

Presbytery of Southern New England
Meeting at Christ Church, Springfield
September 13, 2008

Report of the Executive Presbyter

“We’re in the Exile Now!”

Good Morning! Welcome to all of you, especially those of you here for the first time. May the experience of our Presbytery community be one of warm welcome and inclusion! And thanks to Christ Church for hosting us ... it is a challenge for a small congregation to host the Presbytery and I for one appreciate mightily your hospitality. Thanks!

I was examined for ordination in this Presbytery in 1974. That means that for all my ministry I have been in a denomination that has been in decline! I’ve tried to make sense of it all by attaching to the story of the Exodus. You know, we are on a journey, leaving the slavery of the past, wandering through some difficult times, but that the promised land is just around the corner. I saw my Moses message as describing the promised land and saying: hang in there, we’ll be there soon.

But the story no longer works for me. For one thing I can no longer describe the promised land ... the world is changing so fast that I’m not sure at all what the church or our congregations will look like in the future. And I’m not finding anyone who can. The Exodus also no longer works because we are not coming together on a journey, we are separating and going different directions.

Instead, I’m living the Exile story and perhaps your congregation is too. Today I want to say something about how the Exile story gives meaning to me and how it says something about what is happening in our Church and congregations.

Simply put, the Exile was the journey of God’s people when they were forced to leave their homes and comforts ... to live in a foreign land ... where they had to discover God anew ... and eventually return as changed people to a changed home. We in the Presbyterian Church, if not pretty much the Church in America, are a community on an exile journey.

Forces far beyond our control have forced us into a land that is very different from our past. Many of the things that have been familiar to us are gone or have changed. These things have been with us for so long we can’t imagine living without them. In biblical exile times they were the Temple in Jerusalem, the religious establishment, their sense of entitlement, their self-assurance of God’s favored blessing. Those needed to change! It is not so different today. We can’t imagine living without our church buildings, our denominational structure, the place of mainline Christianity in American culture, our belief God will favor us and our nation forever. But those things are changing: our buildings are so expensive that they compromise our witness, our denomination seems to

be fading away, Christianity is no longer the unofficial state religion, and it feels as though God has withdrawn his favor toward us.

In other words, we are being forced to live in a land and a church that is far different from what it was when most of us grew up. Naturally what many of us are feeling is a sense of loss ... a grief over what no longer exists; and a sense of disillusionment and discouragement about the church. Our sanctuaries are no longer full, denominational identity is unsatisfying, church programs that once worked are now ineffective, languages spoken around us (even by our children) are unfamiliar. We are being forced into exile.

In this time of loss and change we can feel an abundance of anxiety, and anger, and desperation, and a rush for answers or programs or people who will take away our pain and take us back to the time when life was better and easier. We want the one program that will revitalize our church, bring in new members, put money in the offering plate. We want a new pastor. We want the denomination to do something! But none of them seem able to do what we want or need. We just are not in a place where they can. We are entering exile.

The exile is not forcing us to move in one direction or toward one place (as it was in the Exodus). Biblically, the exile was a scattering of God's people, separating them from each other into small, isolated places across the Babylonian empire. We are being scattered as well ... we are being separated from each other. Our family is being wrenched apart. Denominations are being splintered, congregations (like Covenant, Simsbury) are leaving, church members go to other churches or no church at all. What is separating us are important issues: theology and culture and language and worship style and ordination standards just to name a few. And one more grief is added to our hearts: we are no longer united and our Presbyterian family no longer gives us the comfort or belongingness or security we once had. We are in exile.

Intuitively we know we cannot be alone in this exile. We need others. We need an arm to lean on, an extra hand to hold, the heart of another who can assure us and love us. So we seek others ... others of similar theological persuasion, or of practice, or whose hearts resonate with ours. We move toward people, churches, even denominations of like mind. And there is some comfort in that for a while. But the exile is relentless and sooner or later we discover that even these alliances are fraying. Distance or busy-ness, or lack of common experience bring us to realize that there is little we can do to make our selves feel totally at home, or unified, or comfortable. We are in exile ... and all this is what it feels like to be in exile.

The sooner we acknowledge our current experience and fully enter the exile the sooner we will find out why God has put us here and what God offers us while we are here. I say that because ultimately it is God who wants us in exile ... for good reasons.

