



## What Is NEXT Church?

*TEXT*  
*Philippians 2:1–5*

April 28, 2013 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

**T**he front of the bulletin reads: *The mission of NEXT Church is to foster relationships among God’s people; sparking imaginations; connecting congregations; offering a distinctively Presbyterian witness to Jesus Christ. Trusting in God’s sovereignty and grace, NEXT Church will engage the church that is becoming by cultivating vital connections, celebrating emerging leadership and innovation, and working with congregations and leaders to form and reform faith communities.*

This is the mission statement for a network of Presbyterians that has become known as NEXT Church. In short, this conversation has given me reason to be specifically and concretely hopeful for the Presbyterian Church (USA). That’s not a little thing. I’d like to tell you why.

In a couple of weeks, we will baptize infants. You will promise to be the church for them. But what do you think the church will be like when they are grown?

A few weeks ago, we welcomed Diana Butler Bass to Village. She was our Visiting Scholar. She talked with us about the changes in the religious landscape in this country. I suppose

there have always been changes. But the cultural and religious changes we face today are rapid, pervasive and significant. Some say the church has not faced changes like this since the Reformation.<sup>1</sup> She spoke of the spiritual but not religious — those who love God, but they have a high suspicion of the institutional church. You may have some of those in your family. She spoke of the fastest growing faith in the country, the “nones” — those who have no faith commitment at all. You very well may have some of those in your family.

Listen to Diana Butler Bass, and it makes you wonder about the future of the church. At the core of her work is the charge that the culture is in the midst of a gigantic change, and the church is not paying attention to it. Some see the change and try to resist. They will fail. I suggest the better way is to pay attention, careful attention.

The world is changing. Let me give an example. Consider how communication has changed in your lifetime.

It took radio 38 years to reach 50 million listeners. It took television 13 years to reach 50 million viewers. Facebook, which began in a college dorm room, reached 100 million participants

in nine months.<sup>2</sup> Or this: ABC began broadcasting in 1948, and from 1948 to 2008 broadcast 24 hours a day, seven days a week, every day of the year. The total number of viewing hours logged by ABC over 60 years was surpassed in viewing hours by YouTube in the last six months of 2008.<sup>3</sup>

It’s not just that the tools have changed; we don’t communicate in the same ways. And we communicate with people on a daily basis that we may not even know — or will ever know.

We are experiencing the third most significant change in communication in history. The first was the invention of writing. The second was the invention of moveable type. The third is the Internet.

While we are connected in a new fashion through communications, we are at the same time disconnected in dramatic fashion from the institutions that historically sustain community. There even seems to be a debate as to the value of being community — or just a collection of individuals.

Since Watergate and Vietnam, trust in government is not the same. There are steroids in baseball and scandal in college football. Greed is no longer the sin of the human condition

that drives capitalism, as Adam Smith articulated, but greed is a celebrated virtue, even a requirement for the nation to succeed. There is no longer expectation for media to be “objective.”

What we are witnessing in our culture is the collapse of confidence in institutions that have sustained and shaped our communal life. That includes the church. Many will say it: I love God, but I don’t like the institutional church. We are suspicious of any institution.

Carol and I went to Abilene, Kansas, this week. The purpose of our trip, other than a getaway for the two of us, was to visit the Eisenhower Presidential Library and Museum. It was well worth the trip. While there, we walked past a Presbyterian Church, so we stopped in. There were young people who were busy setting up for a program that evening. A young woman greeted us and shared with us the events for the coming weekend. “Would you like to see the place?” “Sure,” I said.

It was nice to see all that energy, but bittersweet also. It’s not a church anymore. It’s Abilene’s theatre. They have plays in the sanctuary.

There is another Presbyterian church in town; I know that. But as I walked through that sanctuary, I wondered how many places that once offered worship to God are now silent or used as historical settings for theatres or restaurants.

