

And The Lord God said, "Go assemble the elders of Israel and say to them, the Lord... appeared to me and said, 'I have watched over you and seen what has been done to you in Egypt. And I have promised to bring you up from your misery in Egypt into... a land flowing with milk and honey.'" Exodus 3:16-17 and "I will be with you..." Ex. 3:12a; MT 28:20

Transitions are disorienting, God knows. And throughout Biblical history, when God wanted to help God's people grow and join in God's mission, He challenged them in new ways, i.e. the wilderness, exile, new church in Acts... until they could no longer stay as/where they were. Yet through all the disorientation in the culture, churches, in the world, and in history, God's great promises are unchanging:

- I see you Ex. 3:1
- "I am the God who brought you out of the Land of Egypt...",
- God has "a future and a hope" for God's people, (Ex. 3:17, Jer. 29:11)
- "I will be with you..." (Ex. 3:12a; Isa. 43:1-5; MT. 28:20).

These are days of destabilization and disorientation. From the war in Russia and Ukraine to the intensity around ideological differences here at home; from inflation and economic insecurities to climate change; and from old, comfortable ways of doing and being church to seeking God for the new ways of faithfulness and fruitfulness. Times of-disorientation can create a letting go, new opportunities, and spiritual hunger which God wants to satisfy, usually in *new* ways, which address the spiritual dynamics and possibilities emerging in the changing conditions. **The great challenge** is to stay rooted, abiding and hoping in Christ, the true vine, connected with the disciple community seeking to embody Christ, discerning what is timeless, what is still valuable or pertinent during transition, while letting go, discovering and embracing the new invitations and life God is bringing. Transitions are never easy or comfortable, God knows. We can be very grateful that our trustworthy God does know and is with us on this journey today as much as with God's people in the past. God is our hope.

OT scholar/prophet/professor, **Walter Brueggemann** has written (*Praying the Psalms*) that individuals and communities experience themselves in and move between one of 3 general "states" and how many of the Psalms function to speak to and/or reflect these 3 states:

Orientation – things are generally familiar, comfortable, predictable, stable, secure, and "make sense"

Disorientation: Richard Rohr's describes this transitional season of pain or change, waiting and uncertainty, as *liminal space*: "where we are betwixt and between the familiar and the completely unknown. Our old world is left behind, while we are not yet sure of the new existence."

We can have *hope* because such transition times of wilderness, exile... are "where all transformation takes place, if we learn to wait and let it form us." Richard Rohr. (Heb. 11, Jer. 29)

Re-Orientation – emerging transformed and wiser, re-storying how we understand, tell and live our lives, stories and identity, usually more settled, trusting and hopeful.

In this season of disorientation, social scientists are confirming how many today feel like the Jewish exiles in Jeremiah, whom God instructed to "Work to see that the city where I sent you as exiles enjoys peace and prosperity." Jeremiah 29:7.

"Working for the peace and prosperity of the city is an idea that's easy to endorse. Who doesn't wish for the flourishing of their hometown? But working for the good of a place where one feels like an outsider, or even perceived as second-class or a threat? That's a tougher sell.

It is also increasingly the very place many of our neighbors claim to find themselves. Various studies

have shown that a substantial portion of Americans believe their political opponents wish them harm and pose a threat to the country. Last month, Pew Research Center [released poll results](#) indicating more than 70% of Americans believe that “on the issues that matter to them, their side in politics has been losing more often than winning.” Across the country and across the ideological spectrum, Americans are reporting feeling like strangers in their own land — and not surprisingly, also report a greater sense of loneliness, fear, and embattlement.

But instead of adding or acclimating to the sense of anxiety and hostility that characterizes so much of our public square, what would it look like to instead work for the flourishing of the cities [communities...] where we feel exiled?” Charie Harder, President of the Trinity Forum, email Nov. 2022 as they are offering online conversation exploring these most important matters. @ www.ttf.org

Where might be God’s invitations and opportunities to us now as individuals and congregations?

