadership for Vital Congregations* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2006).
39.

I was not leading from a place of inner wholeness and congruence. I was in grief and didn't know it at the time. Normally, I was pretty self-revealing in the parish but I felt lost to know how to bear my own soul and hear their loss at the same time. The integrity I gave my ministry in understanding self-differentiation was becoming blurred. How could I grasp their pain and acknowledging my own? A day or so later, Pastor Bob called and asked me to have coffee with him.

"Bonnie," he said, taking my hands in his and looking me straight in the eyes. "How are you really doing?" I started to cry.

"I didn't expect this. I didn't expect people to be mad and sad and I didn't expect to feel so much loss. I thought my happiness about my new call would just cover it all."

"I suspected as much," he comforted. "Let's talk about it and tell me how it is going with your counselor."

We chatted for over an hour. He listened tenderly as I told him all the range of feelings: the dreams and hopes that didn't get realized while I was the pastor at St. Peter's, the possibilities I saw ahead for them, and the changes that might need to take place for them to enter a new day. I was reminded in that moment that I needed a shepherd. I needed someone to guide me. I realized too that I was annoyed at the conference for not providing more leadership and walking with me on this lonely path. Thank God that Pastor Bob was wise and loving and dared to challenge me to name my qualms! The journey was about to take a new turn!

CHAPTER 5

WE NEED A GUIDE!

The LAC met briefly on-line to discuss the results of the first meeting and to see if any changes were needed in the format or questions scheduled for the second gathering. Everyone felt comfortable moving forward as planned and were glad folks spoke up.

I was beginning to feel the ripples of the news hitting the community. Dr. Dicklitch, the Director of Community Relations at Franklin and Marshall College had sent me an email that echoed the comments and questions I was hearing from many folks. “Congratulations, but what an exceptional loss for our community! I have very much enjoyed working and interacting with you. You are a phenomenal presence and I feel blessed to have been able to work and learn from you.”¹ She went on to ask who would be taking my place on her board. While I was thrilled and surprised to realize her feelings for me, my heart sank at leaving my beloved work and community. My morning devotion had given some comfort but still I had the foreboding message that I was not going to be able to predict the outcomes of this journey. I had been given the book, *Jesus Calling* by Sarah Young. It is written as if Jesus is speaking directly to the reader and even though I did not find it theologically evocative, I often was uplifted. On this particular day, the reading was this:

¹ Susan Dicklitch, Email message to author, dated December 4, 2012.

Try to view each day as an adventure, carefully planned out by your Guide. Instead of staring into the day that is ahead of you, attempting to program it according to your will, be attentive to Me and to all I have prepared for you. Thank Me for this day of life, recognizing that it is a precious, unrepeatable gift. Trust that I am with you each moment, whether you sense My Presence or not. A thankful, trusting attitude helps you to see events in your life from My perspective. A life lived close to Me will never be dull or predictable. Expect each day to contain surprises! Resist your tendency to search for the easiest route through the day. Be willing to follow wherever I lead. No matter how steep or treacherous the path before you, the safest place to be is by My side.²

Wow! Those words were just what I needed to hear. Maybe I could use them when it was my turn to address the folks during our second meeting. Today I wondered what verses in the Bible had prompted the writer to pen these words. So I looked up the passages listed at the bottom of the reading. I was a bit perturbed to see that the author seemed to pick them out of the blue. She had chosen I Peter 2:21 and that verse fit the thought for the day well, but whoa, the whole pericope is talking about Christ's suffering. I slammed the Bible shut and quickly got ready to go to church. How was thinking of Christ's suffering going to cheer me up? How was this good news to the people?

I liked the part about a new adventure. I reveled that each day would be full of surprises. I liked good surprises! Ah but wait...*resist your tendency to search for the easiest route through the day.*³ Okay, so maybe there were a lot of theological underpinnings here that I had chosen to ignore. Her devotional certainly was smashing its relevance in my face. "Here we go, God," I breathed, "get me through this day." All I could see was that I needed a good walking stick and a great guide to help me traverse the rough terrain of this path!

The service went well and folks seemed more settled than in previous weeks. The children were actively engaged in the liturgy, presenting their song with hand chimes and

² Sarah Young, *Jesus is Calling* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Inc., 2004), 14.

³ *Ibid.*, 14.

they sat close to me during children's time. I was comforted and breathed a prayer of thanks.

Diane was the leader of this second session and there was no survey. There were forty-two people in attendance. Several non-members who attended worship sporadically, were invited to join the meeting and did so. This added some depth to the dialogue as it gave the LAC and me the chance to see how we were viewed "from the outside."

This session was to be the beginning of leading us from despair to acceptance. The committee believed that recalling some of our past history together would be a good way to engage folks in seeing the whole journey and not just this crossroad. During the session with the committee, I had invited them to explore the notion that the children of Israel, as they were constantly wandering, were always remembering their past, reiterating where God had led them. The Psalms are full of retelling and praising God for the past. The Israelites gained strength by remembering. Perhaps this could do the same for us.

The first questions, *What is different about the church since Pastor Bonnie came? How have we changed? How has Bonnie changed?* ended up being a great time of affirmation for me. Right off the bat, one of the visitors asked if Pastor Bonnie could answer it first. Diane explained that I would address the questions *after* the congregation had discussed them.

The answers were quite varied and made me glad. What I heard lined up with what I had intended to do when I answered their call. My calling and vision had been realized! Perhaps I would come out of this unscathed after all! One person recalled her own spiritual growth.

I have never been so aware of my spiritual journey. The Road to Vitality⁴ also had a lot to do with it and she was a real champion of it. It was a boost in our lives. I think very often people come to church and make a commitment and think that's it. I certainly am better about having devotions every day since she came to us.⁵ This was the comment from one of the leaders. Others described the Capital

Campaign project and the ministry to refugees. The mood was one of happiness and delight.

The second question slowed the pace a bit as members were asked to recall those times that were difficult. *What are the most challenging things we faced during this time?* When the committee had decided to include this question I wondered at the time if it would open up a sea of complaints, especially about me. However, what evolved was once again the truth laid bare for us all to see.

The parishioners named those past times when we grieved the deaths of cherished members. One youth spoke up about the struggle of not having other people her age and the dilemma that brought as we tried to build our confirmation program. Although the people named a few challenges, they quickly began to name again the successes and how we dealt with the challenges. It appeared that folks did not want to linger in the hurts of the past. Diane did not rush the folks in this process and she asked several times, "is there anything else you want to say?" before she moved on.

Diane asked for more specificity when she opened up the dialogue to include highlights of my tenure with them. Not surprisingly, the puppet I use, Elder Mouse, won the day. I am not really a puppeteer and on my first day with this church I had brought the puppet for family time. Elder Mouse became a prominent figure. He often spoke of sticky wickets and addressed what people were thinking but afraid to say. When there were no

⁴ Road to Vitality was a program sponsored by the United Church of Christ to help grow small churches.

⁵ Appendix, 106

children present, Elder Mouse spoke specifically to the adults. Someone made the comment, “Isn’t it interesting that we are talking about Elder Mouse as one of us?”

Even though I had known people enjoyed the puppet, this conversation startled me. I realized just how much teaching had happened through the use of a puppet. I became aware at *that* moment that folks were commenting on the many ways that learning happens and I had stumbled on to something that parishioners considered a “highlight!” This is not exactly what I expected but the significance of Elder Mouse was borne out over and over again as they discussed our life together. At one time I had even asked my pastoral relations committee if Elder Mouse should take a hiatus and they emphatically said no. Even as I was preparing to leave them, they were teaching me.

I also became aware that this process of looking where we *had* been was more than just reflecting. It too was shaping who we were. Some of the elderly who often said very little began to talk about what they perceived was crucial to them in my pastorate. This was the first time I heard some of them comment about my ministry with them. “She was with me when my husband died and that was the best thing. She stayed with me until the end. I don’t know if anyone else can ever take her place.” These were the words of an eighty year old who seldom acted as if she ever heard anything I said. She came faithfully to church, gave faithfully but never participated in small groups or outreach. She was vocal that she didn’t like my altar décor. She felt we asked for too much help for others and she disliked the drums. There were times when I wondered if she even liked me. Yet here she was, crying and telling her story.

Diane then asked them to speak of their disappointments. This was similar to the challenges question so there were not many comments. Most of the responses had to do with the fact that we were still a small church.

The folks at St. Peter's are quite creative and the committee wanted to test the waters to see how they reacted to change. *Is there something about the way we do things that you never thought we would be doing* was then put forth to the group. Personally, there were no surprises for me in their answers. I had negotiated these changes over the years and I was well aware of the trouble spots, the joyous acceptances and the stumbling blocks. They were able to articulate that having a woman pastor was a big deal for some. One of the parishioners recalled that her father was one of only two "no" votes when I was called there. "He said he would never have a woman pastor, but Pastor Bonnie, you won him over. He loved you and he left a big part of his money to this congregation because of you. If Dad can change, anyone can change!" Laughter filled the room as everyone knew who she was talking about and they agreed with her. I remembered Ted with fondness and was glad I had had the opportunity to be a pastor to him.

At this point Diane turned the meeting over to me. "People are eager to hear what you have to say about your time with us," she said. I stepped up to the podium my heart filled with gratitude for this place, these people and this time. The comments about Ted had touched me deeply and I took a moment to gather my thoughts.

This was a precious occasion for me as I was able to share both the joys and challenges I experienced. Folks nodded as I revealed some of my insights about myself.

I am learning to listen more and preach from my own heart. In the early years I did a great deal of study and commenting about what other scholars had to say about the scriptures. Now (especially due to a doctoral class) I still do the study, but I

spend time asking *what is God saying to me and us* through this passage. You keep telling me I am a good preacher and so I am trying to claim it.⁶

My day had begun with the words in my morning devotion telling me to “resist your tendency to search for the easiest route through the day.”⁷ I was beginning to see that the uncharted waters of saying goodbye could contain some calm seas as well as the ocean’s roar. The meeting adjourned with folks in fairly good spirits.

The Lay Advisory Committee met to review how our process was going. I opened the meeting with prayer and then we checked in with one another. “How are we all doing in this transition?” I asked.

“I am sometimes depressed about it,” Kathy offered. “I do see this whole transition as a challenge rather than a burden though.”

“The session last week was very helpful. I am glad so many people spoke up. I think it helps to heal our broken hearts a little to share with each other,” Shirley added.

Dick was well aware of all the challenges ahead and his statements shifted folks to his thinking. “It helps us to get ready. It lays the ground work for what we need to do in the coming days.”

Here the tone took a decidedly different turn as the group became aware of their looming deadline to find a pastor. “I’m angry with Penn Central Conference,” Diane said. “They don’t know this congregation and they are just laying down rules and guidelines that have nothing to do with us. They still have not sent someone to meet with us.”

Dick chimed in to repeat what he had said in earlier sessions. “We don’t need a self-study. We know ourselves. That is evident in what we are hearing folks say to us.

⁶ Appendix, 110.

⁷ Young, 14.

Anyway, the polity of the church lies within the local congregation and so we can move ahead without the conference if we decide to do so.”

At this point I was aware that they were headed on what was next for them without me, and I needed to get us back on track with the project. That ole nagging thing of trying to guide them, knowing I had to part ways with them on who would follow me, was tugging again. I decided not to change too abruptly as I could sense the hurt in the room.

“What are *your* hopes and fear for the church? I know they were discussed last week in the group session but it sounds like this is where it really hits you.” I looked at Diane since she seemed to be frustrated.

“I’m afraid the refugee program will go down in flames without your leadership. The refugees love you. You are the key force in our community – the spokesperson for them all. You dare to step out and advocate for them even when your plate is full. How are we going to replace that? First of all, no one has your connections with them. That’s one of the greatest things we have done here. It has changed us all and now it could all fall flat.”

I was stunned. I had not heard Diane ever speak with such force or even acknowledge my work. She had been a leader in the work herself and I often praised her and her husband for the many hours they put in assisting the refugees but she had never once before told me what I was now hearing.

“Oh Diane,” I said. “Thank you but I assure you, this ministry will go on if you know this is what God wants you all to do. Something this great doesn’t die when one person leaves.”

“She’s right,” Shirley piped in. “Bonnie has a strong group of volunteers behind her. Besides, she wrote that grant so we can pay the supervisor.” Shirley was referring to a grant I had written for us to pay for a university student to work in our program. I had designed a job for a volunteer coordinator, and it was to be paid with this grant. The university assured me they wanted to continue with this program in the future and they thought they would have money to fund it even if I did not receive another grant.

I noticed that the evening was getting late and we still needed to discuss our future meetings. We prepared the agenda for the next meeting with the congregation and discussed the litany for the final service. The original idea had been that the congregation would help write the liturgy at each of our communal gatherings but this did not come to fruition. The team decided that a few of them would work with me on that service. We would take ideas from the sessions and incorporate them into the liturgy. We closed in prayer and went home with heavy hearts. I was fully aware that the grieving would continue through each step. I thought Ross’ description of the stages of grief were only partly right. Yes, we go through those stages of denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance but not necessarily in that order.⁸ Grief is fickle I think. It comes when you least expect it and it doesn’t touch you the same way each time. I was now feeling sad for them, rather than myself. They needed a guide for the future and it wasn’t going to be me!

⁸ Elizabeth Kubler Ross, *On Death and Dying* (Routledge, 1969)

CHAPTER 6

REPLENISHG THE BACKPACKS: BEHIND THE SCENES WORK

Suddenly, I was at a juncture that neither fit the plan of the LAC or my project outline. I felt the need to begin to meet with folks. This was not part of the project with my LAC and I did not find info anywhere that recommended meeting with folks to help them walk through their pain on an individual basis. Odd, isn't it, when we assume in our pastoral role we are to walk with those who grieve and yet in this particular setting, we are not encouraged to set aside time to do this? I was learning that this was an important part of saying goodbye. So I began in a small way.

“Hey, Pastor B,” I heard my name being yelled across the room where our church had set up a stand at the Franklin and Marshall College during their ecumenical days. “It’s us – Ashley and Shannon.” Two beautiful girls bounced over and began to hug me enthusiastically. “It’s not true is it? You are not really leaving to go to California? It’s a joke, right?” They looked at me quizzically.

“Yes, it’s true,” I answered.

“Oh no, who is going to be our leader at English classes? Who is going to help us figure out where to put everybody and find paper and pens and take people to the clinic?”

“It will be fine,” I assured them. “Emily is going to head up the program until May and by then I’m sure they will have a new pastor. Don’t worry, you gals can carry it on by yourselves if you have to!”

They chatted a bit more then hugged me and left still arm in arm.

“Who were they?” Nancy asked. Nancy is one of our parishioners and was helping to staff our booth for the morning.

“They are college students and awesome volunteers at our refugee program,” I answered.

“They seemed a little frightened by your leaving, didn’t you think?” Nancy asked.

“Oh they will be fine. Besides surely you will have an interim or something by then.”

Nancy frowned. “Pastor Bonnie, it’s the first week of February and we haven’t even put any feelers out there. Consistory members reported that the conference office is not helping and so they just set up a committee to meet this week to figure out what to do. I’m certainly not as optimistic as you are.”

I gently put my hand on her arm. “I know you are worried Nancy and yet I believe God will not leave you nor forsake you. There’s a Bible verse somewhere that says that, remember?”

“Oh yeah, right. That’s supposed to make me feel better? I’ll feel better when we get someone on the payroll!”

We turned to wait on students as they came by to visit our table. I enthusiastically told them all about our ministry to refugees, the Divinity Café directed to folks their age, our eclectic worship and the awesome Christian Ed opportunities. Nancy hung back and watched me.

“You know, you are pretty out there about St. Peter’s. How do you even know any of this will exist once you leave?”

“Nancy, we have to keep telling the good news about our church. It’s not going to go away because I am leaving. Who knows, someone will probably come along and knock your socks off!”

She didn’t answer as we were again interrupted with students. I was a little worried now as I attempted to talk to students. Was Nancy right? Did I really have the authority to promise something that might not be there? Still, I did believe the church would carry on, stronger than before. How could I help her and others see this?

We finished our shift and walked back to the church together. “You know, I’ve been thinking about what you said back there, and maybe it would help if we talked more about this in some small groups. What do you think?”

“Oh yes, the woman’s group is all a buzz about it. Some of them are thinking of finding another church now.” Nancy looked alarmed. “Hey, why don’t you come to our women’s meeting this week and we will just call it a ‘chat session with Pastor B?’ I’m the one who is planning this week’s agenda and we only have a little business. I’ll get the word out on the grapevine that you will be there. I think that would be so helpful. You always have a way of turning us around and helping us believe in ourselves.”

Thursday came in a hurry and I had spent a great deal of time preparing to meet with the women. While I wanted it to be an open session where they could share anything, I wanted to ground them in scripture and their vision for the church. I immediately thought of the story of Ruth and Naomi and how hard their parting was.¹ I quickly decided against that as Ruth chose to go with Naomi. Phew!

¹ *Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version, Book of Ruth* (Iowa Falls, World Bible Publishers, 1989)

I was already preparing the final sermon text from Philippians 1:6 about Paul's words to the disciples. "I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ."² This just did not seem the right text for these ladies either but I felt compelled to begin to help people turn to God and the scriptures for strength. While meetings and committees could solve logistics, the soul work needed to take priority.

Thursday with the women's group arrived all too soon and I joined them in the cozy Phillips room. This was a group I had come to love dearly. They were as different as could be and they prided themselves on eating junk food when they got together. I'm serious. They had potato chips, chocolate, cheese curls, soda, pretzels, cupcakes and odds and ends they had each brought from home. I had a flash-back of my first meeting with them seven years ago. They had invited me to the meeting but said, "You can come if you want, but we don't need you to do anything. We've got it under control." They meant it too. I was lucky if they gave me five minutes to make an announcement. Over the years, though, they would ask me to join them and then quiz me about what was going on. I chided them once about being gossipers and they said, "It's good gossip, Pastor Bonnie, let it be."

So here I was surrounded by these deadly snacks and a room full of women who looked like they had just come from a funeral. Nancy cleared her throat. "I asked Pastor Bonnie here today so maybe she can talk with us about what is going on. Let's hold our business meeting till the end." The women nodded and I took my seat as they handed me a plate full of junk food.

²*Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version* (Iowa Falls, World Bible Publishers, 1989), Philippians 1:6

“You know, I’ve been thinking. It probably seems like things have been going along fine until now and all of a sudden your church world is turned upside down.” I looked around at these octogenarians. They mumbled “ah hahs” and nodded. “So why don’t we start with you telling me what you’re feeling and then let me tell you what I’ve been thinking.”

As was predictable they all started talking at once. Some to each other and some to me. “Wait a minute, one at a time.” They laughed and said okay.

For the next twenty minutes I heard their fears in detail. Who was going to bury them and preside at their funeral? Who would come visit them at the hospital? Who would take them to the store when no one else was around? Who would see that they had a ride to church or pick them up for book club? Who would see that they picked up their hearing device on a Sunday morning BEFORE they got in the pew?

I let them ramble and my lips were trembling. “I love you all so much. I thought this was going to be easy, but you know what? You are going to be fine. I really believe this. I believe God sent me here for a season and now it is time to move on. I am leaving with a heart full of gratitude but God is still here.”

