

The Pastor's Report

Howdy-Do to You!

If it is ok with everyone, I am just going to jump right into it this month. As you might imagine, I spend a lot of time thinking about the church. Certainly about *this* church, in specific, but also about *the* "Church," in general; as a concept, institution, and social force. However, I have come to believe and, moreover, we have come to prove that things are not all as we have been led to believe or fear.

While dooming and glooming seem to be pretty much endemic to society these days, this is particularly true of the church's prospects in the modern era. Particularly from those within the church itself. In fairness, this is not at all unfounded. In 1983, when our current denomination was formed through the merger (reuniting, actually) of primarily northern and southern branches, the Presbyterian Church USA had 3,121,238 members. Forty years later, in 2023, our membership had been reduced to a little over 1 million members. Not good. That is almost a 70% drop. While we might imagine that some of these folks might have found other denominations which are a better fit or more to their liking, the real reason for such a precipitous decline is that folks have died and they haven't been replaced (not to put too fine a point on it). It is not just Presbyterians, though. There has been a comparable declines across the denominational board. The times, they are a changin'.

The question becomes why, and what (if anything) can be done to alter this trend? Though a stunning percentage of my colleagues in ministry seemingly fail to grasp the concept, a church is much like a business. Management, Sales, Marketing,

and Customer Service are what drive and dictate the enterprise. While I would argue there is no better product than the Gospel of Jesus Christ, I would also argue that Management has done a poor job of maintaining quality control and supply chain, the folks in Sales have diluted the product line and been overly beholden to faddish or slick advertising campaigns and, most discerning, the entire organizational structure has all but ignored Customer Service. Which is, has been, and forever will be the core principle of our "business."

While it is true that we must know our history in order to truly know ourselves, looking backwards will only get us so far. Worse, the relentless cascade of bad news (real and perceived) has created a "hunched shoulder" posture which not only *expects* more bad news, it creates a climate of "woe is me/us" where Good News is relegated to the realm of unanticipated and is, therefore, unplanned for. We've forgotten the potential of our Product. We have shifted our resources and energies away from Research and Development. We see no way forward for ourselves.

All of which is just a myth which we have perpetuated on ourselves. If you don't believe me, take a hard look at this month's newsletter. It is 21 pages of nothing but Good News. Yes, sometimes the news is hard, but here on the Park it is never not good. Seeing is believing, but one still has to look. Cultural Anthropologist Margaret Mead once said, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." We ARE that small group which is changing the world, and ourselves with it. Good for us.
- Rev. Mike

"Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind" - Romans 12:2