Yellowstone Presbytery Navigating Transitions:

In light of continuing changes and transitions, we have focused the majority of our time on the “Equip and encourage disciple-making congregations and leaders for living the Gospel...” section of YP’s Vision statement

Churches in pastoral transitions: For all of our ministry with you in the presbytery a least one church (usually more) has been in pastoral transition, and some are now. Some of these churches can sustain full or part-time pastors/commissioned lay pastors. Others, for a wide range of reasons, made more challenging by a worsening pastor shortage, cannot.

Therefore, what may the Spirit be saying? What may the Spirit be inviting us as disciples to?

Our focus therefore has been primarily four-fold,

A. **Working with church leaders and PMT** to particular assist the churches in pastoral transition of some sort to read the signs of the times and their community, to discern gifts and God’s call and to mission, discern and experiment with how to adapt and the pastoral gifts and leadership to do so.

Pastoral Interims/Stated Supply pastors and Searches continue in Butte, Manhattan (Debbie Funke retired Oct. 31 after 30 years), First Bozeman, Miles City. Please join us in praying for these churches. Also remember Hysham, Forsyth and Colstrip, as they the first 2 are sharing Rev. Murchie, serving part-time in Colstrip.

B. **Gathering, supporting and equipping the leaders and members** in smaller churches to assume God’s ministry through their gifts and talents as the Spirit intends for the body of Christ.

While pastoral transitions will continue and it is the lay leaders who remain. Believing that lay leaders are gifted by the Holy Spirit and can bring just as much of the Holy Spirit into a ministry context as a pastor, we have been and are diligently offering training and mutual learning and encouragement.

1) In 2020 – 2022, George led a **preaching clinic for lay leaders and CRE’s**. Now some of the participants are actively preaching in various pulpits and contexts across the presbytery... Ask George for names of these lay preachers.

2) Now **George and Bob Hunter**, PCUSA pastor & trained counselor (raised in Montana, currently in Indianapolis) have begun an initial four-month, **monthly training to equip lay leaders to minister in crisis and caring situations in the Holy Spirit**. The hope is that no church will be left without a trained pastoral care leader(s). And where there is a pastor in place, a lay caring team can further develop their gifts and calling and strengthen the pastoral care ministry. At

this point 27 elders and pastors are enrolled across the presbytery representing 11 churches! If you still want to hop in on the first Tuesday of the month on zoom, please contact George.

3)The possibility certainly exists that if the interest is there to extend this training after January in another form, possibly a presbytery-wide Stephen Ministry training program dreamed about.

C. Equipping, encouragement and support for pastors/lay pastors. This remains a top priority 1-1 and in all our interactions, priorities and prayers.

A significant insight from research amidst the great clergy burnout and resignations, was distilled by Rev. Dr. Tod Bolsinger in his online article:

“But the big difference is that those who faced those challenges *without considering stepping down* were not more resolved or committed than those who did, but they did have two other factors that worked in their favor:

1. ***They felt more equipped to face the challenges and***
2. ***The felt more supported as they did.***

As Barna reported, “Overall, most pastors are confronting the same pressures and stressors—but perhaps not the same levels of equipping and support. As Rev. Dr. Glenn Packiam writes in Barna's *The State of Your Church*, “We need sages to advise us, leaders to direct us or hold us accountable, peers to remind us that we aren’t alone, healers to dress our wounds and companions who carry us when we can’t carry on.”

D. The Pastor/Lay pastor/Preacher lectionary study community continues on Thursday afternoons from 2:00 PM to 3:20 PM. zoom. Our great thanks to Jamie Schmeling for coordinating this ministry for the months George was on sabbatical. Newcomers welcome.

E. For all leaders and churches as well as pastors:

Equipping, empowering, supporting, exploring & experimenting with Shalom/God’s flourishing in *today’s context and culture*, not what may have “worked” in the past, doing ministry for a world and culture which no longer exists. We continue to read, share, dialogue, explore with various groups and leaders that we can learn from, equip and support one another.