They all knew I loved to tell stories so I said to them, “Let me tell you a story. I think we will find ourselves in it.” I proceeded to tell them the story of the children of Israel being led by Moses. I made it as dramatic as possible. They were rapt with eagerness and listened attentively. I described how Moses started out not even wanting to lead the people but he did it, even when they grumbled and complained. The children of Israel and Moses had become a family. Yet God was not going to let Moses lead them to the Promised Land. I took a lot of liberties with the story but I described what it must

have felt like to the children of Israel to lose their leader. God knew this and God was compassionate and chose another person to finish the good work Moses had begun.

I pulled out my Bible and in a hushed voice I read

Then Moses summoned Joshua and said to him in the sight of all Israel: Be strong and bold, for you are the one who will go with this people into the land that the Lord has sworn to their ancestors to give them; and you will put them in possession of it. It is the Lord who goes before you. He will be with you; he will not fail you or forsake you. Do not fear or be dismayed.³

I paused and stood up and walked behind each one as I spoke and put my hands on their shoulders. “My sweet, dear sisters, do you not know that God will also be with you? God will not fail you. We can take our fears to God for God goes before us. God will make the path clear in time. We can trust this God who led the children of Israel, who has led me and has led your families all these years. This church had stood and been a light on this corner of the city for over one hundred years and I don’t think God is going to stop blessing it now.”

The sniffles began and the tissues appeared as the tears flowed ever so slightly, hidden but still present. These were not women who wore their feelings on their sleeves. “I told you she would cheer us up,” Nancy said which I felt was ironic given that they were all sitting there in tears.

“We just need to have faith,” Marilyn muttered. “Lots of faith.”

We spent the rest of the time talking about what kind of leader they wanted and how they could tell the leadership about it. I encouraged them to pray daily, to speak up about their needs and share with each other. Perhaps they ought to meet weekly during this time. “Are you kidding?” Alice said, “We don’t have enough junk food for that!” We all burst out laughing and I think God was smiling.

³*Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version* (Iowa Falls, World Bible Publishers, 1989), Deuteronomy 31: 7 & 8.

That day I decided that I would be more intentional about meeting with folks in small groups and individually. I was going to cling to the scriptures and pray with them. The focus needed to shift from the woes to the confidence that God is still speaking.

In the following weeks, the elderly women seemed to find their voice. They spoke out in the congregational meetings. One of them asked to be on the search committee. Another volunteered to help with the refugee outreach and I could sense God's comforting presence among us.

Joyce Rupp in her book, *Praying Our Goodbyes: A Spiritual Companion through Life's Losses and Sorrows* reminds us that one of the ways we move on is by recognizing the hurt.

We all need to learn how to say goodbye, to acknowledge the pain that is there for us so that we can eventually move on to another hello. When we learn how to say goodbye, we truly learn how to say to ourselves and to others: "Go, God be with you. I entrust you to God. The God of strength, courage, comfort, hope, love is with you. The God who promises to wipe away all tears will hold you close and will fill your emptiness. Let go and be free to move on. Do not keep yourself from another step in your homeward journey. May the blessing of the God of autumn be with you."⁴

It was then that I knew I was making another huge step in letting go and preparing myself to move to California with a blessed goodbye. I was making sure we had the tools for our journey.

⁴ Joyce Rupp, *Praying our Goodbyes: A Spiritual Companion through Life's Losses and Sorrows* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 2009), 13.

CHAPTER 7

WHAT IS AROUND THE BEND? FEARS AND HOPES

We arrived in the social hall after the worship service ready to start our third meeting with the congregation. “Pastor Bonnie,” Kathy moved closely to me, her eyes red from crying. “I’m supposed to lead this session but I just can’t do it. Every time I talk about your leaving, I just start crying. Can Diane lead it? I’ll take notes if you like.”

“Oh Kathy, of course. Let’s check in with her and see what she thinks. Anyone on the team can do it.” We approached Diane and she was happy to do it.

“I think I’m going to use newsprint today,” Diane replied. “This way folks can see what is listed. Kathy can you take notes so Pastor Bonnie has them for her project and for us to review?”

Kathy agreed and we gathered the folks. Just as we were ready to start, Shirley stood up. “I have an announcement to make and I think you are going to like what I have to say. The consistory put together a search team and we have decided to hire an interim until we can do a little more work on what kind of leader we need. We have a few names already and so I think we will have someone in place to preach and make pastoral care calls when Pastor Bonnie leaves in March. It will be a part time position so now I hope you all can rest a little easier knowing we have things in the works.”

Everyone clapped and Diane thanked Shirley for her hard work. “Shirley has done a great job and she has done it without any help from the conference. We could not get anyone to meet with us so the committee is working faithfully. Now let’s move ahead for

today. It's a good topic for us at this particular time. We are going to talk about some of our fears. Let's just say what they are, popcorn style. Speak up as you want."

The room was quiet for a moment and then one of the elderly folks spoke up. "I'm afraid the church will close because we won't have enough people or finances." Murmurs of agreement could be heard around the room. Diane wrote the words on the newsprint and waited.

"What will happen to groups who meet here if we close? What will happen to our ministries?" another person piped up. It seemed to me that there were already beginning to plan their own funeral. Wow! Did I just think that? Didn't I say earlier that this was like going to a viewing? This whole idea of grieving and death hangs on and I just can't embrace it! Why doesn't Diane get them off this topic? It's a good thing I am not allowed to speak now!

"What would happen to our church building?" George Kunkel asked. "My family and Kathy's family, we have practically built this church, going way back. We are actually meeting in Kunkel Hall."

I thought to myself, "Oh, here we go again, it's all about the building." I never could help them understand that bricks and mortar are less important than leaving a legacy of ministry. No one told me this would crop up now. "Besides, it's an OLD building," I screamed inside.

They continued to name their fears. "I'm afraid members will leave, existing members won't be together, who will be leading and what will we be led to do?"

"I am depressed over the losses."

The room grew quiet again after that statement and Diane nurtured it with her thoughtful poise. “Is there anything else we want to add to our list of fears?” she prodded gently.

“How about we get to the hopes?” Bill Marshall suggested.

Laughter erupted and someone said, “Yes, let’s move on, this is way too sad for me!” Yes, I was certainly ready to move on. This was reminiscent of the time when I first arrived there seven years ago. I had been so full of energy and vision back then. Could they recapture it without me? I was sure they could! Had I not taught them anything? Yikes, here I am thinking about me again. This is hard!

“So what do we hope will happen with our ministry in the future?” Diane stood ready with her marker to make the new list.

“Stay open for families who need our support, and for young families who come here now and for all our neighbors.”

At that moment folks starting clapping. “Yeah!” someone yelled. The atmosphere changed almost immediately. Some of the children had been playing in the corner came over to see what was happening. I suddenly felt like I was at a pep rally.

They eagerly continued to name their hopes, almost clamoring over each other to speak. “We will not give up.”

“Hey, maybe we could sell the building but still worship here. Since we fixed it up it can be used for lots of things. We already have a connection with Franklin and Marshall College through Pastor Bonnie and we could continue that.”

“Yes, we could somehow make that connection more visible.” This list continued: “have activities for families and children, be open to new and different ways of doing

ministry, St. Peter's could become the teaching church for the seminary again, let's think outside the box. We could have social venues, kind of like our current Divinity Café but maybe have café prior to our services."

The group began to discuss some of these options. They talked about where people could meet, who would be invited, what age group to target. I was smiling from the inside out. They DO have a vision. They DO know what they want in ministry. They ARE sensing God's call. It wasn't just in their words, it was in the enthusiasm as they spoke.

"I hope for great spiritual leadership," Pastor Bob put in.

"Well that's a given," his wife added.

"I hope for spiritual leadership," Brian added and "great music like we have now!"

"Yep," five year old Stella added. "We have to have rain sticks and drums and hand chimes with Dr. Daryl."

No one corrected her that Dr. Daryl was no longer going to be there. She ran over to me and crawled on my lap. "I drew a picture for you." It was picture of Daryl and me and Jesus. She had drawn a picture of herself crying and beside it a person with their hands up in the air as if to say "what now?" "I'm sad," she whispered to me.

"Me too," I answered as I stroked her long hair. "I am really going to miss you."

"Will you write to me?" she asked.

"Yes I surely will," I said. Stella had arrived with her missionary parents who were on furlough in the United States and our congregation had provided housing, food,

clothing, toys and welcome. Stella had become quite attached to me and this was going to be a very difficult separation.

I suddenly remembered the instructions about pastors leaving. In studying materials for my doctorate, I had come across a detailed paper regarding the ending of pastoral ministry at a particular place. I had just crossed the boundaries. I thought the United Church of Christ asks the pastor who is leaving to have no contact whatsoever with any previous parishioner until the new pastor has been there for a year.

My own denomination, had been little help in the process of closure with a congregation. They had some instructions on how to tell them, but there was a scarcity in material that gave suggestions on the many nuances of the transition. I found a marvelous guide on line from the Central Florida Presbytery. It was titled, *Separation Ethics: When Pastor and Congregation Say Goodbye.*¹ When I read it I thought it was wise and thorough. Now I wasn't so sure. Its clarity jolted me.

When a pastor accepts a call to a ministry a distance from the current congregation, questions arise as to what is appropriate and helpful to the congregation and the interim and subsequent pastors. **It is always incumbent upon the departing pastor to make sure that parishioners know that her or his relationship with the congregation has ended.** This is necessary in order that the congregation be free to make the adjustments necessary for changes of leadership, both interim and permanent, without the departing pastor's influence.²

Wow! I had just promised Stella to write to her. But wait, she's only visiting here with her parents. She's not a permanent member. That would make it okay right? Besides, she's a child! What is that going to hurt? It will hurt her more if I just dropped off the planet!

¹Central Florida Presbytery. "Separation Ethics: When Pastor and Congregation Say Goodbye." <http://www.cfpresbytery.org>, (accessed February 2012).

² Ibid., 2.

Elsewhere in the paper it stated, “The pastor is the one in the professional leadership role and therefore, the one who has the responsibility for making sure that the separation that occurs is anticipated and carried out with foresight and effectiveness.”³

Okay, I screwed up. I’ll worry about that later. Right now this squirming child on my lap needs assurance. Pastoral care comes first!

I snapped back to reality as I heard Diane laughing. “We have certainly come full circle, haven’t we?” she asked. “We named our fears and then we started planning. You didn’t just name your hopes, you are ready to work on them.”

“That’s right,” Shirley cheered and put her fist up in the air. “God is not done with us yet. As Pastor Bonnie always says, ‘It’s a new day!’”

Diane called me to speak and asked if there was anything I wanted to add. I was still reeling from the reality that I had just broken a cardinal separation rule and wasn’t ready to say much.

I looked around the room and smiled at everyone. “You all have done some great work! This is exciting.”

“What are your fears and hopes?” Pastor Bob yelled from the back of the room where he was now getting coffee.

“Me? I don’t think it’s appropriate for me to answer that. This journey has to go on without me.”

“No, I mean, what are your fears and hopes for YOUR ministry?” he answered back, grinning. Pastor Bob, always pulling me to reach into my own soul and find what is happening there. He was not going to let me deny this walk.

“Yeah,” Brian piped in. “We want to hear what you plan to do.”

³ Ibid.,4.

This was totally unexpected, but suddenly there they were, all looking at me and waiting eagerly for a reply.

So I told them my fears, how I was sad about leaving my family and friends. I was fearful that the people might not like me, that I might be too radical for them. I was afraid that I would be so lonely without all my refugee folks who constantly opened me to diverse ways of living, eating and thinking. “It’s a pretty white, middle class, rural America where I am going,” I told them. “No fast food joints, no chain stores in Murphys and everybody knows everything. Maybe Daryl and I won’t have any privacy.”

It’s odd as I think about it now, but they became quiet and a gentleness fell over the space.

“But,” I said, “I’m excited too about what God is calling me to do. The church is right in the town and I envision walking downtown and doing evangelism every day. I will hopefully find a place to live where I can walk to church and meet parishioners and perspective members in the local coffee shops. They want me to be involved with youth so I hope to start a youth group there again and I’d love to grow the membership.”

“Will you miss us?” Patty asked. Patty was a nonmember who had been coming to church sporadically but a person whom I counseled fairly regularly on her spiritual path. She was a Buddhist but intrigued by my love of Jesus and always showed up at important meetings and decision time. Once she told me that this was her sacred space and after all she was Ted’s daughter (the story in chapter 5).

“Of course I will miss you all.” I choked up. “Actually a part of you will always be with me. Hopefully I will take the lessons you have taught me into the next parish. I

will remember the wise ways you challenged me and loved me amid all the changes. I just hope my new parish is as flexible as you all are.”

“Not a chance,” Bill Marshall said wryly. “You trained us well, Pastor B.”

I closed my remarks by thanking them for asking me to share this. “It means a lot to me that you care about where I am headed. It’s this kind of generous spirit that God will use to grow your church when I am gone.”

Diane came back to the podium and reminded me that the hour was getting late and folks needed to get home. She reminded everyone of the next meeting and asked Pastor Bob to close in prayer.

“Let’s gather in a circle and hold hands.” Pastor Bob then prayed in his ever soft and gentle way, thanking God for the good meeting and for me. As usual, Kathy and I left the meeting crying together.

I was extremely sentimental by now and in everything I did, I wondered if it would be the last time. As I walked to my car and saw the flags representing the different countries of our refugees, I sobbed at the losses I was bearing. It reminded me of my son Chad’s death and how in the immediate months following his funeral I saw everything differently. I cried easily, memories were triggered by the most insignificant things and every taste and smell conjured up a treasure that I was losing.

I had been resisting this transition as a death, as a necessary time to grieve, but here it was, incredibly similar to the death of my beloved son. Is it any wonder that I was tender and a bit raw? “**God, have mercy**” I begged as I left the parking lot for one of the last times.

CHAPTER 8

MOVING THROUGH THE SADNESS: JOURNEY TO HOPE

The LAC met on February 5 to review our process and prepare for our final meeting with the congregation. We began as usual with checking in about how things are going in this time of transition. Pastor Bob immediately spoke up which was unusual for him. Ordinarily he waited until everyone else had an opportunity to speak and then shared briefly.

“The worship service and communion was a very emotional time for me,” he offered sadly. “Standing by you and knowing it would be the last time we serve communion together was almost unbearable but it was good also. I liked that you used the Jeremiah passage and you referred to Jesus leaving the disciples. It helped put things in perspective for me.”

“I agree,” said Dick. “Most of the people were crying. I have no idea how we are going to get through your last service with us.”

“I think, though, that the service was really good. It was good for me and this whole process has been so helpful in working through the grief.” Pastor Bob smiled at me.

I had chosen Jeremiah 1:1-4 and used the passage to help them see that God is with us every step of the way.

Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations. Then I said, Ah Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak for I am only a boy. But the Lord said to me, Do not say for I am only a boy; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and

you shall speak whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord.¹

I challenged them to remember that we are all called to be ministers for God and

God is going to be with us every step of the way. I reminded them that Jesus said the same thing to his disciples when he was preparing to leave them. The liturgy was especially moving as I constructed it to guide them to forge ahead. We sang *Be Now My Vision* and we ended on *We Are Marching in the Light of God*.²

Many folks had stayed after the service during coffee hour and discussed the sermon, the songs and what it meant to them. Oh I am really going to miss St. Peter's congregational life! Unlike any other church I had known, they hung out afterwards and visited with each other and engaged in dialogue about the worship among many other things.

The other members concurred with Dick and Pastor Bob that the service was quite appropriate for the season of saying goodbye we are in and then we moved on to plan the coming weeks. They had been reading the "narrative of opportunity" that I had written for my doctoral project and so we spent some time discussing it.

"This has been really helpful," Diane stated. "I like seeing if what we are doing is fitting in with your vision of this process and it seems like it is."

The discussion ensued about how none of them had ever heard of a congregation going through an intentional process of saying goodbye to their pastor *with that* pastor. They seemed delighted that they were part of a 'new thing'.

¹ *Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version*, Iowa Falls, World Bible Publishers, 1989. Jeremiah 1:4-8

² See bulletin in appendix, 139-147.

We spent some time talking about the last group meeting and again the members of the committee were very pleased at how folks were deeply engaged in the process. “Even the children and youth are participating,” Shirley added. “That goes to show they feel they have a voice.”

“Yes, that’s cool isn’t it?” asked Diane. “Although they are really sad and we have to talk about it every week in Sunday School. I didn’t quite expect that.”

“Me neither,” I chimed in. “Do you think I should come to the class and spend some time with them?”

“Well, we have a little special time set up for us to be with you so that’s okay. It’s supposed to be a surprise,” she whispered.

“Okay, I’ll keep your secret,” and we laughed together. It was nice to have some fun again, to have a bit more lighthearted discussion. I was beginning to feel like we were over the roughest patch.

“Well, just so you know,” Shirley began, “we are interviewing a person for the interim position and I am very excited about it. If this works out, she can start right when we need her.”

“Who is it?” Kathy asked.

“Wait,” I jumped in. “I don’t think we can discuss this while I am here. Do you want me to leave the room so you can talk about it?”

“No,” Dick answered. “Bonnie is right. We cannot have this discussion now and especially not until the search committee has met and is ready to make some sort of announcement.”

The news however seem to lift their spirits and we reviewed the questions for our final meeting. Brian was going to be the leader and Diane was going to take notes. We took some time to review the material for the future meeting with Dr. Mason, my seminary advisor. They all were very excited to be part of this project and were looking forward to the visit by Dr. Mason very much. I passed out the forms and asked them to review them and fill in the answers before we met with Dr. Mason on February 22.³

They asked if they had to write them, or could answer them orally. I suggested that perhaps they at least want to jot some thoughts down and I would take notes when we were with Dr. Mason so I would have them for my final paper. Kathy stated that she was very interested in hearing what everyone else had to say. "I've been glad I am part of this. I had no idea it would have such a big impact on all of us," she offered.

I told them that Dr. Mason would be interviewing us as a group and that I would be present too. "Please feel free to say whatever you want though," I said.

They laughed. "Your presence never stopped us before," Dick commented.

We discussed the litany for the final service. I shared some of my ideas and they offered to help. Pastor Bob offered to write a prayer, Dick was willing to be the liturgist and they decided to invite all the groups of refugees and the churches which I had nurtured. All of a sudden Shirley realized that the group attending the luncheon was going to be very large. "We also need some ethnic foods! Who is going to make all this?"

Dick volunteered his wife and I told them I was sure the Haitian church would help with the meal. We closed with prayer and left in good spirits.

³ Appendix, 148-152.

Our final meeting with the congregation involved using another survey and then discussing the question, *what could we now celebrate*. Dick and Pastor Bob passed out the surveys before any group participation evolved. Then Brian came forward and asked the group the first question: *How have your feelings about Pastor Bonnie's departure changed since the first time you heard the news?*

I found it interesting that the answers on the survey did not seem to reflect the upbeat mood that was evident in the discussion. Brian wrote the answers on the chalkboard and they are recorded in the appendix.⁴ The comments were all over the place. Some people thought they were less anxious, others said they were still just "sad" and didn't change at all, while others commented about my gifts and ministry to them. There was a good bit of humor in it as one person said, "Who is going to cook for us?" On the surface it might seem like an odd thing, but they loved to have fellowship meals and ironically, there were very few good cooks in the congregation. I love to cook and do it well so most of the time I prepared most of the food! I never gave it much thought until now because it was such an ordinary thing to do. A lot of the folks were elderly or on fixed incomes and so this was one offering I loved to give. *This was one more reminder that the process of working through the journey of saying goodbye revealed far more than our emotions, how to deal with them and what is next. Things that were habitual or ordinary suddenly became sacred and precious.* How was it that I never had training, input, and guidance on this stage of ministry? What an opportunity the seminary and my conference staff were missing by never thinking to hone in on the importance of this pathway.