The Presbyterian Church across the country is losing members. Maybe you know this. 1965 was the last year the

Presbyterian Church showed a net gain in membership. Since 1965, we have lost 46 percent of our membership.<sup>4</sup>

Since things are fine here at Village, you may think this is not such a big deal. But let me share with you a couple reasons it concerns me. (I have more reasons, but I’ll take time to share two). First, I am aware of my debt to the Presbyterian Church. I attended a college pulled up out of the ground by Presbyterians. There are 75 colleges in this country today that Presbyterians have breathed to life. I attended a seminary supported by the generosity of Presbyterians. I have witnessed how, when we work together, lives are transformed in Sudan and Ghana, in Chile and Ecuador.

But more than that, in this church I have found my home and my hope, my voice and my place. In this fragile and sometimes stumbling Presbyterian Church, I have known grace and witnessed resurrection. It is because of this church that I have learned to confess Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior — all grace upon grace. I know that life is better because of the church. It is my own experience; and I have witnessed this truth in others as well.

That’s one reason it matters to me. But another reason it matters to me is that if, in the providence of God, there are ever Are grandchildren, I want them to have a great place to worship God — not just a quaint historical setting to watch a play. I want them to have a church that is thoughtful, mission-oriented,

welcoming of all and gracious in every circumstance — which is to say, I want them to have a church like you.

I am telling you this because I believe if there is to be something new in the Presbyterian Church, it is not likely to happen without Village. There will be leadership from many other places, but you have a strength and a commitment; you have a wisdom and a heritage; you have a capacity to lead — and because of who we are, we also have a responsibility.

In September of 2009, I invited 14 other pastors from across the country to come to Village to meet for a couple days, just to talk about the future of the church. We came from South Carolina and New York, from California and Chicago. We talked. We prayed. We asked ourselves what God might be able to do through us as we committed ourselves to work together. We wondered what would become of the church a generation from now.

There was some frustration in the room. All of us could remember former days of glory. Someone said, “We used to be the church that built hospitals and schools; now we just argue about sex.” There’s more truth in that than I wish. But then the Holy Spirit entered the room. I believe that. We began to imagine what’s next for the church.

That conversation of 15 has grown. Last month we met in Charlotte, and 600 gathered to worship and pray and plan and learn. And there were 600 more joining us on line.

Now let me say this clearly: NEXT is not about screens or no screens. It's not about a new hymnal or keeping the old hymnal or getting rid of the hymnal all together. It's not a program or a workshop, a kit or a class. NEXT is not an institution, a mission agency or a club. It is much deeper than that. It is a conversation — a conversation of hope and trust that God is at work among us already, and we need to pay attention. It is a conversation about how we are church with one another in new ways in this changing time.

I would say the NEXT Church conversation has been a renewal in faith for me personally. It is the most hopeful thing I know going on in the Presbyterian Church (USA). What is next for the church? I am no prophet. My light shines only dimly on this path, but let me tell you just one thing I see.

My friend Dan McKnight is pastor of the Kaw Valley Church here in town. He had a young man in his congregation come to him with questions. "Could you tell me what this church believes?" Dan said, "Sure, but what is prompting the question?" "I was telling my dad that I joined this church, and he wanted to know what we believe. No one had asked me that before. All my friends just want to know what we do."

There was a day when we thought what made the church the church and what distinguished one church from another was doctrine. Every new member class began with this question, "Tom, can you tell me what this

church believes, and how you are different from the Methodists?" I could answer that question. The unintended message, however, was that the most important thing about following Jesus was to get your doctrine right — that Christianity is primarily not something you live; it's just something you think.

That was a bad idea a generation ago; it's absolutely unworkable today. For one reason, religious diversity of our time has changed. When I was a kid, most of my friends went to Protestant churches. We all prayed together to begin the day. Our religious debates were about shared things: Were we right about baptism, or were the Baptists right? Did you have to be dunked, or could a sprinkle get you through? Were the Catholics right about the communion bread, or was it still really just bread after all the prayers? That's what we argued about.