- a. With the enormous challenges today, people are hungry for hope, for relationships and belonging, for groups who model a better, more life-giving way of life and community. We are intended to be a Christ-like contrast community, not merely “an echo of the culture” around us, as Carey Nieuwhof expresses it.
- b. *Living love and Shalom: Escaping Enemy Mode: How Our Brains Unite or Divide us* Intriguing, important insights for anyone, especially God’s people called to love our enemies, from a neuropsychologist, Wilder, and retired Brigadier General, Woolridge, in their hot of the press book,.
- c. *What may be God’s Invitations and Opportunities here?* It is a priority for our Leadership Cabinet, Pastoral Ministry Team and pastoral leaders to pray, dialogue, and explore this, soon. How can we cultivate what Walter Brueggeman refers to as “shalomic imagination”?

F. Camping and Youth Ministry Team – Change was thrust upon Westminster Spires, June 13. All ready after a year’s preparations by Curt especially, and Daniel and the Ministry Team, along with Kimmy, George, Mary Grace, Kara, and others and just 3 weeks away from starting, camp was rendered inaccessible for our camping season after the destructive historic flooding along Rock Creek damaged the bridge. It was sad and disappointing. Read their report about how God lead, they adapted and a different camp experience became possible. **June 17-23, 2023 save and share:**. See the report. And

We are deeply grateful for all of the committed people who have led, planned, served, fixed, led, prayed, cooked, prayed... over many seasons, especially **Curt Kochner whose amazing leadership,**

friendship and mentorship, vision, heart and spirit have been key in guiding the wonderful last 12 years of Westminster Spires ministry and mission, partnering with families and churches and presbytery staff. He has shared he will step back from this primary leadership role. We love and thank God for you and Susan, Curt.

Thank you to the **Rep/Nom Ministry Team for their diligent, prayerful work** seeking to discern the gifts needed for leadership in various ministries and roles. George staffs this.

A. We also want to hold up the work of the St Andrew, Billings Church answering **the call to steward and love the planet in this time of climate crisis.** Thank you for discerning the urgent call and holding up resources for all of us. Hopefully, your work will generate interest and cooperation in and with others in the presbytery.

B. **Transitions in our Synod and beyond** include:
Adjacent **Glacier Presbytery is also in a transition season** as Rev. Chuck Carlson becomes the Interim Executive Presbyter upon the departure of the Rev. Beth McCaw the end of December. Let's support them with our prayers.

C. **Our Synod of the Rocky Mountains.** Elder Lynn Smit, who has served so faithfully as the Stated Clerk is retiring in December. The new Synod Stated Clerk as of January 1, 2023, is Elder Candice Sweet, also Stated Clerk for Utah Presbytery.

D. The **Board of the Montana Association of Christians** decided for many reasons at its final meeting in October that it's season was over. January 16 there will be a service at Plymouth congregational Church in Helena for anyone who wants to attend to remember and celebrate the ministry of MAC.

BUT- the Church of Christ is always in transition. Some have said that God's church is always one generation way from extinction. And so we encourage all of us to read the signs in the culture and the hunger those cultural shifts are creating in the larger community for relationships and connecting meaningfully, authentically with God and others... Dreaming prayerfully... Envisioning, Structuring ministry to meet the new ways of thinking, living, serving,... following Christ together out of Egypt into the wilderness and eventually, the Promised Land and into eternity with our God forever.

Personal - George's mother, 94 and longtime PCUSA elder, gifted leader and beloved Nana, died Aug. 16 after yet another stroke, joining the church triumphant, her prayer for years. Her Oct. 1 memorial service had to be cancelled due to the impact of the hurricane, complicating grieving, closure and needed family time. Then, starting in April we have needed to attend to the very complex affairs of Kathy's 91 year old mother, living with us since the end of May, including declining health and capacities, a challenge and gift some of you have lived as well. Prayers, wisdom and understanding appreciated!

PS - **We each wrote Sabbatical Reports/Reflections** which are intended to compliment and augment this report and are posted with the documents for this meeting.

Thank you again for a restorative time of sabbatical. We are deeply grateful for and love you and look forward to what the Spirit has in store. Shalom!