⁴ Appendix, 117-118.

The second question, *What is your immediate anxiety* brought a lot of discussion which surprised me. Hadn't we already been through this before? The same questions, who will lead, what will happen to us, and then the movement to find solutions continued for quite some time. Brian was very patient with it but I was anxious to move to the celebration part! Again the dialogue brought forth far more comments and intensity than is seen in the survey answers. There seemed to be a willingness, mixed with the anxiety, to go forward on the tough road ahead.

The third question was intended to help the LAC and me discover if our process had made an impact and if so, did it help or hinder. *In what ways were the sessions beneficial? If they were not helpful, state why.*

Overwhelmingly the response was that having these meetings enabled folks to hear what each other was feeling. They identified that it let them know what was going on and gave them a chance to be heard. Most of the people felt quite positive about the meetings and even said it has helped them move forward. One person stated, "It is helping us let her (Bonnie) go."

Brian thanked everyone for being so open and honest and participating in the process. He then moved to question four, *What will you never forget about Pastor Bonnie's tenure here?* I remember feeling reticent about the committee asking this question but the LAC agreed it was the perfect way to celebrate my ministry there. They were right. We laughed and we cried as the people shared story after story. They did not seem to be in a hurry to get this meeting over although we had now been sitting for over an hour.

This was a most blessed time for me. I hope every pastor leaving a church, has such a time as this. I knew this congregation well. I had lived with them for seven years and yet they continued to surprise me on this day, identifying the things they loved about my ministry with them.

“We love your sermons.”

“I’ll never forget Elder Mouse.”

“I’ll never forget your singing prayers and other things.”

“I’ll always remember that you did everything. You modeled for us how to minister to others by jumping in wherever you were needed.”

“I will never forget your incredible hospitality, that you served peanut butter and jelly and tea to any homeless person who came to the door.”

What I learned was *the ministry we did together* was what they will miss the most. I cried for joy and for deep love for these wonderful people. I had been gifted beyond my wildest imagination. More than anything, they saw that I loved Jesus and they loved God too! They spoke of my pastoral care skills, my sense of humor, that darn puppet, (Elder Mouse, again,) my energy, my willingness to do whatever it took to get the work done and my enthusiasm for preaching and worship. Could any pastor ask for anything more? I think not, but yet it still went on as Brian asked question 5. *What can we celebrate together, even as she is leaving?* The power of this question is that it took the focus off me and onto them. It enabled them to think about the future with joy instead of sorrow. This is a group of people who know how to celebrate and their answers demonstrated this strongly. I have included the answers here because they are so powerful and reveal a church that is alive and well!

LOVE – one word, that says it all
I think she made us more aware of God in our daily lives.
We are making a difference in the community – a legacy of helping others
Our own faith journeys – our faith has grown
Divinity Café
God in our daily lives
Celebrate our bigger commitment in the community
I haven't been feeling very celebrative – I guess what doesn't kill you
makes you stronger.
Friendships
Even though her tenure is coming to a close, we are together we are
not divided and we have a great sense of togetherness
A strong, progressive faith – I would find it hard to find another
church that fits my faith – even another UCC –I'm not sure I
would find it.
We have the freedom to ask questions
We are firmly Christian but we have a broader experience to
accept other faiths
We are together in our diversities
Maybe we will lose weight – maybe we should look for another
minister who can cook!

The energy was thrilling and as they begin to describe what they could celebrate I knew they would be fine. They were planting a vision right before my eyes! The LAC was insightful in setting up the questions. The questions themselves opened the people to define who they are.

It's hard to believe that it could get any better but the last question, *How have you grown in the last eight years* was a gift unlike any other I was to receive. When I took my ordination vows in the United Church of Christ I promised to be faithful in preaching and teaching the gospel, in administering the sacraments and rites of the church and in exercising pastoral care and leadership.

This was my chance to have a report card of how I had done. Most denominations give an exit interview but this was far better. This was sitting with folks and hearing them

speaking unscripted about their faith journeys. It wasn't new to them to do this as we had small groups where we initiated these kind of conversations, but to say how you have grown in front of the whole congregation – that's amazing. Their answers reminded me why I became a pastor; their detailed description of the ways they had changed lit a fire within me all over again. It affirmed that it was time to go.

We had grown together. They said,

Through the Road to Vitality process there was an emphasis on spiritual practice and continuing group process.

We hadn't done that before. Even with a small church, having small groups is good.

Prayer groups that have evolved in Darkwood Brew and Panera Bread Book Club – she really blessed us in this way

A personal relationship that has changed. I helped Bonnie through tough times when she was a student. Then she became my pastor and colleague. I called on her as pastor and she called on me as colleague.

I've grown in my love of worship– especially musically through Daryl, and liturgically - living out and experiencing the church year as Pastor Bonnie has taught us about it.

I've grown through the Road to Vitality, in my prayer life and faith sharing.

I evangelize for example at the “weenie roast” I do things now - random acts of kindness.

I have a greater awareness of the lectionary and seasons of the church year.

At Christian education we have focused on the lectionary. I'm much more aware of it – sometimes during the week I prepare myself for the Christian season we are in and it is growing for me.

I used to think that following a lectionary was limiting- but I have come around to thinking back to a different way, every three years is good.

The worship service – Daryl and Bonnie craft it – with music that is seasonal. The worship feels right.

I am learning how to be generous and helpful.

Learning a lot from the Wednesday book club

Personally I have become more aware and sensitive to people who are down and out – like community meals we serve – you see people young and old – it has opened my eyes to the good and bad of that. Some are taking advantage and some are thankful.

I am more aware of the urban scene, I have become more willing to contribute my money and time.

The overflow shelter was an eye-opener – a mother and child came in -it was heart breaking

What is eye opening to me is all the people we serve – I am proud that we provide a place for people with addiction problems. I grew as I was informed.

Now it was my turn. Brian turned to me and said, “Okay, Pastor Bonnie, we want to know how you have grown. Did you learn anything?”

The group laughed and clapped for me as I stood up. I was in full tears by now. “I don’t know if I can speak right now. I did prepare something though because there were some things I surely want to tell you before I leave.”

“I have so much to celebrate! I have grown in ways that you do not even know. You have been my teachers too. You have been willing to do anything I have asked. You embraced my slogan, ‘It’s a new day’ when you were tempted to fall back into the ‘good ole days’ monologue again. Together we have dreamed and seen visions come true. We have dared to tread where others fear to tread; especially by having joint worship with other cultures and other faiths. Your generosity has been evident in both your lives and

your finances. I mean really, who would have thought we could raise a half a million dollars in one year?”

“You showed up at book clubs, prayer meetings, youth trips, outings with the refugees. You ate strange food and we tried to learn new languages. You prepared houses for others and some of you gave away so many of your dishes that you have no spare ones left. This is what I will celebrate! Your love, your faithfulness and your desire to follow Jesus. Your love for the church and each other is evident. This is what will keep you strong. I thank you for being the best sheep a shepherd could have ever. I love you.”

We cried and passed our tissues and then Pastor Bob gathered us in a circle for prayer. I don't remember what he prayed, I just knew I was on holy ground.

CHAPTER 9

THE JOURNEY CONTINUES: CELEBRATION

The LAC and I had met in January to discuss the events of the final celebration day. It was the fourth Sunday in Lent and the gospel text for the day was the story of the Prodigal Son. There was a suggestion that I didn't have to preach based on the lectionary but I explained to folks that the worship service was not about me. We were in the season of Lent and I wanted to keep us on track with our faith journey and observing the Christian year. It also seemed ironically fitting that we were in Lent – a time of inner examination and reflection. I believed this was especially apropos for a time of leaving.

They agreed and we decided that at the end of the service we would have a special time of blessing to send me on my way and propel them to the future. The committee wanted many different folks involved in this process and some of them wanted to speak. I asked if I could end my ministry with them the way I had begun it; with a processional of symbols and gift giving. They loved the idea and suggested we allow time for the refugees to speak if they desired.

One of the issues that arrived for us was whether or not to use the liturgy in the United Church of Christ for the time when a pastor leaves. The liturgy recommended by our conference comes from the Book of Worship. The minister is advised to say these words:

I thank _____(church name) , its members and friends for the love, kindness, and support shown me these last (number of years). I ask forgiveness for the mistakes I

have made. I am grateful for the ways my leadership has been accepted. As I leave, I carry with me all that I have learned here.

The people respond: We receive your thankfulness, offer forgiveness, and accept that you now leave to minister elsewhere. We express our gratitude for your time among us. We ask your forgiveness for our mistakes. Your influence on our faith and faithfulness will not leave us at your departure.

The minister responds: I forgive you and accept your gratitude, trusting that our time together and our parting are pleasing to God.

Then the Vows of release:

Leader: Do you, the members and friends of (local church) release (name of pastor) from the duties of (position)? *People:* we do, with the help of God. *Leader;* do you offer your encouragement for his/her ministry soon to begin as (position) of (location of ministry)? *People:* we do, with the help of God. *Leader:* (addressing the authorized minister: do you, (name) release this local church from turning to you and depending on you? *Authorized minister:* I do, with the help of God. *Leader:* Do you offer your encouragement for the continued ministry here and on the relationship with another who will come to serve? *Minister:* I do, with the help of God.¹

Following these questions come the witness of the Conference or Association. No one around the table had the least bit inclination to include that in our service.

This just didn't sit well with any of us. I did not like the formality of it, bereft of any of the tender, emotional, and pastoral ties I had made with the people. We forgave

¹ Book of Worship United Church of Christ (New York: United Church of Christ Office for Church Life and Leadership, 1986), 252-259.

each other whenever we needed to. None of us felt as if we needed some sort of all-encompassing absolution. We wanted this to be a true celebration.

“I just want to say goodbye and be thankful,” Shirley said. “I think it would be much more meaningful if we could all say it in our own way. That whole thing about releasing you is not helpful. Plus, I’m feeling pretty perturbed at the conference now anyway so I’m just ornery enough I want to create our own liturgy. But wait, is there some legal reason we need to do this the way they prescribe it?”

Shirley always did tell it like it was. She wasn’t bitter, but she wanted to make a point. The rest of the team immediately agreed with her. “Yes, I would like to choose my own words to bless you, Bonnie,” Pastor Bob added. “Really, you are going to California. I don’t think we are going to have any trouble releasing you from your duties to us. There is no legal issue here, the conference just is trying to make sure the transition is smooth and when the pastor leaves they relinquish their responsibilities.”

“This whole litany does not reflect who we have been together,” Dick offered. “This does not seem authentic to our life with each other. Bonnie, why don’t you write what you want to say, send it to us in email, we will write our responses and then let’s trust each other and go with it. It’s important that we let this be OUR service, not something someone else wrote.”

“I like that a lot better,” Kathy stated. “It’s going to be hard enough as it is to say goodbye, we might as well do it the way we want.”

“This will give a chance for the refugees and community representatives to be a part of it as well” commented Brian. “We need to think about the community too and not leave them out of this. Bonnie, you have meant a lot to these people and I know they will

want to say something to you. Plus we want them to know we are going to stand by them and this is our opportunity to say it.”

“I never thought of that,” added Diane, “but Brian is right. We just need to be prepared for the service to be really long. Remember Christmas Eve when the Bhutanese did their Hindu dance to baby Jesus? I thought we would never get out of there!”

We all laughed remembering how five different cultures came together that night as we celebrated Christ’s birth. One of the parishioners had left in a huff after an hour and a half and put a note in the offering plate which stated ‘this is not the St. Peter’s I know!’

We had commented back then that he obviously hadn’t attended in a very long time since we often had services in more than one language. “Do you think he will show up?” Shirley asked. “Maybe we better warn him.”

The group howled at that and I could sense joy in the room. We got back to work on planning who would be speaking, how the symbols would be brought in and then a few details about the meal. The group reiterated that they wanted this time too to reflect all our interactions with the refugees and the Hispanic church that met in our church and often held services with us.

The meal was a big deal though and I think I can accurately say that I have not read anything anywhere that talks about the details of the farewell meal in the instructions on how to leave a parish. Perhaps because we were mixing a number of ethnicities and wanted to be culturally sensitive, we worked hard on it. There were decorations to be set up, invitations to be mailed, dignitaries to notify, and lots of food to be prepared. The dinner following the service was a huge part of the celebration.

“Well, if we are moving from grief to celebration,” Diane suggested, “then let’s act like it and have a big party!” Diane was a person who always connected the dots, making sure tasks were completed and everyone was represented.

“We are,” Shirley assured her. “We’ve got the women’s group on it and they have it all set.”

I explained to the group that I wanted this service to be like bookends to my life with them. One of my strong beliefs is that my call to be a pastor is borne out of the wisdom and gifts I receive from others. The lessons life taught me, and the people who have been present throughout the years have helped form my theology and nurtured me to answer God’s call to the pastorate. When I was ordained at St. Peter’s, folks carried in symbols of my life. They were: an anthem composed by Daryl, a basin and towel, a Cherokee shawl, flowers, a stole, the Statement of Faith, and the Holy Bible.²

I wanted to end my life with them carrying in symbols of my ministry among the people. They loved the idea and when I began to describe the symbols I wanted to present, Kathy started to cry. “I don’t know how I’m going to get through this. I won’t be able to speak. Dick, can you do my part?”

“Well I don’t know that I’m going to get through it any better but I told Bonnie I want to meet with her during the week before she goes so I won’t really be saying my goodbye then. I want to do it in private, not before the whole congregation.” Dick had been a trusted colleague for many years and I had pastored him through some very tough storms in the last few years. We had bonded since he had been my professor at seminary and then I became his pastor.

² Appendix, 139-147.

“Let’s remember that it’s okay to cry at this part of the service,” I added. “We can take our time and do what needs to be done. This is a precious time for us.” Once again I was trying to be optimistic and guide them through the tough paths. I was keenly aware that while we would be celebrating, we would still be grieving.

We changed directions then and talked about all that would be included in this part of the celebration. We entitled this part of the service: *Liturgy of Blessing: Saying Goodbye and Beginning a New Holy Adventure*. As we wound down from the discussions, Brian said, “Wow, this seems too final doesn’t it? I mean, I knew it was coming, but now here it is. Are we really ready?”

“We have to be. No one will ever replace Bonnie but we have to move on. I hope Murphys knows that they are getting a real treasure.” With that comment Shirley came over and hugged me. “I love you. Never forget it.”

That seemed to be the signal for everyone to give hugs. The tears flowed freely again and then we started reminiscing about some of the fun times we had. Kathy started by telling how I had helped her with her college-aged daughter and how I also suggested she sing a solo. “I always wanted to sing a solo, but no one ever asked me until you did, Pastor Bonnie. And then Daryl came and helped me some more. My family can’t believe it. You know how they all show up when I am singing. You know me.” Kathy hung on to me tightly and just bawled.

“You will continue to sing, Kathy. God is still going to use you to bless others.” I lingered with her a bit and then moved on to each member of the team. We were able to cry and laugh and it felt like a healing service. I felt tugs at my heart that were sad but then we would burst out laughing at some crazy thing I had done or convinced them to

do. It was finally time to turn out the lights and go home. Only one more meeting with this team and that was with Dr. Mason for my project review. Oh how I loved them!

CELEBRATION DAY

“This is the day God has made,” I whispered to Daryl as he brought me my morning coffee.

“Let us rejoice and be glad in it,” he answered back. This had been our morning routine for many years now, to begin the day this way, quoting this scripture in response to one another.

“Today is the day, Daryl. I think I’m ready for it. My last time leading worship at St. Peter’s. Can you believe it? In some ways the time has flown since I announced I was leaving and in other ways, it has seemed like an eternity.”

“It’s going to be a tough day,” Daryl commented. “You are leaving and saying goodbye and I am staying for another few months. A mixed blessing. This way the congregation can focus totally on saying goodbye to you.” (Daryl was staying at St. Peter’s until the end of May since he was finishing his tenure as Dean of the Chapel and Music and Worship Professor at Lancaster Theological Seminary.)

“Yes, but I am ready. We have led the people through their grief and I think today will be a celebration. Besides, all my refugee friends will be there, and family and folks from the Ephrata Cloister Chorus. It’s going to be a grand reunion. I’m sure there will be tears, but it is time for me to move on.”

We arrived at the church in good time and folks were already busy preparing the space and taking food to the social hall for the meal after the service. I immediately

spotted friends from the professional choir in which I sang. This was going to be awesome! People from all walks of my life were here to celebrate and say goodbye.

The service did NOT start on time and we knew it wouldn't. Mixing other cultures and getting everyone to the church via many shuttles just pushed it back. We didn't care though and when the opening song began, we were in our places.

The Lenten theme served us well that day and I preached on the gospel text emphasizing that God's love is for everyone. How fitting for this day. Here we were gathered as one people in God's good earth.

When we began our Liturgy of Blessing, I was ready. The symbols I had gathered to give to the people were reminiscent of my life with them. I had asked specific individuals to carry them in during the processional and I received them as they came forward. Each symbol was then placed on a table in the chancel area.

Pastor Daniel Pierre was the first one to walk in and he carried the globe. Pastor Daniel was the pastor of the Haitian church that began in our building. I had met him four years earlier at a downtown meeting and he told me the Haitian population with whom he was ministering had no place to meet. I invited them to use our chapel and he graciously accepted. We had become fast friends and held services together at least four times a year. We also started a multicultural Sunday School together. Our congregation had given money to rebuild his home church in Haiti after the hurricane.

Pastor Bob brought in a blanket. It was a wailing blanket that had been given to me after my son died by a group of women who had started an organization to help families in the death of a child. I often kept the blanket in my office and shared it with people when they needed to wail. I wanted Pastor Bob to have it as he was going to be

the visitation pastor until they found a settled pastor. In addition to that, I had walked his family through a tragedy when his grandson tried to take his life and ended up in intensive care for weeks. That had bonded us in ways untold.

Diane Koon brought in a girl puppet. I took Elder Mouse with me but wanted to leave them with a tool for ministry with families. I didn't give her a name and when I passed her on to Diane I said, "You can name her as she finds her personality among you. Let her speak with humor and love."

Kevin was a man of Hispanic ethnicity whom I had baptized recently. He was a neighbor to our church and had started attending when his mother died. He carried in a pitcher of water, symbolizing new life in Christ.

Diane Brandt, was to be the interim pastor after I left. She had been one of my students when I taught the worship class at seminary and I was reassured that they were in capable and loving hands with Diane. She carried in the Holy Bible as a symbol of passing the preaching tasks to her.

Daryl, my loving husband, minister of music at St. Peter's, carried in a drum which we had purchased to leave with them. Most of the musical instruments we used in our parish belonged to Daryl and so we wanted them to have this wonderful djembe drum.

George carried in a basin and towel. George had made some huge transitions in my tenure as his pastor. When I came, he rarely attended and told me that he needed golf course time on Sundays. That was his way of connecting to God. I challenged him on that and invited him to become one of our 'evangelist.' He embraced it over time and says it changed his life. He is now committed to random acts of kindness and even

walked the streets of downtown Lancaster city passing out flyers about our church! He is truly a servant of God!