First and foremost, what God offers us is God's own self. This may be the reason we are actually in exile ... to find God. Nothing human ... no new building, no new program, no new pastor, no new structure can give us what we need. We need God and exile

drives us toward God. Let me be clear about this: my experience in visiting many of our congregations is that we are good talking about our buildings or programs or fellowship or our plans for the future. But we are not so good at talking about or helping others relate to God or Jesus or the Holy Spirit. We may know something about God, but do we know God? God so desperately wants us that God even sends us into exile to find the divine mystery.

And so we experience the church in exile as fractured and contentious and diminishing ... a church concerned often about only its own welfare ... and we see less and less reason to be together, to go to Presbytery meetings, to belong to our Reformed heritage. And here is the second reason we may be in exile: God wants us in community, in fellowship, and in family ... and surprisingly that is the gift God wishes to give us exile. It is the very nature of God to be in community ... a three-person community called the Trinity ... a dual-nature community called the Christ ... a community of people called out by God named the ekklesia or church ... God's own body.

But, our community is not built, as Henri Nouwen says "*on human compatibility, or shared affection, or common interests but upon having received the same divine fire and having been embraced by the same divine love.*" In exile we are finally in a place and frame of heart to receive the divine fire and feel the embrace of divine love... and it is an experience so powerful and universal that it binds together all who receive it.

A third reason we are in exile is to find the new future God has in mind for us. It will be different from the past, far different. The exile does not end quickly, nor does what is on the other side of exile arrive at one time or uniformly. Biblically God's people left exile over a period of many years, and they did not all return to the same place. They came back slowly, sporadically, and almost invisibly. And so do we. We go back a little here and a little there, one person or small group at a time. One congregation discovers a small part of the future and lives it out. Another finds a wholly different way to leave and live into a new life.

With a newly deepened awareness of God we can leave the exile ... free of the past, free to risk something new, free to change, free to start a new life. It comes with intense hard work and surprising creativity. We see it in congregations and ministries that launch forth in new, unexpected and novel ways.

- Talk to Providence Church, for example, to see how to turn around decline and become a multi-cultural church with the best per member mission giving in the Presbytery.
- Or talk to Noroton Church about how direct and sustained mission involvement energizes a congregation.
- Or talk to Christ is Life Church about supporting a Brazilian elder doing new church development in Brazil for former immigrants to the US.
- Or look at our Synod Presbytery Partnership Group in New England who have funded a two new initiatives: a person in Higher Education Ministries and two persons in Immigration Ministries, both to work with all three of our Presbyteries.

- Or be in conversation with some of our specialized ministers: Dick Dannenfelter working with PTSD for returning veterans, or Eileen Epperson working with Forgiveness therapy, or Tony Charles a military chaplain who provides marriage support for military families, or Tom Troeger who teaches narrative and image and poetry in contemporary preaching, or Cory Loder about what it is like to live in true community in an educational community. These are God's people purified by the exile and now heading in new directions.

Sometimes the experiments work, sometimes they don't. But what matters is that they now have a sense of the holy ... so much so that they have escaped the chains of both the past and the exile. Where exactly they will end up or what exactly they will look like doesn't matter nearly as much as the conviction they now have about who they are. They are God's people no longer owned by human culture or political position or their expensive buildings or their tight finances or any human empire or enterprise. They are fully God's people free to fully reflect the glory of God. And that can happen anywhere and everywhere. The exile can no longer contain them. They have learned in the exile to fully live out the first commandment: to love God with all their hearts and their souls and their minds. All else has become secondary. The most important thing they take with them on the journey is the love of God ... God's unending love of them and their uncompromised love of God.

There are three parts to the Exodus journey. You or your congregation may be predominately in one of them, or in all three. In which part of the journey are you?

- The beginning stage of loss, and disillusionment, and disorientation ... wondering if there is a future for your congregation.
- Living in exile ... a time of change and discomfort, but engaging the new culture and looking for God's presence and leading.
- Returning ... Energized by the Spirit and risking all for the Gospel, attempting entirely new ministries

And, if we are in exile, and if it really is God who wants us here, then there are reasons for us being here. Which of these gifts are you receiving from God?

- An infusion of the Holy Spirit, and a palpable sense of God's presence. A realization that knowing God is the most talked about, most real thing in your congregation ... above buildings and money and program and ... whatever else.
- An entering into community with people who are different than yourselves. Not just new members, but are you as concerned, as Jeremiah said, about the welfare of the people around you as you are of your members?
- New life ... new mindsets ... new mission efforts ... a resurgence of ministry that is different and more faithful than the past.

The exile experience began when we abandoned and forgot the God who found us, named us, and saved us. The exile is God's way of bringing us back to God! I hope this biblical paradigm helps you as much as it helps me.