

“Seeking the Welfare of the City”

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Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7, 11
Matthew 25:31-40

According to a recent study conducted by the American Religious Identification Survey, the number of Americans who identify themselves as Christian has fallen from 86% in 1990 to 76% in 2008. The number who say that they have no religion has increased from 8.2 % in 1990 to 14.2 % in 2008. In the years between 2001 and 2008, the percentage of mainline Protestants has fallen from 17% to 12.9%. (This survey was done by the Program on Public Values at Trinity College in Hartford, CT).

Presbyterians in Hampton Roads are not immune to this down turn. In the past ten years, the combined membership of our 63 churches has decreased by 2,000 people, the equivalent of losing one 200 member church a year for ten years!

We are beginning to see several of our churches not being able to afford full time pastors any longer. I estimate that in a five year period beginning about two years ago, we will go from 44 of our churches having a fulltime pastor to 35. In the next five to 10 years, we will probably see several of our churches ask the Presbytery to dissolve them, or to merge or yoke with another church.

We are going through a severe business downturn. Our unemployment rate is at the highest rate we have seen in 30 years. The giving to our churches has decreased drastically in some of our churches. The largest decrease in congregational vitality is in Norfolk, where we have 18 congregations, with a population that can sustain only 5 to 10 Presbyterian Churches. Instead we have one 2,000 member church, and 17 struggling churches.

Given these realities, is there a word from the Lord?

Many theologians have said that the time we find ourselves in is more similar to that of the Babylonian Exile than any other time in Biblical history. Let me share with you a passage from Jeremiah in the midst of that Babylonian Exile, because I think there is much that applies to our situation today in this words.

Listen to these words as they are recorded in Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7, 11:

These are the words of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah

sent from Jerusalem to the remaining elders among the exiles,
and to the priests, the prophets, and all the people,
whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon.
“Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles
whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon.
Build houses and live in them;
plant gardens and eat what they produce.
Take wives and have sons and daughters;
multiply there, and do not decrease.
But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile,
and pray to the Lord on its behalf,
for in its welfare you will find your welfare. ...
For surely I know the plans I have for you,
plans for your welfare, and not for harm,
to give you a future with hope.”

50 years ago, before the exile we find ourselves in today,
our society and our churches shared the same values.

Today, Christians are a smaller percentage of the population than in recent memory.
People are suspicious of you if they find out you are a Christian.
In some cases, Christians are attacked and mocked by nationally known comedians.

And yet, I get the impression that God is not finished with the church.

Last year 85% of our sessions, representing over 500 elders, told the Presbytery
that making disciples should be the over arching goal of the Presbytery.

We hope to have most of our pastors over the next 3 to 4 years
go through a twelve to thirteen month class to give them the skills
to lead their congregations to make and grow disciples for Jesus Christ.

Already 16 are about halfway through the first class. Your pastor has been a faithful member of
this first class.

One crucial element of this strategy will be to help our churches see
that they must become outward focused
in order to be the kind of congregation that makes and grows disciples of Jesus Christ.
Before our exile, we were quite proficient at architectural evangelism,
otherwise know as “build it and they will come.”
Today we are being called to shift our thinking to that of a missionary mindset –
to go where people are
instead of expecting them to show up whenever and wherever we build a church building.

This is not to say that we neglect present church members.
In fact, every church **must** take care of its own members.

But our congregations over the next three to four years will study the scriptures and talk among themselves and pray and will come to see that the outward focus has to have priority over the inward focus, again, if the church of Jesus Christ is to become the church that Jesus intended, to make and grow disciples.

Our pastors and leaders over the next three to four years will see if they don't already, that outward focused mission has to include personal relationships,. That means that you don't just help needy people. You develop relationships. You get to know their names.

One of our churches thought they were being outward focused when they noticed that kids were hanging around the church in the afternoon with nothing to do. So they built a basketball goal in the parking lot to give these kids something to do. That was a good thing to do. But they forgot that ministry is not about doing good things for other people. It's about developing relationships with people. It's about getting to know people so that at the very least you know their names.

Jesus knows us by name.
Jesus knows the unchurched by name.
How do you think that the unchurched will figure out that Jesus knows their name?

It used to be that you could tell them that, and some would believe it.

But today, the unchurched need to be shown before they can be told. When the body of Christ starts learning the names of the unchurched, later the unchurched will understand that Jesus knows their name also.

Outwardly focused churches build bridges to their communities instead of walls. They don't shout at the dirty stream, they get in the water and begin to clean it up. They measure their effectiveness not only by internal measures such as worship attendance and finances and members, but also by the spiritual and societal effects they are having on the communities around them. ... Internally focused churches help individuals. Outwardly focused churches change the city.^[1]

This passage from Jeremiah demonstrates God's concern for the city., That should be our concern as well.

^[1] Paraphrased from Rusaw and Swanson, The Externally Focused Church, pp. 17-18. Much of the rest of this sermon is also drawn from the first chapter in this book. This book is one of the 13 books that our pastors are studying to prepare themselves to lead their congregations from being inwardly focused to externally focused.

Outwardly focused churches have moved past being angry with the city to wanting to be a blessing to the city.

As I said before, we are today in exile, just like the Hebrews in Babylon. Jeremiah's words of advice to them and to us are "Seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it." (Jeremiah 29:7)

There must be a million ways to do that, but let me give you just one example, of a church that took seriously this call to be outwardly focused, and to seek the welfare of the city.

Leaders of their church went to the elementary school principal to see what needs she had. She said that they had a significant number of students who were reading a grade or more below their own grade level. Statistics indicated that unless those kids could learn to read better, in their teenage years they were likely to end up behind bars or dead. The church organized a group of adults who could provide one on one reading to elementary age children four afternoons a week. In 6 months, those students were reading at grade level. Folks, those church members were engaged in the ministry of saving lives.

We learn from scripture that the church ought to be like salt and light and leaven to the community. But salt, light, and leaven can only change their objects when they are in relationship with the object they are supposed to change. They don't work very effectively at a distance.

One author has noticed that John Bunyan's Pilgrim's progress, written in 1675, may have had an unintentional consequence. The story is about escaping the wicked city in order to get to the celestial city. He says that the theme of escaping the city has subconsciously influenced the church for over 300 years. "Could it be that Christians have tried to turn the church into a celestial city where we educate our kids, eat our meals after church, and enjoy our circle of friends away from the wicked city?" I don't know about you, but I stand before you guilty as charged.

I hope that five years from now, we can joyfully report to each other that a growing number of our churches have become outwardly focused, and that they are seeking to serve and bless the city, not to control it. That we will be learning to build bridges instead of walls. That we will be blessing our cities and praying for them. That we will be seen as assets to the city, and not liabilities.

I really think God can do this through us,
but it will be a lot easier for God to do this
if we shift our focus from internal to external.

I hope you believe that as well.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.