Dick carried the Holy Communion set as he was one of the elders who often served with me. He loved the traditional liturgy in our worship book and even though he appreciated the alternative liturgies I used, he was glad when he could recite the formal services by heart.³

Shirley, as consistory president, carried the keys to my office and the church building. I had attached them to a large skeleton key with the words, “God loves you,” attached to it.

As each person brought the symbols forward I placed them on the altar. At the end of the service, I presented each designated item to a specific individual and spoke of my blessings with them. This was the most precious part of the entire journey of saying goodbye. It was if a moment in time had stopped. I was integrating the past, the present and the future. I was giving symbols that had deep and abiding meaning to me and passing on my hopes for all of us.

It felt as if I was stepping over a threshold and reminded me of the day when our youngest daughter married. I was handing her off to a new life, still holding all that was precious in my heart but joyfully letting go so new growth could be experienced for them and for me. In the same way, I was releasing my obligations and commitments to these beloved people and they were sending me on my way to a bold and holy adventure.

³The New Century Hymnal, *The Order of Word and Sacrament* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1995), 12.

As each person received their symbol they also spoke to me. The refugees and a community representative spoke and thanked me for my work with them. The service ended with a joyful prayer and we moved on to party!

The social hall was decorated with flowers and was packed! The smell of the ethnic foods reached me before I ever stepped foot in the area. Laughter, lots of noise, children running around, people standing in line, folks greeting me, hands showering me with gifts and hugs all around created the highlight I had anticipated. Now this was the way to say goodbye – with the people I pastored, the friends who had nurtured me, the family who bore my joys and pains, the community who welcomed me, the refugees who captured my heart and the place that had been my holy ground for seven years. We had made it – the journey of grief to the celebration of goodbye. May God be praised!

CHAPTER 10
IT WAS A GREAT JOURNEY
AND I'M RESTOCKING MY BACK PACK

The celebration is over, I'm settled in my new home and congregation and it's time to reflect on the doctoral project that enabled me to move on with some semblance of joy. The Lay Advisory Committee and I set out to move our congregation through the stages of loss. We labeled the stages shock, grief, acceptance and celebration. This particular process may not work in every situation but was effective for us for several reasons.

Our congregation was small and I was loved there. We had few conflicts and we had many flourishing outreach ministries and a vital worship life. Our spiritual growth intertwined and we supported one another through the ups and downs of life. I loved the parish and the work God had called me to do, was energized by the people and the neighborhood. My leaving was a shock to most of them, but I was not asked to leave nor reprimanded in any way. Due to our affection for one another, it was easy to risk going through this activity believing that we would all benefit from our participation in it.

Secondly, the small church is uniquely positioned for vital interaction with one another. Carl Dudley defines small churches as

Culture-carrying, history-bearing, single-cell organization and the effective small membership church is a composite of several churches that have stabilized in their

relationship to their particular environment. They seem to have a positive attitude toward themselves, and a constructive relationship with their pastor.¹

The size of the congregation enabled me to know the members well. It was helpful in discerning who would be good candidates for the Lay Advisory Committee.

Nancy Foltz states that in most small churches

Each leader and teacher learns in an environment that unfolds faith page after page, generation after generation. ...The grapevine is alive and well and nourished in this church. Leaders who need to communicate use the grapevine and pastors who care to learn must know how to use and not abuse its use.²

This knowledge enabled the team and I to know that all news would travel fast and we believed that offering opportunities for them to discuss their emotions would be valuable.

CHOOSING THE LAY ADVISORY COMMITTEE

The driving force behind our project was the Lay Advisory Committee. I was blessed that even in our small parish, we had a plethora of diversity. As I chose the team members I took several things into consideration. I wanted to have a group that was representative of our parish and community. *If I had to choose one thing that made this project a success it would be the Lay Advisory Committee.* In addition to making sure that I had a variety of ages, economics, professions and theological beliefs represented, I wanted people who would challenge me and be liaisons for the congregation when needed. It was important for me to have a trusted mentor on the team who could ask the tough questions to guide me along the way.

The committee had many strengths. They were able to work together yet brought their own individuality and beliefs to the table. They took the project seriously and freed

¹ Nancy Foltz, et al., ed, *Religious Education in the Small Membership Church* Birmingham: Religious Education Press, 1990), 9.

²Ibid., 19.

up time in their schedules to attend to it. The members were willing to affirm my work and at the same time speak up when they disagreed with me or had a better suggestion. Probably the greatest force among them was their devout love of God and the church. They were fully vested in moving ahead even if it meant time, effort and pain.

The committee reported to Dr. Mason at the review of our work they believed our project was portable and would be a welcome process for many churches. I agree wholeheartedly and there are some “must have’s” if one is setting up a committee. Make sure one person is a recorder and pays attention to detail. This work could not have been done had it not been for Diane, Kathy and me keeping copious notes.

Someone in the group needs to have a pulse on the mood of the congregation. Shirley, our consistory president, always knew what was going on, who was talking about what, and took time to listen to others. She also felt responsible for the church as their leader and responded without delay to requests made of her.

While those things are very important, Pastor Bob’s mentoring was vital. He attended to my needs, never let me off the hook in telling how I was doing and continually asked for the theology behind what we were doing.

Dick was an organizer who could take what he heard from others and put it in cohesive order. When designing the survey questions he was particularly astute at the wording and how the sessions would flow.

Kathy had the ability to state exactly what she felt and saw but yet had an analytical mind that could manage the details. Kathy also was not afraid to show her emotions and honored us by grieving in our presence. Her uncanny self-revelations brought out the truth in us.

Brian was the wild card. Everybody should be so lucky to have a man like him in their congregation. He lived in the neighborhood of our church, was fully engaged in all functions of the church, was a single parent, and was exuberant just to be a part of us. He felt honored to be asked to serve on this committee and even though his schedule was quite difficult, he was present at every meeting. His spirit was tender and his personality invitational so folks really opened up to him.

This strong committee enabled us to discern what was needed, set a plan and follow through with it. Their commitment was not only to the church but to me and my project.

WE MOVED FROM GOOD FRIDAY TO EASTER

Anthony Plate calls the course we took as “moving from Good Friday to Easter.”³ He relates it to the death of Christ and his resurrection.

Indeed, all of us – parishioners, staff, pastor – can grow spiritually during a transition if we are able to translate the dying and rising of Christ into practical terms. Transitions are part of the human experience. We need to learn how to say hello and goodbye. If we can do both gracefully, then we truly will have followed in the footsteps of the Risen Christ.⁴

We decided to call the project “The Journey of Saying Goodbye.” This was language the congregation knew well as my mantra for our discipleship was that of walking the journey with God. I would have to say unequivocally that our project was a success. We did indeed move folks from shock to celebration.

The process we used was collaborative and intentional. We met as a team and decided to have four meetings with the congregation. At the first and last meeting a survey was taken to see if we could gain insights into how people had transitioned in this time. A weakness of the surveys is that they did not convey the full range of emotions

³ White, 55.

⁴ White, 56.

and people tended to write as little as possible. The strength was in the dialogue at each meeting and this enabled the committee to discern what was happening with people. The detailed notes were a good tool for review to determine if we were on the right track in the methods chosen.

The results from the communal gatherings, the surveys, the committee's self-review and the festivity on my last Sunday all evidenced that folks had moved from shock to grief to acceptance and then to celebration. They were ready to move on and not only could they bless me but they could see a brighter future ahead. The authentic way in which folks participated highlighted the success of our endeavors.

During the first meeting we learned that folks were indeed in shock, were sad and even angry. They felt intense loss at my announcement and suddenly their viability as a congregation seemed to be at stake. Their responses indicated a lack of direction and fear.⁵ The respite at that time came from knowing they were not alone.

The second meeting which focused on their life with the pastor in the past seven years was a settling in with their grief. While they recollected some of the good times during my pastorate, they also voiced their sense of doubt as to whether their ministry could go on. For the LAC and the consistory it was valuable information to gather so the leadership could know how to focus on healing and also the direction for a new leader. The general feeling was still one of sadness.

At the third gathering, attendees were asked to focus on their hopes for the future. This deliberate choice by the committee was to determine if folks were moving in their sense of loss and able to articulate about the future. Indeed they were. The meeting became quite lively when the group was asked about their hopes. A whole range of ideas

⁵ Appendix, 119-135.

that had never before been mentioned surfaced. The tenacity of the group became evident.

The last meeting on February 10 was a love feast if there ever was one. It was an emotional time for many of us but folks recalled the stories and life of my ministry with them. They also talked about the church as a light in the city. This was a turning point for me, a knowing that I could go with their blessing. The celebration service on February 27 was the culmination of a process that involved much pain, growth and eventual joy.

REFLECTIONS ON THE PROJECT

This project far exceeded what I expected to happen. I was prepared for the congregation to journey with the committee and me, and I fully anticipated that we would have a good result. One of the great surprises for me was the steadfast work of the committee and their devotedness to the project. They owned it!

I shouldn't have been surprised because although I was a strong pastor who led through interpersonal relationships, creative worship and teaching, they joined me in every aspect. I cannot think of one thing they didn't at least try that I had asked them to do. More often than not, they brought their own individuality and imaginative spirits to the work and ministry.

The second revelation that I wasn't prepared for was how deeply I grieved, and the tender care of the committee and the congregation. I entered this assignment thinking that "I" would be helping "them." It resulted in growth for all of us.

One of the ways in which this was revealed was during the review session with Dr. Mason. Before our meeting with him, I had handed out the questions I assumed we

would be asked answering.⁶ What occurred was a dialogue and not just with Dr. Mason. The LAC spoke with me and each other about this responsibility they had taken on.

They were especially pleased that the project accomplished what was stated in the prospectus.⁷ Dick stated, “One of the strong points was that it got the congregation to talk about what they were feeling. We crafted something that enabled people to grieve together.”

Brian felt strongly about the events that had occurred. “I can’t imagine we could have gone through this without Pastor Bonnie helping us and making a way for the grief.”

Kathy loved the way the project was framed. “It was planned as a trajectory, not pushed from here to there. The topic of each meeting moved them.”

Pastor Bob shared that he loved the theological underpinnings in the sermons I preached. “Every Sunday you worked this path into the liturgical year and the emotional context of the people.”

Shirley reported that it was especially helpful for the consistory because they now knew just what people felt and envisioned for possibilities in the future. She commented, “It allowed us to hear what everyone was saying and then to say, ‘Bonnie, you go with our blessing’.”

Dr. Mason posed this question to the group. “What caught you by surprise?”

Diane stated that she was impressed with how vocal people were in a good way. “It cut out the parking lot discussions and it probably saved the church. We came together and saw our strengths.”

⁶ Appendix, 148-153.

⁷ Appendix, 154-168.

Dick reiterated the fact that it brought focus to the future which was a joyful, unexpected result. “It re-energized our passion. Who would have thought that learning to grieve corporately would take us to new visions for ministry?”

The team was able to convey to Dr. Mason the strengths that I brought to the table for this venture. I had not expected a review to be so affirming. Pastor Bob spoke of my spiritual leadership. “Bonnie’s great love for God is evident always. That shines through more than anything. We are able to relax in her example.”

Diane loved the format. “The structure of the project was just enough to move people but plenty of room for personal involvement at a level with which folks were comfortable.”

Kathy, in her protective nature of me, wanted to make sure Dr. Mason knew it was my idea. “Well it was Pastor Bonnie’s idea, you know. She has such strong administration skills and the foundation of the whole thing was just excellent.”

Even though the strategies were planned, Dick felt that the serendipitous nature of it was powerful. “This process suited the moments of our lives. It was exactly what was needed for this time and this place.”

IS THIS PROJECT PORTABLE?

Initially the group agreed that this project would be a wonderful model for other congregations facing similar circumstances. As they engaged in more analysis they did admit to a few caveats. “It depends on the congregation,” Pastor Bob acknowledged.

“I am not sure it would work if the congregation was asking the pastor to leave,” Diane admitted. “But then again, they would at least have a guideline. We had nothing to follow until we created this.”

WHAT WOULD YOU CHANGE?

Pastor Bob admitted that he would have appreciated more theological dialogues about the journey of saying goodbye. “I would have liked for the committee members to have had more time to chat about the biblical underpinnings of what we were doing. Even some research together or to read some of the books you (Pastor Bonnie) did would have been helpful.”

Kathy stated that she wanted to understand more about the “call to ministry.” “What is the process and how do you decide when it is time to go? Why does it take so long and why is there all this secrecy about it?” I found it interesting that this question came up now as I was ready to leave them. It is one more insight into all the surprising ponderings that come at a time like this.

As we prepared to close the meeting, Dr. Mason asked if there were any general comments folks wanted to share. “Well,” Diane said, “the conference is insisting we do a self-study and I would say Pastor Bonnie achieved that before she got out the door!” Everyone laughed as the tension between the conference and the congregation still existed.

“You are right Diane,” Dick added. “The conference has no idea how reflective we have been and how faithful to our people we are.”

“I loved creating the liturgy,” Brian noted. “That worship service was incredible and I was glad to be a part of it.”

We said our goodbyes to Dr. Mason and I thanked everyone for their good work and promptly served them lunch!

A MISSING PIECE IN THE BACKPACK

The one regret I have is that the conference offered little to no support and chose not to engage with us in this powerful, life-altering passage. I fully believe they could have used this excursion as a model for other churches and pastors. They would have received blessings from watching a small parish grow and move to a greater vision of themselves. Personally, they left me stranded. Thankfully the LAC committee and my personal counselor steered me on the route to new ministry and saying goodbye to my beloved parish.

They did not offer the church encouragement or support. When consistory members requested a meeting with the conference office at the beginning of December they were told it would be at least January before anyone could come meet with them. When Shirley attempted to set a date, the minister in charge of Search and Call⁸ could not clear his calendar that far ahead. When she asked for names they could contact she was told that there are a number of retired ministers in the area. Subsequent calls resulted in her being told that the church needed to put a profile together before going any further in seeking a minister.

I found it amazing that even as they wanted to hold the church and me to strict adherence to their recommendations, they did little to hold up their promise to support me or the congregation. Three days before I was to leave the state, a representative from the local church association⁹ called asking to set up a time to do an exit interview. “You have got to be kidding,” I told them. “You knew for three months that I was leaving and you wait until three days before I move across the country to ask for an interview!” I could

⁸ Penn Central Conference of the UCC assigns one staff person to assist churches with the Search and Call Process.

⁹ Local association is the entity to which a local UCC church belongs and where the pastor has ministerial standing.

not believe it and I said ‘no thanks.’ When Dr. Heather Elkins reviewed my dissertation she made an astute observation. She posed this question, “Was it helpful to have someone like "the Establishment" to express anger toward as part of the grief process? It enabled the venting to remain safely outside the community, and in fact, may have empowered your congregation for self-care.”¹⁰ While this was never part of our conscious thinking, I believe it reflects the nature of what can happen in a time of distress when anger is deflected somewhere else. In this case, it seemed to work.

As I muse about all this, perhaps a project is needed to lead conference staff on how to walk with congregations when their pastor is leaving! There are documents in our Manual on Ministry ¹¹telling the pastor and the congregation the tasks to complete to end the relationship, but no guidance on how to travel from shock to celebration.

REVELATIONS: The New Shape of My Story

It has been my privilege to have walked with the LAC and the congregation for one of the most growing times in my life. This project enabled me to leave them with joy, knowing they were going to continue the good work which Christ began.

I also uncovered the truth that this past year was like a death experience I wanted to deny. I kept trying to push my grief to the edges of my conscious, only to have them brought back to the surface by the dear ones I served. If I had it to do over, I would certainly give more time to my grief and allow the parish to encounter it with me. I would listen to the pain, rest in it and live with it.

The project also opened my eyes to the multitude of ways theologies are lived and I uncovered some deep learnings for me personally. As I concluded the process and

¹⁰ Heather Elkins email to author, January 8, 2014.

¹¹ Manual on Ministry is the UCC guidelines for clergy and churches in the search and call process.

especially as I reviewed what I had written and prepared for the Exit Interview with my advisors, I discovered that my deep theological yearnings are borne out in this project. My belief about outreach and the incredible sense of sacredness around my call as pastor were manifested in the stories of the parish. I unearthed one of my greatest gifts in that my primary theological methodology is that of narrative theology. Prior to my training at Drew University I had been mainly taught preaching and pastoral theology through the lens of historical criticism; even to the point that professors would try to steer me away from personal story. The Holy Spirit opened me and the people I served to allow us to listen, walk, cry, laugh and share our journey that create who we are and what we believe. This is narrative theology at its best and I now own it!

APPENDIX

Rev. Bonnie L. Hollinger

816 Spring Hill Lane

Lebanon, PA 17042

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My dearly beloved sisters and brothers in Christ,

Ten years ago you all welcomed me into your hearts as a student seminarian and then as your called pastor. We began our time with the slogan, "It's a new day" and we set about doing the work of Jesus Christ in our lives and neighborhood. We found ourselves embarking on a marvelous journey of rebuilding and extending our welcome to refugees. Great joy abounded as we made much needed changes to our building. We took in new members and grew spiritually.

It has been my great privilege to lead you and I have been blessed beyond measure with your generosity and eagerness to serve God. So it is with both joy and sadness that I tell you that the time has come for me to begin a *New Holy Adventure*. First Congregational Church UCC of Murphys California has called me to be their pastor. I have sensed that God is calling me to go into a new place and I have answered that nudging.

I want to say THANK YOU for all your love, encouragement and support because it hasn't always been easy and there have been some tough times both in the parish and on a personal level. God shows love for us through the love we share and I have felt greatly loved by each and all of you and it has made all the difference.

My life is enriched beyond measure because of you all. You have welcomed me into your lives, just as I am – honoring my stories and my teachings with your own wisdom. I have never pretended to be perfect or to have all the answers and yet together we have found a way to create joy out of chaos, ministry out of shared gifts, and community by opening our hearts and lives to others. In my own limited and energized way, I have tried to demonstrate God's love to you in deed as well as word. I have laughed with those who laugh and I have certainly cried with those who cried and again I thank you for allowing me the privilege of being part of your lives especially during critical moments. You took on many challenges and allowed me to live the pastor's dream of being God's presence in the community.

It is not yet time to say goodbye as I will be here for three more months. As I move on I hope I have left a legacy of love and the memory of someone who made you happy and led you outside of your comfort zones!

Your consistory members will be meeting next week to discuss the future and will give you a report and entertain questions at the congregational meeting on Sunday, December 9. A member of Penn Central conference staff is ready to assist you in the next step as well.

I do not intend to sit by idly in these next few months. I will continue to serve as your pastor until my last day here. Please feel free to call on me as always. God is doing great things in this neighborhood and your faithfulness to God is evident. Let us continue to let our lights shine brightly!

Joy in the journey,

Pastor Bonnie

Pastor Bonnie

November 29, 2012

From: Pastor Bonnie Hollinger <pastorbonnie@comcast.net>
Sent: Tuesday, December 04, 2012 8:57 AM
To: Bob & Carol Muise (VICTORY898@verizon.net); DICK BERG (rberg@lancasterseminary.edu); Shirley Henderson (toytug@webtv.net); Kunkel, Kathy (Kunkel@co.lancaster.pa.us); DIANE KOON (diane.koon@comcast.net)
Subject: re: My doctoral team

Dear folks, I am writing to ask if you all are still able to be on my doctoral advisory team since I have had to change the topic. I met with my professor yesterday and he approved my proposals. The plan is to have four gathering times with the congregation to work through saying goodbye to one another. I need to meet with you all ASAP so that I can get your input on the four sessions and my proposal. I am wondering if we could meet for about twenty minutes on Thursday night at 6:30pm before choir.

