



Presbytery of Genesee Valley

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Dear Pastors and Churches of the Presbytery of Genesee Valley,

The book “*Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory*” by Tod Bolsinger, is particularly poignant at this critical moment that we, church leaders and congregations, find ourselves in. Perhaps gleanings from the story of the Lewis and Clark expedition can help us navigate in the uncharted territory of social distancing. Consider the following quotes in light of the reality of Covid-19:

“Lewis and Clark’s expedition to explore the newly acquired Louisiana Purchase was built on a completely false expectation. They believed, like everyone before them, that the unexplored west was exactly the same geography as the familiar east.”

“They planned on rowing, and they thought the hardest part was behind them. **But in truth everything they had accomplished was only a prelude to what was in front of them.** Lewis and Clark and the Corp of Discovery were about to go off the map and into uncharted territory. They would have to change plans, give up expectations, even reframe their entire mission. What lay before them was nothing like what was behind them. There were no experts, no maps, no “best practices” and no sure guides who could lead them safely and successfully.”

“How do you canoe over mountains? You don’t. If you want to continue forward, you change. You adapt. Meriwether Lewis looked at the miles and miles of snow-covered peaks and knew that to continue his journey he would have to change his entire approach. **The same is true for all who are called to lead beyond the boundaries of what is known.** We go through a personal transformation of identity and mission intention. We go from being river rats to mountain climbers. **We keep on course with the same goal, but change absolutely everything required to make it through this uncharted territory.** We ditch the canoes, ask for help, find horses and cross the mountains. And when the time comes, we make new boats out of old trees. **You let go, you learn as you go and you keep going, no matter what.**”

Friends, the ministry reality we face now, and the realities that are unfolding but not yet upon us, are certainly not the same landscape that we have known. We are in a very unfamiliar place and time. This is uncharted territory that will require of us new learnings and adaptive responses. Even so, the Good News of the Gospel will continue to be proclaimed, albeit in different forms.

While this moment of change and loss of the “old ways” is new to us, it is not new to Christianity. Church historian Phyllis Tickle reminds us of this reality in her work, “The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why.” She notes that the church has reformed itself in fundamental ways every 500 years. Furthermore, Christianity has been in the midst of a 500 year re-formation for decades prior to the emergence of Covid-19. The synopsis on her website says this to us:

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“Rooted in the observation that massive transitions in the church happen about every 500 years, Phyllis Tickle shows readers that we live in such a time right now. She compares the Great Emergence to other “Greats” in the history of Christianity, including the Great Transformation (when God walked among us), the time of Gregory the Great, the Great Schism, and the Great Reformation”.

Indeed, Covid-19 is not the beginning of the next great reformation. Instead, it is a pressing of the fast-forward function on the reformation period we were already immersed in. As God was in the past reformation moments of the Church, God is present with us in this moment, too. **We are reformed and always reforming!**

The Presbytery of Genesee Valley and its congregations are finding our way “off the map”. We, your Leadership Team, commit to the following, and encourage you to do as well:

- Pray often.
- Be Spirit-Led.
- Connect with other pastors and congregations (and presbyteries) in order to find our way, together.
- Discern and take whatever faithful first steps that will be life-giving for your congregation and our Presbytery.
- Make friends with failure as everything you try will not “work.”
- Celebrate the new connections and the new skills you are given the opportunity to learn. Our creative new attempts at communicating will draw new people into the communion and conversation.
- Try and try again.
- Pray some more

May the peace of Christ enfold us, uphold us, empower us and flow through us in these challenging days.

In Christ,

Rev. Sue Thaine, Convener of Big Picture Team

Elder Roger Estes, Moderator of Presbytery of Genesee Valley

Rev. Colin Pritchard, Moderator-Elect of Presbytery of Genesee Valley

Elder Susan Orr, Stated Clerk of the Presbytery of Genesee Valley

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