

Report of the Executive Presbyter
to the 135th Stated Meeting of the
Presbytery of Southern New England
November 2008
“Being Formed In Exile”

Last presbytery meeting I spoke to you about the Exile experience. I am gratified by the response of many of you commissioners. The story of the Exile seems to resonate with you as much as with me as a helpful description of what we are facing in our church.

Today I want to amplify on how this biblical story speaks to me. As a reminder, last time I noted several parallels between our experiences today and what the exiles experienced when taken to Babylon.

- Like the biblical exiles we are being forced to live in a land and a culture that is quite foreign to what we knew years ago. You could call this land post-modern, or secular, or consumerist, or profane. But it is generally hostile to our faith and our spiritual community. It is uncomfortable to be here. We are in Babylon.
- One of our primary feelings is loss as it was in biblical times. Our membership is down, our attendance is down, and the median size of our congregations is only 103 members. We have lost influence. We have less unity. We just aren't what we used to be. We are in Babylon. As Psalm 137 says: *“By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion.”*
- As the biblical exiles were scattered and divided over the ancient Near East, so are we becoming divided and separated from one another. Our theology, our politics, our language, our worship music ... all seem to drive wedges between us. We are isolated across the Babylonian empire.
- Like it was for the exiles this experience is long, and hard, and very discouraging. It feels like God has abandoned the church. But, God is not done with us, and as it was in the Bible, we are returning to God and God is returning us to vitality by bringing us to something new a little here and a little there. Signs of growth and the new church are emerging. Last meeting I mentioned some specific places where that is happening in our Presbytery.

I have immersed myself the last couple of months in the Exile story...especially the exile prophets of Jeremiah and Isaiah. I have found incredible insights into our current life as congregations and as a Presbytery! Here are some themes I'm discovering from these prophets ... spoken to exiles like us.

Though we may feel like victims of forces far beyond our control, at the core we are being driven into exile because we have lost our way. We have put our faith and trust and banked our future on things other than God. We have thought buildings, or

programs, or new pastors, or money, or changes in the Book of Order, or being popular would grow us. But they haven't ... instead we are declining. Jeremiah quotes God: "*for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed our cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns, that can hold no water.*" (Jer. 2:13)

I was taken aback last month when two people in our presbytery each independently came to me and said in essence: if we are in exile we probably need to confess. One person was from one of our most liberal congregations, the other from one of our most conservative evangelical congregations. The fact is every renewal in the church has been preceded by an awakening to our need to confess. Through many of my 34 years in ministry I too easily looked to the new program from the General Assembly or the new popular book to do my ministry and I paid far too little attention to God. We need a season of confessing to one another and especially to God. Confessing that we have hurt one another. Confessing our reliance on things that no longer work. Confessing that we really don't know God that well or God's ways. Confessing our need for God and God alone to bring us through.

Another theme I am discovering is that God uses the exile to re-form, re-fashion, re-mold God's people. Just like the economic crisis is forcing us to live differently and spend differently, so the exile will force us to be different people. Pope John Paul when asked about the declining Catholic Church in America said that perhaps the church needs to be smaller in order to know who it is. I liken that to what the exile is doing to us. This time of decline and loss and scattering is a pregnant time. God is in it. God is seeking to bring us back to life, to faithfulness, to God's own self. God is trying to form us. "Behold, I have refined you, but not like silver; I have tried you in the furnace of affliction" Isaiah says of God.

The image Jeremiah used was of a potter molding a lump of clay ... the potter could do great things with the clay but if it resisted, if it kept within itself impurities, then the clay was discarded as worthless. God wants to mold us into something entirely new, perhaps never seen before, but we need to yield ourselves to God (not our culture) and purify ourselves in confession and changing the way we live.

So here is my challenge to you my brothers and sisters in Christ. We have got to stop trying to simply maintain and save the institution of the church and denomination. Like the Temple in Jerusalem, like the fortified walls of the city, like the elaborate ceremonies of the Levites the institutions and practices of our denominations are fading away. We have been smothered by our many reports, policies, amendment debates, procedures, structures, reorganizations, committees, and assemblies. There has been no room, no space, no time left after our institutional obligations to be open to being formed by God's hand. This we need to acknowledge and confess and change.

So the good news is: we are in exile! We are being changed whether we like it or not. "*The former things are passing and new things I now declare.*" (Is. 42:9) When we leave the past behind, glorious as it once was, our spirits can be formed anew by God.

A pilgrim was walking a long road when one day he passed what seemed to be a monk sitting in a field. Nearby men were working on a stone building.

“You look like a monk,” the pilgrim said.

“I am that,” said the monk.

“Who is that working on the abbey?”

“My monks,” said the man, “I’m the abbot.”

“It’s good to see a monastery going up,” said the pilgrim.

“They’re tearing it down,” said the abbot.

“Whatever for?” asked the pilgrim.

“So we can see the sun rise at dawn,” said the abbot.

(From **Meditations** by Thomas Moore)

For me this is a very potent story about what needs to be happening in our exile.

Let me suggest these to your session, or to your committee, and especially to those of you who lead this presbytery.

Stop this habit of opening up every gathering of God’s people with perfunctory prayer and then doing just business. In this exile we can no longer afford the luxury of letting our past faith and practices sustain us. We are going to need a lot more during this lean and challenging time. Be driven back to the biblical story, especially of the exile. Begin with the Bible, enter into the gift of the ways God deals with us. When we have done Bible studies here at Presbytery meetings we have almost universally appreciated the experience and grown from it. And we have moved to incorporate a full worship experience at our meetings ... recognizing that God must not only come first, but God is the one essential of our gatherings.

The PUP group of this Presbytery, meeting now for over 3 years is a shining example of how people of very divergent theology and culture can come to respect, strength, and faithfulness by simply praying and studying the Scriptures together. Their uncommon but shared openness and vulnerability has allowed them to be safe together in the Word, and to discover our true identity as a community known as the Body of Christ. Our listening to and wrestling with the Word together frees us from our competition and rivalry and re-forms us as brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ whom we seek. This is why God wants us in exile: to form us as God’s own Body.

I want to challenge the leaders of your church and challenge especially the leaders of this Presbytery. We who are in exile have got to stop doing business as usual ... and focus the best of our energy on discerning together what God is doing with us ... and who God wants us to be. We may need to stop doing committee meetings and be in small discernment groups. In other words, we need to lead by discerning God’s way and not by our management of this institution.

Recently I had a conversation with several people from the Northampton area of Massachusetts. They are Presbyterians in a Congregational land, but wish nevertheless to start a reformed community. My initial reaction is how can we find the money and

leaders, how can we help them find a place to worship, how can we fit them into our new church development procedures... you know, I wanted to do the institutional thing. But they wanted to talk to us of spiritual formation ... of their values of welcoming the stranger and the outcast, worshipping God in freedom, of respect for each individual, of seeking justice, of doing mission.

Do you think we and our institutional life can get out of the way and let God form in us a new thing?