Also, if you feel that you can no longer serve on the advisory board please let me know. The goal is to have these congregational meetings in January and February (probably after church with me hosting a luncheon) and then culminating in a celebration service. I will need to meet periodically with you folks to get your input on what those meetings will look like. I will have a proposal written for you on Thursday night. If you can't all meet, I will meet with whoever can gather and then talk with the others when it is convenient. I am also asking Brian Snow to be part of the team.

Thanks for your continued love and prayers as we journey this time together, Pastor Bonnie

*Joy in the Journey,
Rev. Bonnie Hollinger
St. Peter's United Church of Christ
816 Buchanan Ave
Lancaster, PA 17603
717-397-8912*

Doctoral Lay Advisory Team

Agenda

December 6, 2012

Team Members: Brian Snow, Kathy Kunkel, Diane Koon, Dick Berg, Pastor Bob Muise, Shirley Henderson

Purpose of team: The doctoral lay advisory team is to assist the student in developing and implementing the doctoral project. The doctoral project must be approved by Drew University before the implementation begins.

Expectations of team members: Team members will participate in the project with parishioners. They will assist the student in developing questions and tools of analysis. They may be asked to lead discussions. They will meet four times with the congregation as part of the project, they will meet at least twice with the student to prepare for the project, and will be interviewed by the student's Drew University Advisor, Rev. Dr. Joel Mason.

They will also provide support to the student and challenges as necessary. They will give feedback all along the way as to how they see the project progressing and make suggestions as they seem fit.

Purpose of the project: The purpose of this project is to provide some guidance in the journey of separation through all its stages of shock, grief, acceptance (hopefully) and then to celebration. This project will be directed with the congregation being the primary impetus for opportunities for processing, but will also include steps that I take to find my bearing as I leave this beloved flock.

Scope of the project: The project will consist of four congregational gatherings. There will be four main areas of discovery. They are:

* Where are we now having heard the news of our pastor's leaving?

*What have we done these past years? —

*What do we hope for the future?

*What can we celebrate?

We will ask open ended questions and also take a survey at the beginning and one at the end. At each session we will create a liturgy for that session which will then be used in the liturgy at the final celebration service.

The gathering data phase will be to review all the stories and conversations and answers to specific questions. This will lead us to the celebration where we will recall the past and rejoice in the future.

Timeline: (this is where I need your help)

- Meeting 1 Jan 6
- Meeting 2 Jan 13 - Women's Group - Jan 20
- Meeting 3 Jan 27
- Meeting 4 - Feb. 10

Advisory Team meetings

1. Jan 3
2. Jan 17

Questions

Suggestions

Next Meeting

Prayer

Doctoral Lay Advisory Team

December 6, 2012 minutes

Members in attendance: Brian Snow, Kathy Kunkel, Diane Koon, Dick Berg, Pastor Bob Muisse, Shirley Henderson, Pastor Bonnie

Bonnie opened the meeting with prayer and then discussed the purpose of the team. The purpose of the team is to assist the student in developing and implementing the doctoral project.

Expectations of team members: Team members will participate in the project with parishioners. They will assist the student in developing questions and tools of analysis. They may be asked to lead discussions. They will meet four times with the congregation as part of the project, they will meet at least twice with the student to prepare for the project, and will be interviewed by the student's Drew University Advisor, Rev. Dr. Joel Mason.

They will also provide support to the student and challenges as necessary. They will give feedback all along the way as to how they see the project progressing and make suggestions as they seem fit. The members of the committee agreed that they are willing and able to participate in this way.

Purpose of the project: The purpose of this project is to provide some guidance in the journey of separation through all its stages of shock, grief, acceptance (hopefully) and then to celebration. This project will be directed with the congregation being the primary impetus for opportunities for processing, but will also include steps that Bonnie takes to find her bearing as she leaves this beloved flock.

Scope of the project: The project will consist of four congregational gatherings. There will be four main areas of discovery. They are:

* Where are we now having heard the news of our pastor's leaving? (will be held on January 6)

The team came up with the following questions for this meeting:

How do you feel about my leaving? How do you feel about the way I went about it? Bonnie will answer these same two questions. How do you feel about St. Peter's now? How do you feel the church is different than when you called Bonnie?

*What have we done these past years? (January 13)

The Journey of Saying Goodbye
Survey Questions January 6, 2013

1. What was your initial reaction upon hearing the news that Pastor Bonnie is leaving?
2. How do you feel about the way in which you heard the news? (by a letter)
3. Now, after a month of knowing that she is leaving, how are you feeling about the news?
4. What do you feel is the general mood of the congregation since Pastor Bonnie announced she is leaving?
5. In what ways would you like to be involved in making decisions about the future of St. Peter's going forward?

Name: (optional)

The Journey of Saying Goodbye

Minutes of meeting on January 6, 2013

Pastor Bonnie opened the meeting with prayer. She explained about the doctoral project and introduced the lay advisory team. She explained that the survey is to be an aide for all of us to work through the process of saying goodbye. Dick berg and Bob Muise passed out the survey.

After the survey was filled out and collected, Pastor Bonnie gave an explanation of the protocol that ministers are to follow in the UCC in notifying congregations of their decision to leave a parish. She stated that the congregation is to receive notice in a written letter only after the minister has a written contract from another congregation. She was not comfortable with that process so she met with Shirley Henderson the consistory president in person before she mailed the letter to the congregation.

Pastor Bonnie also called each consistory member or spoke to them personally on the day the letter was mailed.

She then went on to explain how she reached the decision to leave St. Peter's. She has been sensing "god's nudges" and has wanted to work with diverse groups, to teach, to possibly do conference work and to have a situation where Daryl did not have to work three jobs. She saw the profile for Murphys on the UCC website and it seemed a good fit with her gifts and skills. Doors continued to open all along the way. She stated that she loves this parish and is not leaving because of problems here but was ready to move on once Jordan graduated from high school.

Dick Berg then asked if anyone had any questions for Bonnie and since there were none, he then led discussion on the survey questions.

1. What was your initial reaction upon hearing the news that Pastor Bonnie is leaving?

Comments were: people were super sad, not shocked and expected it when Jordan graduated. Surprised and not, based on average tenure

Shirley stated that she does not want to be on the search committee but will do anything she can. Jack believes we are in a positive direction. Might get lucky. Dick stated that consistory must be in constant communication with the congregation and transparent. Brain talked about the strength and challenge of St. Peter's having deep relationships with each other. It is hard to let others in but can be overcome. Young people would need a different typed of worship. Reputation of St. Peter's is good . We give volunteers an outlet to serve. Bonnie suggested that we think about what we are projecting to others about the church during this time.

She announced that next week's meeting is to dialogue about where we have been these last seven years and closed with prayer.

Notes taken by Diane Koon, typed by Bonnie Hollinger

The Journey of Saying Goodbye

Survey Questions January 6, 2013

1. What was your initial reaction upon hearing the news that Pastor Bonnie is leaving?

Here are the responses:

- a. Sad
- b. Shocked, sad, anxious about all the programs she has started and been leading
- c. Sadness, expected, timely
- d. Sadness and feel like it is the end of St. Peter's as we know it (at least re: a full time minister/choir traditional services)
- e. Concern (however, not a surprise..concern for the church but upward and onward to Pastor Bonnie and Daryl)
- f. Sad but not shocked
- g. I was very saddened, but in the same moment very happy for her and Daryl for their new adventure and service to the church
- h. Shocked! Then sad..had tears.
- i. Not surprised. Several things she said over the past year made me think she was considering the possibility. I was more apprehensive about others' reactions and whether this would start a lot of talk about the decline of the church.
- j. Dismayed for our church. Happy for Pastor Bonnie
- k. Surprise but not surprised
- l. Very sad and somewhat depressed. Happy for Bonnie
- m. I expected that this would be coming when she entered the doctoral program
- n. Surprise
- o. Sad and a little panicky
- p. I was very surprised and worried.
- q. I was surprised and shocked

2. How do you feel about the way in which you heard the news? (by a letter)
 - a. No response
 - b. Since I am not a member I heard it from Shirley on the Bazaar day
 - c. Good, the letter was beautiful
 - d. That is the typical way and it is up to the members to decide what is next
 - e. ...in person..that's okay.. I am not a member
 - f. She personally phoned me which I appreciated
 - g. Pastor Bonnie told me personally before I received the letter in the mail, but I thought the letter which I received was very well written and very considerate of the feelings of the congregation. Had I only received that, for me, that would have been acceptable.
 - h. Since Pastor Bonnie had shared that she was leaving with Bob and I prior to receiving the letter we knew it was coming. However, If I received the letter without knowing I might have been totally shocked many hurt – sad.
 - i. This was probably the best way to let everyone know at the same time and to avoid rumor and speculation
 - j. There wouldn't have been a good way to hear that news
 - k. It was good that the information was shared with all so that eliminated rumors and other sources of misinformation
 - l. She told me personally, I thought the letter that was sent to the congregation is well written and gentle letter
 - m. The letter went to all so that was practical, voice would have been more personal
 - n. It was a very informative way to hear the news, emotions didn't interfere with things at that time
 - o. I thought it was a good way to do it
 - p. Through my grandma and through the letter. It was a good idea to send the letter first because it let the news soak in
 - q. I think it was a good way to do it

3. Now, after a month of knowing that she is leaving, how are you feeling about the news?
- a. Accepting it more, after giving it some thought I remembered her saying different things suggesting she might not stay
 - b. Still bummed out because she is one of the main reasons that we come to church other than God and Jesus
 - c. Still sad, but hoping that we can get some more new members
 - d. That things will go on hopefully
 - e. It was time for her to move on, sad that she brings to St. Peter's closer to having to make the decision of what's nexts
 - f. Still very sad and nervous about St. Peter's future. I'm trying to think about he saying, "When one door closes, another one opens."
 - g. Apprehensive about what the future holds for St. Peter's. Happy for her that she thinks sh has found a new challenge and place to be
 - h. It is hard to deal with since we have many other problems to face
 - i. Kind of anxious to begin planning and involve others in the process. What will we do next – both short and long term
 - j. It is still hard to see Pastor Bonnie's time coming to a close. But I think this process will be helpful
 - k. I am still sady about this news and wondering what the future of St. Peter's holds because I believe , congregations and their missios are hugely a reflections of their leader. But also I have faith the the wonderful tgroup of members of this church to guide us and just to give support to all during this time.
 - l. Torn, I omprehend that she has her family to think of and life's calling, however we at st. peter's still need her/Daryl and have grown comfortable and love them. always difficult to give up someone/something you love
 - m. I just heard today- this could be a time for reflection
 - n. Accepting – it is reality – just not feeling like there is an easy path for replacement or the church's future
 - o. Sad, hoping for the best
 - p. More positive, happy for her
 - q. Still sad

4. What do you feel is the general mood of the congregation since Pastor Bonnie announced she is leaving?
- a. Some people are very sad and some are not
 - b. (no answer)
 - c. About the same as my mood
 - d. Concerned about next steps- consistory should lay out a plan soon even if it has to be changed. Only 7 Sundays left until March
 - e. Don't know
 - f. Yin/Yang – supportive of her personal life's calling/God's – but concerned with our future and faith journey
 - g. I really can't answer this because unfortunately I have been working so many weekends that I haven't been able to attend church to get the feelings of the congregation
 - h. Hard to tell. Seems as a whole, it is ok, however in small groups there is some discussion. I'm also sad that we will be losing Daryl as well
 - i. I'm not sure I have a feel for that, Possible, hesitant, unsure
 - j. I think most of us are in limbo, not knowing what to think or do
 - k. Uncertainty and concern for the future
 - l. Very sorry to lose such a wonderful, caring, energizing, fun pastor
 - m. Sad, discouragement, what is next??
 - n. That there is much to be done for St. Peter's to continue on
 - o. I think they are feeling rather pessimistic about the future and the church
 - p. Everyone is upset and still in awe
 - q. People are sad to see her go
5. In what ways would you like to be involved in making decisions about the future of St. Peter's going forward?
- a. No
 - b. (no answer)
 - c. In any way I can be of help – Jack Henderson
 - d. Dependent upon consistory to get a game plan – in consideration of number attending members

- e. It's not in my place to do that, however, I like brainstorming with people – Patsy Solomon
- f. I'm on consistory plus a major decision such as this will have to come before the congregation – George Kunkel
- g. I feel since I am a very new member of this church, I don't want to nor do I feel I should be that involved in decisions that need to be made. Those members who have been here the longest should be most active in the process, although I am happy to voice my opinion. Their sadness, I'm sure, goes much deeper than any feelings I have. – Judy Buch
- h. If I can be of help I would like to be involved – Carole Muise
- i. I will probably be very involved as I am on consistory – Diane Koon
- j. I think the whole congregation should be involved since it affects all of us – Marilyn Zook
- k. Comfortable letting the elected consistory handle where we go from here – Bill Marshall
- l. I do not want to be on the search committee but do want to be involved in some way and will be available for whatever jobs I can do – Shirley Henderson
- m. Not sure – Julie Marshall
- n. To be informed when there are choices to be made with regards to the type of service, minister, etc
- o. I like to be involved as much as I can but realize that old age!!! And health problems sometimes prevent this – Gerry Cooke
- p. I don't know – Michel Cooke
- q. (no answer)

Name: (optional)

The Journey of Saying Good-bye

January 13, 2013

Report

This was the second of the four scheduled meetings. Diane Koon was the leader. She led the group in discussion of the following questions. These questions had been prepared by the Lay advisory team.

1. **What is different about the church since pastor Bonnie came? How have we changed? How has Bonnie changed?**

When Diane introduced these questions, Patty spoke up right away and said she would like to hear how Bonnie sees us and herself. She wondered if Bonnie could answer the same questions. Diane indicated that Pastor Bonnie would address the questions after the congregation had discussed them.

"I have never been so aware of my spiritual journey. The Road to Vitality also had a lot to do with it and she was a real champion of it. It was a boost in our lives. I think very often people come to church and make a commitment and think that's it. I certainly am better about having devotions every day since she came to us.

"I've seen an evolution in our worship style – the liturgy is a blend of contemporary and traditional. The content and the way we do things look different. The music is different."

"The music is different – we have different styles and the music is more participatory."

"People used to grumble but now people are doing it freely. Whatever Daryl tells us we do gladly."

"Every pastor has their time in every church. It was a wonderful movement forward to call a woman."

"Also, the opening up of worship – the amount of spirituality as the rest of the stuff that goes on – ore creative – the visual, the heart, and the mind. St. Peter's is on the road to a new thing."

"Quite a few things came together to expose us culturally – music, overlap of services, refugees, Bonnie referred to these things in her sermons – various

congregations worshipping here and we worshipped with them. We were engaged and opened to other religious traditions and are more diverse than a decade ago.”

“The capital campaign – the elevator – serves more people in the day time. It was a big commitment. I was a little intimidated at first but Pastor Bonnie believed we could do it so we went ahead.”

“To show how St. Peter’s has opened up in 1987 the consistory thought hard about allowing an AA group to use our facilities. Look where we are in this time and the number of folks that use the space. It’s changing lives – we don’t always see it – an indication of how much we have opened up.”

“Another church didn’t allow refugees and so they are helping us.”

“We had an F & M class here.” We have a better relationship with F & M – we are more involved with one another.”

2. What are the most challenging things we faced during this time?

“A continual challenge is the death of long time members. A lot of grieving.

“Few people in the congregation- some can’t do as much so there are not as many bodies to do the work.”

“As we are cleaning up things in our house we are coming across things from folks who have died and it is grieving all over again. I can remember where each one sat – an indication of major change – difficult to remember”

“A challenge not to become so introverted and forgetting “whose” we are and the work we are doing.”

“Confirmation was a challenge because there were not enough kids my age. Pastor Bonnie had good ideas but sometimes there were not enough of us to do them. I went to conference and all these kids were introducing others from their church and it was just me from St. Peter’s.”

“Decline in the Sunday School numbers. My kids were young my son acolyte 26 times in a row because not enough kids showed up.”

“The biggest challenge is because we don’t have young children. Young parents don’t come.”

“Someone told me, “We didn’t leave St. Peter’s because we didn’t like it – we left because there were not children.”

“The 20’s and 30’s are also missing.

“Grateful for the program and Lancaster Theological Seminary and the youth events – with St. Peter’s as her spiritual home my daughter was able to participate with other youth and great events.’

“Emma, we are so happy to have you part of us.”

“Today’s age is a challenge- every day you struggle to keep positive. St. Peter’s has maintained the faith even through these circumstances and I give you a lot of credit.”

“I agree – Faith is mess. We are not often with frustrated with ambiguity. Underneath the frustration – there are no easy answers.”

“Darkwood Brew and Panera Bread. WE talk and get to know each other’s spiritual hearts.”

A small church is a good thing- we had more small groups in the last eight years.

Communication has evolved. When Bonnie came no one knew much about the telephone system. We now have a web site; we now have a wireless PA system. A new telephone system – email instead of a phone tree – email has improved – from start to finish communication looks different.

The challenge is a big building with small numbers of people.

One of the nice things of the AA groups is that they are helping us- We got an email that an alarm was going off. Bill came down – it was nice that a group using our space helped us out.

We have a lot of good will from these groups.

3. Highpoints?

Elder Mouse – I sometimes get more out of Elder Mouse.

WE identify with Elder Mouse

Isn’t it interesting that we are talking about Elder Mouse as one of us???

Elder Mouse – we are going to get the message through him about the messy stuff of church.

Capital Campaign - a few individuals needed to be guided and Pastor Bonnie provided that guidance and it made a big difference.

Debbie Miley's ordination

100th anniversary celebration

Refugee program that Bonnie began for this church. It is a true blessing. We have blessed so many lives and she has affected so many people herself.

When I took Ja mar din to the Social Security office – we were nervous but it was a wonderful experience.

I think they (refugees) are a great gift to us.

Worship and Music – feeding spiritually and challenging. Feeds my soul

Even with a few people worship doesn't feel small. Bonnie and Daryl carried on faithfully not slacking in their preparation and ministry in worship.

Disappointments

That our numbers haven't grown

I would think that anyone who came here once who would continue

Yes, that's what happened to us.

More money, more children, more young people

Is there something about the way we do things that you never thought we would be doing?

A woman pastor

A friend said, "I'm not ready for that."

I never had so much good food.

Bonnie is fun

When we did renovations I didn't image that the piano would be used as hard in the Phillip's room. We thought it was going to be like a parlor. We wanted to make it all beautiful

and honor Ann Leibrick but the other day I came in and there were 40 refugees crowded around those icky tables.

Ann Leibrick would say – way to go!

I never thought we would have a worship team – like Daryl and Bonnie – a richness not only in worship and music but in Divinity café and the Bazaar- the spring auction and in the community.

Yes the music helps us in fellowship

A small congregation challenges each one of us – I never thought I would lead consistory!

Brian Snow says we are still going to have Divinity Café!