A few years ago, my kids were at Shawnee Mission East. One of their favorite teachers was Muslim — a great young man. It was not possible for me, when I was in high school, to imagine that a Muslim would be my history teacher. It is not possible for my kids to imagine why that would be a surprise. In such a world, to talk about being dunked versus sprinkled is ridiculous. To talk as if the goal of Christianity is getting our doctrine straight makes no sense.

I think that is a good thing. The church that is becoming is going to matter to the world because of how we treat one

another and the world. I think that's faithful.

The apostle Paul says, "Be of the same mind." It sounds like Paul is asking us to think alike, but Paul is describing something else. The word translated "mind" is more helpfully translated "mindset" or "orientation." Paul is not calling doctrinal purity, but a spirit of humility. Listen to the rest of the passage: "Be of the same mind, having the same love. ... Do nothing from selfish conceit, but in humility ... Look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others."

Where do we get an attitude like this? From Christ, "who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God ... but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave ... humbled himself."

This is the mind of Christ. The world doesn't need another community that has figured it all out, but a community that loves one another. We are being beaten to death by those who have all the answers. What the world needs is a community that knows our mission is to love the neighbor — not because of his creed or her status, but simply because the neighbor is the neighbor.

When you think about the mind of Christ, who do you think of? Let me ask it this way: Who has taught you what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ? Who has shown you what it means to be a follower of Christ? I imagine that the teaching had less to do with teaching you information about Christianity and more that she loved you, that he loved you — and others.

I think of Bob. I call him “Holy.” He’s a pastor. He’s the kind who never calls attention to himself. He listens more than he speaks, but when he speaks, he speaks wisdom. He was the head of staff when I was first out of seminary, and he gave me a job (which is why my father loves him.) He took me in when I was as green as a spring lawn. I didn’t know what I didn’t know. That didn’t bother him.

He was generous with patience and with time and put me on a road in ministry that I would not have found without his mentoring. We are as different as silk and burlap; he is silk. I thought I was learning from him the techniques of ministry: how to craft a sermon, how to run a meeting, how to make a visit. But I learned something much more crucial: how to be a Christian. I love him because he showed me that love matters; that love can be trusted to transform. Love is the currency of the church. Love is the language of the church. Love is the air we breathe because love is the Spirit that gave us birth.

When I think about the mind of Christ, I think about him. Who do you think about? It’s important, because in a couple of weeks, we will baptize some babies, and we are going to ask you to promise to be the church for them — which is to say, we are going to ask you to promise to love them.

I have no idea what the church is going to look like when they are grown, but I know there will be a need for a people who know their mission is to love

the neighbor simply because the neighbor is the neighbor.

In a day when more and more sanctuaries are being remodeled into restaurants or theatres, I have a deep hope rooted in what I have seen: God is raising up a spirit of humility and love, a spirit of welcome and service that will be a home for the generations that are coming.

I know things will be different. But I say, bring on the changes. We know this about all change: Some will be good. Some will be sad. Some will be empty. Some will be life-giving.

No matter the change, there will be a need for a community shaped by a spirit of humility and love. They will need that. And they are not likely to find that in a theatre.

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<sup>1</sup>Phyllis Tickle. *The Great Emergence* (2008)

<sup>2</sup>Socialnomics.com

<sup>3</sup>Michael Wesch, an anthropologist from Kansas State University. It should be recognized that the viewing impact is different. For a majority of ABC’s viewing years, it was mass viewership. The majority of YouTube videos are viewed by 100 people or less. However, we all know how some videos in a matter of hours and days can circle the world and become viewed by millions.

<sup>4</sup>Board of Pensions publication, *Here Is the Church*; pcusa.org stats. 2008 was 3.1 percent, and 2009 was 2.9 percent.

**This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.**

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church’s Web site: [www.villagepres.org/sermons](http://www.villagepres.org/sermons).