We handicapped ourselves by not having classrooms

We have a little corner – no way to grow or separate age groups. It's not good to put a five year old with a 13 year old.

When I did Sunday school upstairs I did it by myself - no you have to have two people

Young families take a look and don't come back – it's a catch 22

The flags – I never would have thought we would have them – we are diverse now- it says something about who we are as a church.

It peaks people's curiosity

Diane closed this portion of the questions and turned it over to Bonnie to comment.

Bonnie stated that she was surprised no one mentioned the Youth Mission Trip to South Dakota. That was a highlight. She also stated that it was interesting to hear folks say we don't have enough children but then in the same breath talk about not having enough classroom space for the children we do have.

In answering, what has she learned about herself or changed? I am learning to listen more and preach from my own heart. In the early years I did a great deal of study and commenting about what other scholars had to say about the scriptures. Now (especially due to a doctoral class) I still do the study, but I spend time asking what is God saying to me and us through this passage. You keep telling me I am a good preacher and so I am trying to claim it.

What would I change? Sometimes I feel like it is a tough decision to know when to lead and when to cheerlead. I felt there were times when I was running too fast and needed to slow down to see where you believed God was calling us.

Bonnie stated that she truly has loved her time with this congregation and has appreciated all the interactions and ministries we have done together. She thanked Pastor Bob and the church for taking her in when she was bereft of a denomination.

The meeting closed with a reminder of the next meeting on January 27.

Doctoral Lay Advisory team

Agenda

January 17, 2013

Opening Prayer

Checking in with each other – how are we doing in this transition?

Review of last two congregational meetings – see attached report from January 13.

Agenda for meeting on January 27 – and who will lead?

Litany for final service

Next meeting

Doctoral Lay Advisory team

Agenda

February 5, 2013

Opening Prayer

Checking in with each other – how are we doing in this transition?

Was sermon and communion helpful? Relating Christ's departure with mine?

Review narrative of opportunity

Review of last congregational meeting – see attached notes

Agenda for meeting on February 13 – who will lead?

Meeting with Dr. Joel Mason on February 22 – see attached notes

Litany for final service

Next meeting

Closing Prayer

Bestowing the Gifts of God	Congregational Representative
Globe	Pastor Daniel Pierre
Shawl	Rev. Bob Muise
(not sure yet – symbol of outreach & Christian education)	Diane Koon
Pitcher of Water	Kevin Alexander
The Bible	Diane Brandt
Musical Instrument	Daryl Hollinger
Basin & Towel	George Kunkel
The Keys	Shirley Henderson
The Cup and Plate	Rev. Dick Berg

Liturgy of Blessing – Saying Goodbye and Beginning a New Holy Adventure

Congregational Representative: (Shirley) Pastor Bonnie, on December 1, 2005, we called you to be our pastor: to proclaim God's Word, to baptize new members into the church of Jesus Christ, to be our teacher and lead us to a new day in this community. With the Gospel we have been challenged to lives of service. With your gifts of pastoral care, you have comforted us in times of sickness and trouble, and at the death of loved ones. Sharing our joys and sorrows, you have been important to our life together in this Church of Jesus Christ and in our service to this community.

Congregation: With love and our prayerful support, we release you from St. Peter's United Church of Christ to share God's gifts as an ordained pastor in First Congregational Church in Murphys California.

Pastor Bonnie: I give thanks for the life we shared with Christ. I have found our time together an incredible journey and remarkable growth for me as well. The memories we have made will always remain precious and meaningful.

I return to you symbols representing my role and responsibilities as the pastor in your midst.

(Pastor Daniel will come forward) It has been my privilege to serve the many cultures which enrich Lancaster County. This globe is a symbol of all the people who have found a welcome inside these doors. I have sought to live by Jesus command to go into all the world and make disciples. Pastor Daniel, we have bonded together as one people in Christ. We have worshipped together and you are on the path to become a United Church of Christ congregation. Receive this globe as a symbol of a welcome to all people.

(Pastor Bob will come forward) Pastor Bob, our pastor emeritus, you have been a stalwart for me and others in these past years. Your quiet support has meant the world to me and Daryl. Receive this shawl as a symbol of the care and nurture you provide in your generous way. When you wrap yourself in it, let it remind you of my love for you.

(Diane Koon will come forward) Diane, I have tried to live in such a way that people know we are Christians by our love. Together we have learned that it is risky to be a Christian and takes blood, sweat and tears to make a difference in our world. Receive this ?, as a symbol of all the outreach and education that St. Peter's is called to do.

(Kevin Alexander will come forward) I have baptized people in the name of the Triune God, using water as a symbol of cleansing and rebirth. Here is the water which symbolizes God's gift of belonging in Christ. Kevin, I baptized you last Easter and you have been baptizing me ever since with your faithfulness to God. Receive this pitcher as a reminder to let God's love wash over you every day.

(Diane Brandt will come forward) I have tried to proclaim the Word of God faithfully among you. I may have done it in some unconventional ways – drama, storytelling, dancing, PowerPoint, paintings, preaching and teaching. Diane Brandt, I give this Bible to you as an encouragement to scour it for divine wisdom and courage to open it among the people.

(Daryl Hollinger will come forward) *I'm still thinking what to say here!*

(George Kunkel will come forward) As a called and ordained minister I have tried to live the servant life as Jesus calls us to do. Here is the basin and towel that was carried to my ordination here. May you bless it often as you continue to serve this community.

(Shirley Henderson will come forward) Shirley, here are the keys to my office, the place where I have challenged and been challenged, have counseled and comforted people. It is the place where I entered holy quiet times, wailed in distress and roared in laughter. It is the place of paper and pens, puppets and pots of tea. May you receive them with great fondness remembering that the work of the parish is to love God with all your heart, and love your neighbor as yourself.

(Dick Berg will come forward) Dick, the best place to be is sitting at God's table. Together we have set the table for anyone who wants to come. We have feasting on God's good gifts of bread and wine, remembering how Jesus taught us to live. Receive these now and set the table often, inviting everyone to come.

Dick Berg: Invite the congregation to stand and join hands with one another until we are all joined together. Then offer a prayer: here is a suggestion or make up your own.

Dick: Eternal God, we thank you for Pastor Bonnie and for our life together in this congregation and community. As she has been a blessing to us, so now send her forth to be a blessing to others; through Jesus Christ. Amen

Notes

Bonnie - UCC has a protocol, notification of all congregants by letter at the same time after receiving a contract from the new church. She was not comfortable w/ that process.
The Journey of Saying Goodbye

Survey Questions January 6, 2013

Decision based on "God's nudges" - has wanted to work w/ diverse groups, to teach, possibly conf. work + for Daryl to not work 3 jobs - profile was a good fit.
 1. What was your initial reaction upon hearing the news that Pastor Bonnie is leaving? Super sad, not shocked - expected it when Jordan graduated. Surprised + not, based on average tenure + her PhD work. Letter was beautiful, sad, hard to read but understand her need to move on. Had hoped that opening the endowment would be a new beginning. She may have been thinking of us, knowing we couldn't afford her.

Doris opened along the way.

2. How do you feel about the way in which you heard the news? (by a letter)

In another case this protocol could have been offensive but the letter was effective. Process is contrary to the way church is organized (point) Bonnie bent the rules a little to inform Shirley + Coatsworth the way the letter was sent.

3. Now, after a month of knowing that she is leaving, how are you feeling about the news?

Still sad, but happy for them. Worried for them about the cost of living over the holidays - thinking of new steps. Acceptance? Concern about the future. Numb, emotionally spent.

4. What do you feel is the general mood of the congregation since Pastor Bonnie announced she is leaving?

Uncertain. We have a lot of decisions ahead. Lots of options - pt + pastor, sell building, start a refuge center, stay together or go separate ways. Obligate for 3 mos. + see what's going on then - tired - "I-armed-paper-hangers"
 Can you afford the expense? Look at what you do want - can't St. Peter's

5. In what ways would you like to be involved in making decisions about the future of St. Peter's going forward?

Shirley - not in search but will do anything I can. Jack - positive direction - might get lucky Dick - consistency must be in constant communication w/ the Cong. - transparent

Name: (optional)
 Jack + Shirley received a 30th anniv. pamphlet + will share

be a model for this time in history - not Fundamentalist - new ways to do church.

Next week - reflect on the last 7 years.

Brain - strength + challenge - Deep relationships - hard to let others in? - but can be overcome. Young people would need a diff. type of worship - Reputation is good - volunteers/refugees - outlet to serve.
Dance - need to think about what we are projecting about the Church.

I am : Sad
for

Pastor

Comrie
is

Leaving.

The Journey of Saying Goodbye

Survey Questions January 6, 2013

1. What was your initial reaction upon hearing the news that Pastor Bonnie is leaving?

I was surprised and shocked.

2. How do you feel about the way in which you heard the news? (by a letter)

I think it was a good way to do it.

3. Now, after a month of knowing that she is leaving, how are you feeling about the news?

*accepting it more. after giving it ^{some} thought
I remembered her saying different things,
suggesting she might not stay.*

4. What do you feel is the general mood of the congregation since Pastor Bonnie announced she is leaving?

People are sad to see her go.

5. In what ways would you like to be involved in making decisions about the future of St. Peter's going forward?

Name: (optional)

The Journey of Saying Goodbye

Survey Questions January 6, 2013

1. What was your initial reaction upon hearing the news that Pastor Bonnie is leaving?

I was very surprised and worried.

2. How do you feel about the way in which you heard the news? (by a letter)

Through my Grandma and through the letter. It was a good idea to send the letter first because it let the news soak in.

3. Now, after a month of knowing that she is leaving, how are you feeling about the news?

Still bummed out because she is one of the main reasons that we come to church other than God and Jesus.

4. What do you feel is the general mood of the congregation since Pastor Bonnie announced she is leaving?

Everyone is upset and still in awe.

5. In what ways would you like to be involved in making decisions about the future of St. Peter's going forward?

IDK

Name: (optional)

Michel Cooke

The Journey of Saying Goodbye

Survey Questions January 6, 2013

1. What was your initial reaction upon hearing the news that Pastor Bonnie is leaving? *Sad and a little Pensive.*

2. How do you feel about the way in which you heard the news? (by a letter)

I thought it was a good way to do it.

3. Now, after a month of knowing that she is leaving, how are you feeling about the news?

Still sad, but hoping that we can get some more new members.

4. What do you feel is the general mood of the congregation since Pastor Bonnie announced she is leaving?

I think they're feeling rather pessimistic about the future of the Church.

5. In what ways would you like to be involved in making decisions about the future of St. Peter's going forward?

I like to be involved as much as I can but realize that old age!!! and health problems sometimes prevent this.

Name: (optional)

Ray St

The Journey of Saying Goodbye
 Survey Questions January 6, 2013

1. What was your initial reaction upon hearing the news that Pastor Bonnie is leaving? *Surprise*

2. How do you feel about the way in which you heard the news? (by a letter)

It was a very informative way to hear the news, emotions didn't interfere with things at that time.

3. Now, after a month of knowing that she is leaving, how are you feeling about the news?

That things will go on hopefully.

4. What do you feel is the general mood of the congregation since Pastor Bonnie announced she is leaving?

That there is much to be done for St. Peter's to continue on.

5. In what ways would you like to be involved in making decisions about the future of St. Peter's going forward?

To be informed when there are choices to be made w.r.t. the type of services, music, etc.

Name: (optional)

Brenda

The Journey of Saying Goodbye

Survey Questions January 6, 2013

1. What was your initial reaction upon hearing the news that Pastor Bonnie is leaving?

I expected that this would be coming when she entered the doctoral program

2. How do you feel about the way in which you heard the news? (by a letter)

The letter went to all so that was practical, would have been more personal

3. Now, after a month of knowing that she is leaving, how are you feeling about the news?

It was time for her to move on, so I don't think being to St Peter's closer to leaving to someone how decisive of what's next

4. What do you feel is the general mood of the congregation since Pastor Bonnie announced she is leaving?

Sad, discouragement, what's next??

5. In what ways would you like to be involved in making decisions about the future of St. Peter's going forward?

— not sure

Name: (optional)

Jane Mariani

The Journey of Saying Goodbye

Survey Questions

January 6, 2013

1. What was your initial reaction upon hearing the news that Pastor Bonnie is leaving?

*very sad and somewhat depressed.
Happy for Bonnie.*

2. How do you feel about the way in which you heard the news? (by a letter)

She told me personally. I thought the letter that was sent to the Congregation a well written and gentle letter.

3. Now, after a month of knowing that she is leaving, how are you feeling about the news?

Still very sad and nervous about St. Peter's future. I'm trying to think about the saying "When one door closes another one opens".

4. What do you feel is the general mood of the congregation since Pastor Bonnie announced she is leaving?

Very sorry to lose such a wonderful, caring, energizing, fun pastor.

5. In what ways would you like to be involved in making decisions about the future of St. Peter's going forward?

I do not want to be on the search committee, but do want to be involved in some way and will be available for whatever gifts & cards.

Name: (optional)

Skirley Hudson

The Journey of Saying Goodbye

Survey Questions January 6, 2013

1. What was your initial reaction upon hearing the news that Pastor Bonnie is leaving?

Surprise but not surprised.

2. How do you feel about the way in which you heard the news? (by a letter)

It was good that the information was shared ~~by~~ ^{with} all so that eliminated rumors and other sources of misinformation.

3. Now, after a month of knowing that she is leaving, how are you feeling about the news?

Apprehensive about what the future holds for St. Peter's. Happy for her that she thinks she has found a new challenge & place to be.

4. What do you feel is the general mood of the congregation since Pastor Bonnie announced she is leaving?

Uncertainty & concern for the future

5. In what ways would you like to be involved in making decisions about the future of St. Peter's going forward?

Comfortable letting the elected Co-congregators handle where we go from here

Name: (optional)

Ben Maxwell

The Journey of Saying Goodbye

Survey Questions January 6, 2013

1. What was your initial reaction upon hearing the news that Pastor Bonnie is leaving?

Disappointed for our church. Happy for Pastor Bonnie.

2. How do you feel about the way in which you heard the news? (by a letter)

There would not have been a good way to hear that news.

3. Now, after a month of knowing that she is leaving, how are you feeling about the news?

It is hard to deal with since we have many other problems to face.

4. What do you feel is the general mood of the congregation since Pastor Bonnie announced she is leaving?

I think most of us are in limbo, not knowing what to think or do.

5. In what ways would you like to be involved in making decisions about the future of St. Peter's going forward?

I think the whole congregation should be involved since it affects all of us.

Name: (optional)

Matthew Zook

The Journey of Saying Goodbye

Survey Questions January 6, 2013

1. What was your initial reaction upon hearing the news that Pastor Bonnie is leaving? *Not surprised. Several things she said over the past year made me think she was considering the possibility. I was more apprehensive about others' reactions + whether this would start a lot of talk about the decline of the church.*
2. How do you feel about the way in which you heard the news? (by a letter) *This was probably the best way to let everyone know at the same time + to avoid rumor + speculation.*
3. Now, after a month of knowing that she is leaving, how are you feeling about the news? *Kind of anxious to begin planning + involve others in that process. What will we do next - both short- + long-term.*
4. What do you feel is the general mood of the congregation since Pastor Bonnie announced she is leaving? *I'm not sure I have a feel for that. Possibly hesitant, unsure.*
5. In what ways would you like to be involved in making decisions about the future of St. Peter's going forward? *I will probably be very involved as I am in consistency.*

Name: (optional)

Debra K

The Journey of Saying Goodbye

Survey Questions January 6, 2013

1. What was your initial reaction upon hearing the news that Pastor Bonnie is leaving?

Shocked! Then sad - had tears.

2. How do you feel about the way in which you heard the news? (by a letter)

Some friends Bonnie had shared that she was leaving with Bob & I prior to receiving the letter. We knew it was coming. However, if I rec'd the letter w/o knowing, I might have been totally shocked. Maybe not - sad.

3. Now, after a month of knowing that she is leaving, how are you feeling about the news?

It is still hard to see Pastor Bonnie's time coming to a close, but I think this process will be helpful.

4. What do you feel is the general mood of the congregation since Pastor Bonnie announced she is leaving?

Hard to tell. Seems as a whole, it is OK. However, in small groups, there is some discussion. I'm also sad that we will be losing David, as well.

5. In what ways would you like to be involved in making decisions about the future of St. Peter's going forward?

If I can be of help, I would like to be involved.

Name: (optional)

Carole Munn

The Journey of Saying Goodbye

Survey Questions January 6, 2013

1. What was your initial reaction upon hearing the news that Pastor Bonnie is leaving?

I was very saddened, but in the same moment very happy for her and Daryl for their new adventure and service to the Church.

2. How do you feel about the way in which you heard the news? (by a letter)

Pastor Bonnie told me personally before I received the letter in the mail, but I thought the letter which I received was very well written and very considerate of the feelings of the congregation. Had I only received that, for me, that would have been acceptable.

3. Now, after a month of knowing that she is leaving, how are you feeling about the news?

I am still sad about this news and wondering what the future of St. Peter's holds, because I believe, congregations and their missions, are hugely a reflection of their leader. But also I have faith in the wonderful group of members of this church to guide us and just to give support to all during this time.

4. What do you feel is the general mood of the congregation since Pastor

Bonnie announced she is leaving? I really can't answer this, because unfortunately, I have been working so many weekends, that I haven't been able to attend church, to get the feeling of the congregation.

5. In what ways would you like to be involved in making decisions about the future of St. Peter's going forward?

I feel since I am a very new member of this church, I don't want to be ^{or feel I should be} that involved in decisions that need to be made. Those members who have been here the

Name: (optional)

Judy Burk

longest should be most active in this process, although I am happy to voice my opinion. Their sadness, I'm sure, goes much deeper, than any feelings I have.

The Journey of Saying Goodbye

Survey Questions January 6, 2013

1. What was your initial reaction upon hearing the news that Pastor Bonnie is leaving? *Sad but not shocked*

2. How do you feel about the way in which you heard the news? (by a letter)

She personally phoned me, which I appreciated.

3. Now, after a month of knowing that she is leaving, how are you feeling about the news?

True, I understand that she has her family to think of and life's calling, however we @ St. Peter's still need her/Daryl and have grown comfortable & love them. Always difficult to give up someone/something you love.

4. What do you feel is the general mood of the congregation since Pastor Bonnie announced she is leaving?

Yin/Yang - Supportive of her personal life's calling/calls, but concerned with our future and faith journey.

5. In what ways would you like to be involved in making decisions about the future of St. Peter's going forward?

I'm on Consistory plus a major decision such as this will have to come before the entire congregation.

Name: (optional)

George Kuntel

The Journey of Saying Goodbye

Survey Questions January 6, 2013

1. What was your initial reaction upon hearing the news that Pastor Bonnie is leaving?

CONCERN. (HOWEVER, NOT A SURPRISE.... CONCERN FOR THE CHURCH BUT... UPWARD AND ONWARD TO PASTER BONNIE AND DARYL.

2. How do you feel about the way in which you heard the news? (by a letter)

... IN PERSON... THAT'S OKAY. I'M NOT A MEMBER

3. Now, after a month of knowing that she is leaving, how are you feeling about the news?

(I JUST HEARD TODAY) THIS COULD BE A TIME FOR REFLEXION.

4. What do you feel is the general mood of the congregation since Pastor Bonnie announced she is leaving?

DON'T KNOW.

5. In what ways would you like to be involved in making decisions about the future of St. Peter's going forward?

IT'S NOT ^{IN} MY PLACE TO DO THAT. HOWEVER, I LIKE BRAINSTORMING WITH PEOPLE.

Name: (optional)

Patricia Solano

The Journey of Saying Goodbye

Survey Questions January 6, 2013

1. What was your initial reaction upon hearing the news that Pastor Bonnie is leaving?

Sadness and feel like it is the end of St. Peter's as we know it (at least re: a fulltime minister/choir traditional services.

2. How do you feel about the way in which you heard the news? (by a letter)

That is the typical way - and it is up to the members to decide what is next.

3. Now, after a month of knowing that she is leaving, how are you feeling about the news?

Accepting - it is reality - just not feeling like there is an easy path for replacement or the church's future.

4. What do you feel is the general mood of the congregation since Pastor Bonnie announced she is leaving?

Concerned about next steps - Consistory should lay out a plan soon even if it has to be changed. Only 7 Sundays left until March

5. In what ways would you like to be involved in making decisions about the future of St. Peter's going forward?

Dependant upon Consistory to get a game plan, in consideration of number attending members.

Name: (optional)

The Journey of Saying Goodbye

Survey Questions January 6, 2013

1. What was your initial reaction upon hearing the news that Pastor Bonnie is leaving?

• SADNESS
• EXPECTED
• TIMELY

2. How do you feel about the way in which you heard the news? (by a letter)

• GOOD THE LETTER WAS BEAUTIFUL.

3. Now, after a month of knowing that she is leaving, how are you feeling about the news?

• SAD, HOPING FOR THE BEST.

4. What do you feel is the general mood of the congregation since Pastor Bonnie announced she is leaving?

• ABOUT THE SAME AS MY MOOD.

5. In what ways would you like to be involved in making decisions about the future of St. Peter's going forward?

• IN ANY WAY I CAN BE OF HELP.

Name: (optional)

[Handwritten signature]

The Journey of Saying Goodbye

Survey Questions January 6, 2013

1. What was your initial reaction upon hearing the news that Pastor Bonnie is leaving?

shocked, sad, anxious about all the programs she has started and been leading

2. How do you feel about the way in which you heard the news? (by a letter)

(Since I am not a member, I heard it from Sherley on the Bazaar day.)

3. Now, after a month of knowing that she is leaving, how are you feeling about the news?

more positive, happier for her.

4. What do you feel is the general mood of the congregation since Pastor Bonnie announced she is leaving?

5. In what ways would you like to be involved in making decisions about the future of St. Peter's going forward?

Name: (optional)

Bestowing the Gifts of God	Congregational Representative
Symbol of multicultural faiths	Pastor Daniel Pierre
Symbol of Pastoral Compassion	Rev. Bob Muise
Symbol of outreach & Christian education	Diane Koon
Symbol of Baptism	Kevin Alexander
Symbol of The Word of God	Diane Brandt
Symbol of Worship	Daryl Hollinger
Symbol of Servanthood	George Kunkel
Symbol of St. Peter's	Shirley Henderson
Symbol of Community	Rev. Dick Berg

Liturgy of Blessing – Saying Goodbye and Beginning a New Holy Adventure

Congregational Representative: (Shirley) Pastor Bonnie, on December 1, 2005, we called you to be our pastor: to proclaim God's Word, to baptize new members into the church of Jesus Christ, to be our teacher and lead us to a new day in this community. With the Gospel we have been challenged to lives of service. With your gifts of pastoral care, you have comforted us in times of sickness and trouble, and at the death of loved ones. Sharing our joys and sorrows, you have been important to our life together in this Church of Jesus Christ and in our service to this community.

Congregation: With love and our prayerful support, we release you from St. Peter's United Church of Christ to share God's gifts as an ordained pastor in First Congregational Church in Murphys California.

Pastor Bonnie: I give thanks for the life we shared with Christ. I have found our time together an incredible journey and remarkable growth for me as well. The memories we have made will always remain precious and meaningful.

I return to you symbols representing my role and responsibilities as the pastor in your midst.

(Pastor Daniel will come forward) It has been my privilege to serve the many cultures which enrich Lancaster County. This globe is a symbol of all the people who have found a welcome inside these doors. I have sought to live by Jesus command to go into all the world and make disciples. Pastor Daniel, we have bonded together as one people in Christ. We have worshipped together and you are on the path to become a United Church of Christ congregation. Receive this globe as a symbol of a welcome to all people.

(Diane Koon will come forward) Diane, I have tried to live in such a way that people know we are Christians by our love. Together we have learned that it is risky to be a Christian and takes blood, sweat and tears to make a difference in our world. Receive this puppet, as a symbol of all the outreach and education that St. Peter's is called to do.

(Kevin Alexander will come forward) I have baptized people in the name of the Triune God, using water as a symbol of cleansing and rebirth. Here is the water which symbolizes God's gift of belonging in Christ. Kevin, I baptized you last Easter and you have been baptizing me ever since with your faithfulness to God. Receive this pitcher as a reminder to let God's love wash over you every day.

(Diane Brandt will come forward) I have tried to proclaim the Word of God faithfully among you. I may have done it in some unconventional ways – drama, storytelling, dancing, PowerPoint, paintings, preaching and teaching. Diane Brandt, I give this Bible to you as an encouragement to scour it for divine wisdom and courage to open it among the people.

(Daryl Hollinger will come forward) I will present a rain stick but don't have the script written yet.

(George Kunkel will come forward) As a called and ordained minister I have tried to live the servant life as Jesus calls us to do. Here is the basin and towel that was carried to my ordination here. Servant hood is often inconvenient, it messes up our lives, it interrupts our golf games. As a representative of this congregation I have seen you wear the apron of Christ as you fed the homeless, stayed awake at the overflow shelter, walked the streets with postcards and other kindnesses too numerous to mention. Discipleship is risky business. May you bless this basin and towel often as it reminds you to continue to serve this community.

(Pastor Bob will come forward) Pastor Bob, our pastor emeritus, you have been a stalwart for me and others in these past years. Your quiet support has meant the world to me and Daryl. Receive this shawl as a symbol of the care and nurture you provide in your generous way. When you wrap yourself in it, let it remind you of my love for you.

(Shirley Henderson will come forward) Shirley, here are the keys to my office, the place where I have challenged and been challenged, have counseled and comforted people. It is the place where I entered holy quiet times, wailed in distress and roared in laughter. It is the place of paper and pens, puppets and pots of tea. May you receive them with great fondness remembering that the work of the parish is to love God with all your heart, and love your neighbor as yourself.

(Dick Berg will come forward) Dick, the best place to be is sitting at God's table. Together we have set the table for anyone who wants to come. We have feasted on God's good gifts of bread and wine, remembering how Jesus taught us to live. Receive these now and set the table often, inviting everyone to come. As an ordained clergy in this parish, you have often set the table. You and your wife Judy example what Jesus taught and sets your table at home to whomever shows up. Set this table often and remember this is the place where community is welcome.

Dick Berg: *Invite the congregation to stand and join hands with one another until we are all joined together. Then offer a prayer: here is a suggestion or make up your own.*

Dick: Eternal God, we thank you for Pastor Bonnie and for our life together in this congregation and community. As she has been a blessing to us, so now send her forth to be a blessing to others; through Jesus Christ. Amen



*St. Peter's United Church of Christ
Second Sunday in Lent*

*February 24, 2013
A Service of Worship to God
and Blessing for our pastor,
Rev. Bonnie L. Hollinger*

PRELUDE

Come Share the Spirit
Divinity Band

Vicki Vogel Schmidt

WELCOME Daryl

GATHERING HYMN AND PROCESSIONAL

The God of Abraham Praise

Black Hymnal #24

INVITATION TO CONFESSION: Dick Berg at altar with hand held mike
(*Dick: Let us pause for a moment as we reflect on God's mercy.*)

SONG: *Kyrie – God Have Mercy* Daryl Hollinger

One: Kyrie, eleison.

All: Kyrie, eleison.

One: God have mercy upon us.

All: God have mercy upon us.

One: Christe, eleison.

All: Christe, eleison.

e: Christ have mercy upon us.

All: Christ, have mercy upon us.

One: Gracious God, have mercy today.

All: Gracious God, have mercy today.

One: Show us how to walk the Lenten way. **All: Show us how to walk the Lenten way.**

CONFESSION (based on Psalm 27) Dick Berg

One: Loving God, we fear too many things and listen to the wrong voices. Turn us away from our impulses to solve our problems with our money and pull us to your Holy Spirit.

ALL: You, God, are our light and our salvation. You are the stronghold of our lives.

One: Strong God, we put our trust in armies and power and yet You tell us that our strength is in praising you.

ALL: You, God, are our light and our salvation. You are the stronghold of our lives.

One: Gentle God, hear us in our time of trouble for we do not seek your way. We fill our lives with worry, work and play. We fail to see your face.

ALL: You, God, are our light and our salvation. You are the stronghold of our lives.

One: Teach us your way O God and lead us on a level path. We know we shall see the goodness of your love. Amen

SONG: *Kyrie - God Have Mercy*

One: Kyrie, eleison.	All: Kyrie, eleison.
One: God have mercy upon us.	All: God have mercy upon us.
One: Christe, eleison.	All: Christe, eleison.
One: Christ have mercy upon us.	All: Christ, have mercy upon us.

***ASSURANCE OF GOD'S GRACE** (based on Genesis 15) Dick Berg*(Please stand if you are able to do so comfortably.)*

One: Children of God, rejoice. God hears our cries and forgives us. God told Abraham, "I am your shield and your reward shall be very great. I am the God who brought you out of the land of the Chaldeans. This same God will deliver us, heal us, and give us strength for the journey. Rejoice for God is our help.

***HYMN OF PRAISE** *O God Our Help in Ages Past* (stanza 6)

*Oh God, our help in ages past, our hope for years to come.
Still be our God while troubles last, and our eternal home!*

(The passing of Christ's peace is a sign that we have been reconciled with God and each other.) Dick Berg

One: The peace of Christ be with you.

ALL: And also with you.

One: Let us greet one another with the peace of Christ.

FAMILY TIME**SCRIPTURES** **DEBBIE MILEY AT THE LECTERN**Genesis 15:1-18 - *Remembering God's Goodness.*Psalm 27 - *God is our light and salvation.***SERMON**

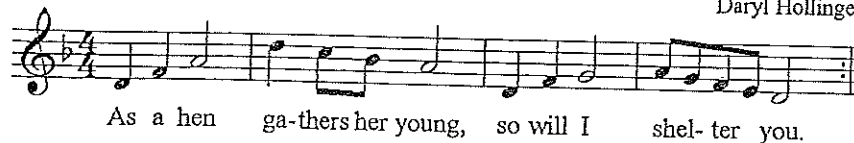
Pastor Bonnie Hollinger

Luke 13: 31-35 *Protection in the midst of Trouble.*

SONG OF RESPONSE

Based on Luke 13:34

Daryl Hollinger



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Pastor Bob and Pastor Bonnie will go to the altar. Pastor Bob use hand held mike.

PASTORAL PRAYER

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Sung Reponse



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The Lord's Prayer Pastor Bob Muise

ALL: Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

One: You, loving God, are here and everywhere. We worship you and adore you.

ALL: Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

One: We want your will, so use us as instruments of peace, as givers of love, as healers today.

ALL: Give us this day our daily bread.

One: We are blessed abundantly. Teach us to be grateful and share our bread with those in need.

ALL: And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

One: Our hope is in you. Your grace is new everyday. Keep our eyes and hearts focused on you.

ALL: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.

CALL TO OFFERING (based on Philippians 3:17, 20) Pastor Bob Muise

One: The Epistle lesson tells us to imitate the life of Christ. We are only travelers on this earth, our citizenship is in heaven. It is through Christ that we are transformed and our offerings are a sign of our devotion to God. Let us give our offerings with joy as we serve God with our money, our talents, and our time. May they be instruments of hope for others.

OFFERTORY*A Shelter in the Time of Storm*

Daryl Hollinger

***OFFERTORY RESPONSE** *Savior, Who Dying Gave* Black Hymnal #452

*Verse 3 All that I am and have is yours alone,
my love for you the fruit your love has sown.
Not doubt, nor fear, nor wrong, nor death can still this song;
my gifts of love belong to you alone.*

***PRAYER OF DEDICATION** (unison) Pastor Bob Muise

ALL: Loving God, we bring these gifts because we have been changed by you. We give them joyfully because you have blessed us with abundant life and have met our physical needs. We continue to serve you and others knowing we are to be light in the world. Amen. (Pastor Bob puts mike in stand at communion table.)

**LITURGY OF BLESSING – SAYING GOODBYE AND BEGINNING A NEW
HOLY ADVENTURE**

Congregational Representative: Shirley Henderson to communion table.

Pastor Bonnie, on December 1, 2005, we called you to be our pastor: to proclaim God's Word, to baptize new members into the church of Jesus Christ, to be our teacher and lead us to a new day in this community. With the Gospel we have been challenged to lives of service. With your gifts of pastoral care, you have comforted us in times of sickness and trouble, and at the death of loved ones. Sharing our joys and sorrows, you have been important to our life together in this Church of Jesus Christ and in our service to this community.

Congregation: With love and our prayerful support, we release you from St. Peter's United Church of Christ to share God's gifts as an ordained pastor in First Congregational Church in Murphys California.

Pastor Bonnie: I give thanks for the life we shared with Christ. I have found our time together an incredible journey and remarkable growth for me as well. The memories we have made will always remain precious and meaningful. I return to you symbols representing my role and responsibilities as the pastor in your midst. (People who are receiving symbols come up as you are called. If you are speaking, speak clearly into the mike on the stand.)

PRAYER OF BLESSING Dick Berg use mike at stand

ANTHEM *This Little Light of Mine* Daryl Hollinger

- announcements - prayer for Joac - seating -
BENEDICTION Pastor Bonnie *And the peace of God which passes all understanding shall keep your hearts + your minds thru Christ Jesus.*

***RECESSIONAL HYMN** *Sent Forth by God's Blessing* Black Hymnal #76

POSTLUDE *When the Saints Go Marching In* Divinity Band

Everyone is invited to a luncheon in Kunkel Hall to bless Pastor Bonnie as she prepares to leave for California.

WORSHIP PARTICIPANTS

Greeters: Debbie and Emma Miley
Usher: Jack Henderson & Roger Koon
Lector: Rev. Debbie Miley
Liturgists: Rev. Bob Muise & Rev. Dick Berg
Divinity Band: Dr. Daryl Hollinger, Brain Snow and Bob the trumpet guy
Flautist: Hana Mensendiek

Bestowing the Gifts of God	Congregational Representative
Symbol of Multicultural Faiths	Pastor Daniel Pierre
Symbol of Pastoral Compassion	Rev. Bob Muise
Symbol of Outreach & Christian Education	Diane Koon
Symbol of Baptism	Kevin Alexander
Symbol of The Word of God	Diane Brandt
Symbol of Worship	Daryl Hollinger
Symbol of Servants	George Kunkel
Symbol of St. Peter's	Shirley Henderson
Symbol of Community	Rev. Dick Berg

Credits: Liturgy written by Pastor Bonnie

Mosaic photo used by permission from Biblewalk.com This mosaic is on the altar of the church Dominus Fleuit in on the foothills of the Mount of Olives. It is believed to be the place where Jesus wept over Jerusalem. The mosaic is an illustration of a hen gathering her chickens, which is based on Luke 13:44 "...how often would I have gathered thy children together, as a hen doth gather her brood under her wings, and ye would not!"

From Pastor Bonnie: *Thanks to all my friends and family who joined St. Peter's choir today to sing the beautiful anthem.*

Thanks to my clergy colleagues who came today and bless me with your presence.

Thanks to all my refugee friends who delight me every day and honor me by bei... here today.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Thanks to the Women's Group and all members for providing the wonderful meal and reception today. Thanks to all those who have helped me pack. Pastor Bonnie

Divinity Café is back! Thursday, March 14, a great line up of musicians from the neighborhood will be here. A speaker will entertain dialogue on care of the earth. It's at 7pm. Bring your friends and family!

Panera Bread Book Club is every Wednesday at 10a.m. If you would like to join call the church office for details. The current book is "Reading the Bible Again for the First Time."

Darkwood Brew is every other week and its next meeting is Thursday, March 13 at 6pm in Divinity Lounge. The current topic is the Beatitudes. Come join this provocation discussion!

Diane Brandt is the new bridge pastor. Her phone number is 627-0759 and her email is dibrandt555@gmail.com Welcome Pastor Diane!



OUR MISSION

We, the members of St. Peter's United Church of Christ in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, in covenant with God and each other and empowered by the Holy Spirit, are called to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ as we become living examples of God's love. Therefore, we commit ourselves to grow in Christian faith, to nurture God's whole creation, and to seek God's guidance in our ministries of worshipping, caring, equipping for Christian living, and serving.

WEEKLY CALENDAR

Monday, February 25, 2013

7 am AA meeting in Marshall Hall
 10-11:30 am Refugee English Class

Tuesday, February 26, 2013

7 am AA meeting in Marshall Hall
 10-11:30 am Refugee English Class

Wednesday, February 27, 2013

7 am AA meeting in Marshall Hall
 10 am Panera Bread Book Club
 10-11:30 am Refugee English class

Thursday, February 28, 2013

7 am AA meeting in Marshall Hall
 10-11:30 am Refugee English Class

Friday, March 1, 2013

7 am AA meeting in Marshall Hall
 11:30 am N.W. Cluster Lenten lunch and service

Saturday, March 2, 2013

7 am – AA meeting in Marshall Hall
 Noon – 2 pm Progress AA in Marshall Hall
 5:30-8:30 pm AA Speakers Group, Marshall Hall

Sunday, March 3, 2013

10 am Church of Christ of the Fraternity in Spotts Chapel
 10am Intergenerational Sunday School
 11 am Worship Service, Pastor Diane Brandt preaching

PROJECT SITE REVIEW FORM
 Doctor of Ministry Program
 Drew University

Name of Candidate:

Bonnie L. Hollinger

Name and Address of the Church:

St. Peter's United Church of Christ
2116 Buchanan Ave
Lancaster PA 17603

Chairperson of the Local Advisory Committee:

Names and Positions of Local Advisory Committee Members, i.e., lay leader, board member, etc.

POSITION	NAME
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

INTRODUCTION

To the Candidate, Advisory Committee, Parishioners, and other interested persons:

Greetings!

By this time you all know of the fine doctoral project which has been developed by your Pastoral Leader with the assistance of the Drew Faculty, the Advisory Committee of your church, and other interested persons. We congratulate you on the vision, hard work, and commitment to ministry which the Project represents. Normally, one of the requirements of the DMIN Program is a Site Visit by Drew Faculty to the site where the project has been conducted.

The site visit is a meeting of the candidate, faculty, advisory committee, and church officials for the purpose of critically assessing the progress and accomplishments of the project. This

important step gives valuable feedback to the candidate and helps him/her prepare for writing the professional paper. It is a chance for faculty to guide the project towards its successful completion. It is also an occasion on which to lift up and celebrate the learning, ministries and spiritual growth generated by the project.

However, in certain cases, when a candidate has moved to another state, or when the site is located at a distance over 200 miles from Drew campus A Guided Site Review conducted jointly by the candidate and the Local Advisory Committee Chairperson is permitted. Therefore, utilize the following outline to conduct a site review. Please complete the Site Review Form, affix the appropriate signatures, and return the form to the Faculty Leader. It will be most helpful if you type the information. If you hand write it, please print or write legibly.

Please feel free to add additional sheets to the form as needed. Your detailed and extensive feedback, reflection, and suggestions are welcomed and are deeply appreciated.

Drew Colloquium Faculty Team:

TO BE ANSWERED BY THE ADVISORY COMMITTEE

1. List the dates when the Advisory Committee has met during the course of the Project.

2. Has the Advisory Committee been trained in its duties and made aware of the nature and scope of this Project? If so, answer "yes". If not, please explain.

3. Have all of the Advisory Committee Members read the Prospectus? (Y/N)____. Do they understand the purposes, goals, and ministries proposed in the Prospectus? (Y/N)____ If not, please explain.

4. What steps in the Action Phase of the Project have been taken? What is the result? (i.e., learning, congregational and personal growth through teaching, preaching, seminars, group activities and celebrations, community outreach, healing of conflicts, increase in cohesion and understanding, spiritual advance, etc.)

8. Assess the Candidate's leadership on the Project so far

- a. Has the Candidate taken initiative to educate the Committee, church leaders, and the congregation about the project? (Y/N) ____ If yes, how was that accomplished? Be specific.

- b. Has the Candidate demonstrated to the congregation the potential benefits of the Project for the life and ministry of the congregation? (Y/N) ____ State what you feel are the strengths and weaknesses of the Candidate's leadership on this project. Be specific.

- c. Has the Candidate guided the Committee's work sufficiently and stayed engaged with the Committee's work process? (Y/N) ____ If not, please explain.

- d. Has the Candidate shared the results of his/her research and involved the Committee in its interpretation for the ministries of the parish? (Y/N) ____ If not, what more can the Candidate do to facilitate this?

e. Has the Candidate demonstrated effective and appropriate communications skills in his/her leadership? (Y/N) ___ Do you have any helpful suggestions for improvement?

9. Please record the substance of any feedback or comments on the Project offered by church members, officials, consultants, or observers who were **not** members of the Local Advisory Committee.

TO BE ANSWERED BY THE CANDIDATE

4. Have you followed the structure and process as detailed in the Prospectus for timetable, meetings, research, leadership recruitment, and collaborative work? Explain.

DMIN Prospectus

A Healthy Passage in Saying Goodbye

Bonnie L Hollinger

December 2012

NARRATIVE OF OPPORTUNITY

St. Peter's is a small, close knit community of progressive Christians who are now facing an unexpected turn of events. I have been there pastor for over seven years and just recently notified them that I will be leaving and serving a parish in California.

The congregation is over one hundred years old and has lost most of its former distinctiveness. Where it was once the great towering church for the educated and elite of the local college, Franklin and Marshall, and considered "the church" of the Lancaster Theological Seminary, it is now a tiny remnant of faithful believers who are determined to make a difference in their neighborhood.

The parish looks entirely different than when I arrived. This church was almost dead and the building even bore that resemblance. Classrooms were filled with junk from floor to ceiling, cobwebs stared at me as I entered an upstairs chapel; the smell was musty and very little sign of anything new existed. We embarked on a path to create spaces where ministry could happen. We installed an elevator, air conditioning, a new sound system and created a narthex where folks could enter and be welcomed.

This initial act of preparing our building enabled us to begin to look outside of the building and determine where our ministry could thrive. Little did we know that by helping one refugee family in the same block as our church we would be opening the door to a ministry that is flourishing today. Our city is an ideal place for refugees to relocate and with the aid of Church

World Services, we have seen over a thousand refugees resettle here in the last seven years. Our church holds classes for refugees Monday through Thursday and we service several hundred people a week. This grew out of a tiny class of six people who needed to learn to speak English and were put on a long wait list at our local literacy council. These classes are led by volunteers from the neighborhood and college and funded by donations from everywhere.

This ministry has changed the lives of the members of St. Peter's. Recently at a congregational meeting when the parish was deciding if they wanted to merge with another congregation, the first concern was what would happen to this outreach ministry if we closed our doors. Members decided that too many people rely on this parish to close and they are determined to love their neighbors as themselves until the money runs out!

The process has suddenly taken a new turn as I have announced that I will be leaving as their pastor to take a new call in California. While I told this congregation, its leadership and had many dialogues stating that I would most likely seek to go elsewhere when our son graduated from high school or at the end of seven or eight years, they still seem shocked.

The congregation recently voted to continue to contract with me as a full time pastor even though the finances are meager. I wrote two grants this year and we had a number of large gifts given to the church and so 2013 was looking bright. However, as soon as I announced my leaving, leaders immediately began talking about whether or not they would continue to have or a full time pastor or even continue as a church! It is probably an understatement to say that this congregation has relied heavily on its pastor for leadership in the last seven years.

In doing research on how to say goodbye to a congregation, I discovered that there are many resources for congregations on protocol and ethics and articles on how a pastor and his

young family will adapt to a new place. There is little material on the psychological and emotional toll this is on the congregation and a pastor with grown children. Processes to follow for this situation is not readily available. I also found that the liturgy for the closing service in the United Church of Christ does not seem to fit with our congregation's life together.

Having said all this as a way of background, it leads me to think about Hiltner's comments on Pastoral Theology. If I understand this correctly, then I do have my own sense of pastoral theology which was seeded but not cultivated in seminary. I believe that my shepherding perspective will bode well in this process as we move forward. Hiltner states that "pastoral theology comes out of the shepherding perspective."¹ He goes on to emphasize that pastoral theology enables us to use a critical method that is consistent with standards for my critical theological method.² I like his take on this and I agree that we come to our pastorate with a plethora of experiences and views that influence our leadership, our methods of inquiry and our ability to describe and access the changes taking place. I was often amazed that my seminary training was mostly geared to the methods of historical criticism and assimilation of material and little attention given to the acknowledgement of the models of leadership and diagnoses. One of my colleagues told me early on that the greatest gift a pastor possesses is the ability to diagnose the congregation both in a systematic perspective and in a personal one.

I believe this project can be enlightening and successful because I already have achieved a high level of trust among parishioners. The caution may come in my ability to be open to new insights and pains they will hopefully share.

¹ Seward Hiltner, "The Meaning and Importance of Pastoral Theology," in *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology*, Ed. James Woodward and Stephen Pattison (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 2000) 28.

² *Ibid.*, 29.

PURPOSE OF THE PROJECT

The purpose of this project is to provide some guidance to both the parishioners and myself in the journey of separation through all its stages of shock, grief, acceptance (hopefully) and then to celebration. This project will be directed with the congregation being the primary impetus for opportunities for processing, but will also include steps that I take to find my bearing as I leave this beloved flock.

THE SCOPE OF THE PROJECT

The project will engage members of St. Peter's in a series of meetings where we will discuss the stages of leaving. All members of the parish will be invited to participate in group meetings where guided discussions will take place. Lay members and I will lead these gatherings and an advisory committee from the congregation will help determine the nature of the questions. There will be some training in listening to narrative stories and asking open ended questions. The project will start in January of 2013 and last two months. The lay advisory committee has already approved the meetings with a final celebration on February 24.

MAJOR STEPS OF THE PROJECT

Initially I will meet with the lay committee to review the plan and scope of the project. We will set dates for the group meetings to begin and decide who will lead them.

There will be four main areas of discovery. They are: where are we now having heard the news of our pastor's leaving? What have we done these past years? What do we hope for the future? What can we celebrate? We will ask open ended questions and also take a survey at

the beginning and one at the end. At each session we will create a liturgy for that session which will then be used in the liturgy at the final celebration service.

DATA GATHERING

The gathering data phase will be to review all the stories and conversations and answers to specific questions. The survey will be one tool we use to gauge if the congregation has indeed moved from despair (as they appear to be now) to joy. Conversations and story telling will aide us in finding out where we are. This will lead us to the celebration where we will recall the past and rejoice in the future.

Analysis can take part on several levels. Care will need to be taken so that all groups and ages within the congregation are represented within these conversations. Record keeping of who attends the meetings will attend to this detail. We will use a variety of instruments to gather data such as writing things on newsprint, having folks fill out forms, games and discussion around tables.

I will invite folks to tell what they are feeling and thinking even delving into how hard these conversations might be. The class we just completed at Drew University in which we engaged in asking open ended questions is a good model for me to emulate in this project. It will not simply be a matter of “Are you sad about the pastor leaving” or “what are you feeling now” but a whole conglomerate of the lives of the people and their vision. I will ask “what was your first reaction when you heard the news? Do you remember what you were doing when you found out? What was that moment like?” In aiding folks to talk about this difficult subject I will embrace the use of *ethnography*. Moschella states, “Ethnography as a pastoral practice also

draws from narrative models of theology and care. Narrative models recognize the importance of storytelling as a hallmark of human experience.”³

She goes on to add, “The pastoral practice of ethnography can bring a congregation into an analogous co-authoring process.⁴ This is exactly what I hope will transpire! Through storytelling about *who we were*, *who we are now* and *how did we become who we are now* will lead us to dialogue about our journey together and an appropriate way for it to end.

In the gathering data phase we will review all the stories and conversations and answers to specific questions. We will look at the survey which will be given to attendees at the first and last meeting. This will lead us to the celebration where we will recall the past and rejoice in the future.

TIMELINE AND LAY ADVISORY TEAM

The Team Members of the lay advisory team are: Brian Snow, Kathy Kunkel, Diane Koon, Dick Berg, Pastor Bob Muise, and Shirley Henderson.

Brian is in his twenties and although he is not a member of our congregation he participates fully in the life of our church. He is a single dad with two young children who attend our worship and Christian education. He is a hospital chaplain and has completed seminary and is on track for ordination. Brian has a strong connection to the young people in the city and often invites me to accompany him at music events downtown. Brian lives “outside the box” and brings a new approach to almost everything he does. Kathy is the county controller and has been a long time member of the parish. Her family has a long history of supporting the

³Mary Clark Moschella., *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice*, (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2008) 5.

⁴Ibid., 6.

church and the social hall is named after her family. She serves as the treasurer of the consistory (the governing body of our parish). She is married and the mother of a daughter who is in graduate school. She is usually guided by her heart and her emotions easily spill over but her intellect enables her to approach things from a balanced perspective. Diane is the director of Headstart in Lancaster and is the vice-president of consistory. She is married and the mother of two college age youth. She is very analytical and will bring a practical side to the table. Dick is the head librarian at Lancaster Theological Seminary and also an ordained minister in the United church of Christ but he has not served a parish for over twenty years. His ongoing experience of church work is a great help in leading the church. He is a member of consistory and is often asked to preside at meetings as he is a gifted speaker and organizer. Rev. Bob Muise is retired and the pastor emeritus of this congregation and a great mentor to me. His years of experience give him much insight into the history and beliefs (both spoken and unspoken) of this parish. Shirley is the consistory president and a strong positive force in the church. She is not afraid to speak up for what she believes and she will tackle almost anything when asked. She is retired and lives with her husband on a small farm. I believe this committee is well rounded and they seemed eager to be part of this project as they perceive it is going to be a great help to the congregation.

Purpose of team: The doctoral lay advisory team is to assist the student in developing and implementing the doctoral project. They will help lead the meetings, design open ended questions, take notes, gather stories and share their own perspectives. They will meet four times with the congregation as part of the project; they will meet at least twice with the student to prepare for the project, and will be interviewed by the student's Drew University Advisor, Rev. Dr. Joel Mason. They will also provide support to the student and challenges as necessary. They

) will give feedback all along the way as to how they see the project progressing and make suggestions as they seem fit.

TIMELINE

There will be four congregational meetings and the dates for these are: January 6, January 13, January 27, and February 10. The final celebration is scheduled for February 24. Members of the lay advisory team have agreed to lead the discussions. In February Dr. Mason will visit the parish and interview the Lay Advisory team. In March I will connect with the team via email and Skype to review the data I gathered. When I return to Drew In April I will also meet with them to tie up any loose ends on the data gathering phase.

METHODOLOGY

Understanding the meaning of Habitus as described by Moschella will be important. She states, "Habitus is this almost unconscious agreement that here we do things this way. Forgotten as history, it is experienced as just the way things were, are and forever will be."⁵ While I don't sense that folks at St. Peter's are stuck in the past, I am not sure they are aware of these undercurrents that define them. I rarely hear the phrase, "well we have always done it this way," but I do hear folks tell of the good old days. They start off saying, "I remember when we used to have two hundred children in Sunday School." Where once I might have wanted to cut off such dreamy remembrances, I think now *I will invite discovering into what our time together was like.*

⁵Ibid., 52.

When I met with my committee we discussed *Appreciative Inquiry* as a possible too. This method has been used at St. Peter's previously. Even though Branson states that "the goal of Appreciative Inquiry is long-term change in congregational habits, the formation of new habits that arise from an attitude of focusing on the positive" and might not be the goal we are seeking, I believe this tool could be useful in my project.⁶ Especially beneficial will be the power of images as it refers to our expectations. Branson says that "the organization is shaped by the expectations of other when those others have particular images of the organization."⁷ I suspect this is true for us. The fact that Appreciative Inquiry begins with the positive might be a bit of a challenge since this study is generated by what many see as a negative action on the part of the pastor. Most of the time they are energized and ready to move however, this recent news might cause some folks to want to stop moving ahead. *The 4-I model might be helpful* especially since one other person and I have been trained in AI. It seems like a good fit to begin with Initiate and Inquire then move to Imagine and Innovate.⁸

I love the idea of *discovering what is possible*. Peers recall how Moses discovered the Holy in the midst of nowhere. He admits that it may mean leaving a safe place and going into deep waters but often that is where growth really happens.⁹ St. Peter's may certainly feel as if they have been led to a stormy sea with the news of my leaving.

⁶Mark Lau Branson, *Memories, Hopes and Conversations: Appreciative Inquiry and Congregational Change* (Herndon: The Alban Institute, 2004) xi.

⁷Ibid., 38.

⁸Ibid., 67.

⁹Lawrence Peers, "Expeditions into What is Possible: Narrative Leadership and Deep Change." in *Finding Our Story: Narrative Leadership and Congregational Change*, ed. Larry A. Coleman (Herndon: The Alban Institute, 2010) 41-58.

Perhaps a way of engaging and deciphering these questions and stories is through a process that Savage and Presnell call *circular inquiry*. I like how they suggest that collaborative deconstruction can be a part of assisting a congregation in delving through the distortions and perceptions that often come attached to stories.¹⁰ I am wondering if this will be particularly helpful in this congregation where the current leaders tend to be optimistic, including myself. It takes some discipline to listen to the problem- saturated parts of the story and not dismiss them. *The intentional interviewing* (or asking evocative questions in our sessions) will be helpful and as I work with the team for the project I will want to keep in mind that we will want to be good listeners and able to birth new questions to provide even greater clarity.¹¹

THEOLOGICAL AND ETHICAL UNDERSTANDINGS

One of the greatest examples in the Bible of saying goodbye is Jesus telling his disciples that he was going to leave them. The disciples rarely accepted it when Jesus told them he was going to leave them and when he finally died, they were in disbelief. I like the way Richard Ullman puts it in his article, "*Leaving WELL.*"

Consider the model set out in John's gospel. The start of Jesus' ministry takes a single chapter one lovely poem; a stirring sermon followed by a powerful liturgy, then – Boom! – he's off and recruiting a ministry team. The closure of his ministry takes four chapters (John 13:38-17:26), one-fifth of the whole book. There, in the farewell discourses, Jesus announces his departure, then reviews with his friends what they have done together, what they have meant to each other, and how their ministries shall continue.¹²

This suggests to me that this process of departure from a congregation which I dearly love, is going to take time and nurture. The duality of looking at the actions and reactions of the

¹⁰ Carl Savage and William Presnell, *Narrative Research in Ministry: A Postmodern Research Approach for Faith Communities* (Louisville: Wayne E. Oates Institute, 2008), 83.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 83.

¹² Ullman, Richard. *Leaving WELL*. The Living Church. 2008.

congregation and my own processes will indeed need reflection and space for grieving and sorting out all the systems at work.

Almost every denomination has procedures and ethical guideline for the time when a pastor leaves a parish. They usually consist of showing the correct forms to use, what parishioners are to do and not do with the pastor once she leaves and how to conduct a final service. What seems missing to me are stories, guides, suggestions and insights into the stages of grieving, how to discuss the sticky-wickets that exist when folks are upset and how to deal with the present reality of loss while at the same time trying to figure out the days ahead.

There are ethical issues to be sure. The Central Florida Presbytery in their manual on *Separation Ethics: When Pastor and Congregation Say Goodbye* states, "The pastor is the one in the professional leadership role and therefore, the one who has the responsibility for making sure that the separation that occurs is anticipated and carried out with foresight and effectiveness."¹³

I find this rather clinical and removed from the ethos that embodies the folks at St. Peter's. Perhaps it will be good to listen to the airlines and their instructions on flights. "First put the mask on your face and secure it tightly. Then assist the child next to you." It is often customary for pastors to be expected to take care of everyone else first. The Florida Presbytery seems to indicate this.

St. Peter's folks are a group of people who cry easily, laugh easily and share abundantly. I expect that their saying goodbye will not follow a protocol or anything that resembles it. Instead we might bumble along the way. It is through this project that I trust we will be able to grapple in joyous ways the journey of saying goodbye.

¹³ Central Florida presbytery June 7, 2011

There are some protocols that I need to follow according to my denominational guidelines and I will surely follow them. This means giving my congregation a ninety day notice of termination which I have done. I had to notify the conference office that I was leaving and the local association to which I have ministerial standing. I contacted the minister in charge of search and call at our conference level to let him know I was leaving and he already gave me dates that he can meet with the church leadership.

There are no strategies on how to say goodbye or notify the local community or the para-church ministries in which I am involved. A few denominations address this but not many. In this era of technology, there were no recommendations or parameters on how to use social media in this transition. I will be addressing this in portions of my project as some of our members used this communication vehicle to talk about my letter of resignation.

The speed at which information passes is not tackled at all in any of the dozens of articles I read. The concern of my conference was that everyone in the congregation would find out at the same time and told me I needed to use a letter to communicate to the congregation. The dilemma for me was that my husband is not going to resign his position at the church or the seminary at the same time as me. We had to strategize on talking to a number of institutions at the same time. The leaving becomes very complex!

My own theological premise that God is with us in all of life's struggles and joys will guide me and this congregation. These concerns can become ethical issues as I strive to lead the congregation into a process of saying goodbye while at the same time tending to our own emotional and spiritual needs. There is much to do in a short time and it is easy to get wrapped up in these events and neglect the silence I need and the teaching and pastoral care the

congregation needs. My denomination offers no leadership by personnel in this area. In keeping with my current spiritual practices I will continue to meet with my spiritual mentor and thrive on my daily journaling and prayer.

CONCLUSION

While this project is largely designed to benefit the congregation in moving from shock and fear to a time of celebration while saying goodbye to their pastor, I intend to keep copious notes about my own journey through the process. Since this is my first parish I have no experience in saying goodbye to a loving flock. Moving so far away presents both challenges and joys. In some ways it makes the transition easier for the congregation and me as we don't have to worry about boundary issues but the physical energy and preparation associated with moving across the United States is huge. It is with great prayer and mercy from God that this path will be a happy one!

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