

Presbytery of Boston

E-Connection

January 26, 2012

Called to be a Community of Faith

By Arnold Rots, Immediate Past Moderator

Scripture Readings: Genesis 12:1-5; Exodus 3:1-14; Mark 10:17-22

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ,

When we look at the story of the rich young man in Mark: what was it that Jesus asked of him? Last fall when it was the lesson during an evensong, it occurred to me that it was not just about money. Jesus asked him to give up his security in order to follow him. And that extends beyond the security that is represented by worldly possessions, by money; security is also found in convictions and beliefs – because beliefs offer an anchor that provides stability, comfort, and security in life. So, maybe we should be prepared to give them up, too?

Here is the central issue I want to raise: belief and faith, they are different things. The English language is lucky to have two different words for them, unlike most other languages – including the New Testament's Greek. One might ask whether one could be more important than the other.

Let's look at the other scripture readings that we just heard. Abram was called by God to become a pilgrim, to give up all security of a homeland, a familiar place, familiar people, a familiar religion, too, and go to a place he did not know. He was not asked to believe anything in particular or to have a systematic theology; he was asked to have faith – and respond to God's call.

Moses was also called to give up the life that he knew and that provided security (after his scary experience in Egypt) – to go and do something radical. And he was asked to have faith in the god with the strange name: I am he who is; I will be there; I will be with you. He was not asked to subscribe to any deistic beliefs – only to have faith that God would be with him, and with the Israelites.

The mystery of that strange name is that it is an enigma to which we will never find a definitive answer. Every generation, every community has to fill it in, has to wrestle with the question what it means to them that God will be there, with them and for them; to find a name for God, to imagine God in a way that responds to their particular situation, that makes it possible to be truly church at that place and in that time. It is a never-ending quest for an answer, knowing that there is no definitive answer for all times and all places. But it is also knowing that that quest is never in vain. Because the answer is, paradoxically, in trying to find an answer. Re-imagining is a

crucial and never-ending part of the church's discerning her calling. And it is a quest that only has meaning in the context and in the language of faith. It is foolish to look for God outside that context. Those who tried only caused themselves and others endless trouble. Trying to prove God's existence or inserting God into scientific discourse has done incredible harm to the church – as well as to society.

The reading of a delightful little book helped in making it all fall in place: James Carse's *The Religious Case against Belief*; James Carse is emeritus professor of religion at NYU¹.

Belief systems are as much defined by what they stand for as by what they are against. Defining borders is very much part of them, it is often a matter of us-against-them; they have an adversarial character, are defensive, and they have an ossifying effect. Because of that, they tend to stifle religion, since they don't allow religion to evolve anymore, condemning the faith community to irrelevance.

Why is that? What is religion, if it is not a collection of beliefs? Carse provides a very interesting and challenging answer. Religion (and faith, I would add) is something that has endured the ages; that still inspires communities – communities that continue to ponder the mystery of that religion: always searching for an answer, one that is determined by, and valid for, a particular time and place. This is the eternal quest that I outlined a minute ago, where the value is in the searching – a searching that helps make sense of things.

And this is why I feel that beliefs have this dangerous potential to become killers of faith. Since they do not allow the answers to change, a religion based purely on beliefs becomes a caricature of faith and eventually becomes irrelevant. And so, the question becomes: Can faith fall victim to belief? Has faith fallen victim to belief?

One might ask: what about the Book of Confessions? Isn't this important part of our constitution all about beliefs? Not really: the most important (and probably least read) part is the Preamble. There it states clearly that these were statements of faith uttered in a specific place and at a specific time, in specific circumstances that moved the community to feel the necessity to write down what their faith was about. So, it is not a collection of statements that we have to accept as eternal, objective truths. It is a collection of examples that tell us how previous generations and different communities wrestled with the mystery at the core of our faith and how they, tentatively, put it into words for their time.

The American Presbyterian tradition specifically rejected strict subscription, in the Adopting Act of 1729. This has served us well for almost three centuries. It was affirmed in 1927 after a 15-year attempt to bring subscription back in the form of the five fundamentals. That is why each PC(USA) council has to discern, for every examination anew, whether the candidate in question is adhering to the essentials of the reformed faith; there is no one-fits-all answer. And note: it says "the reformed faith", not "the reformed beliefs"!

It also helps to keep in mind some of the basic principles in the opening articles of our Form of Government.

¹ James, P. Carse 2008, *The Religious Case against Belief*, The Penguin Press, New York

In the calling of the church:

The Church is to be a community of hope, rejoicing in the sure and certain knowledge that, in Christ, God is making a new creation. This new creation is a new beginning for human life and for all things. The Church lives in the present on the strength of that promised new creation.

The Church is to be a community of love, where sin is forgiven, reconciliation is accomplished, and the dividing walls of hostility are torn down.

In the historic principles:

[T]he Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) reaffirms the historic principles of church order, which have been a part of our common heritage and which are basic to our Presbyterian concept and system of church government, namely:

That, while [...] we think it necessary to make effectual provision that all who are admitted as teachers be sound in the faith, we also believe that there are truths and forms with respect to which men of good characters and principles may differ. And in all these we think it the duty both of private Christians and societies to exercise mutual forbearance toward each other.

Squabbling over beliefs has nearly killed this denomination. It has done untold harm – to the kingdom of God, to this world, to the church, to presbyteries and congregations, and to individual human beings. This is not what we are called to do and be as Gods people. Emphasis on beliefs puts one in danger of losing one’s faith – because the comfortable security of cherished beliefs and convictions turns one deaf to the call to have faith.

Belief systems are, as I said, defined by what they believe as much as by what they do not believe; they need an adversary and really flourish in entrenchment. They become especially dangerous when beliefs are raised to the level of knowledge; as a scientist I can attest to that. What belief requires is that the believer stops thinking at the boundaries defined by belief – because that is where the beliefs of the adversary begins.

Faith, on the other hand, continuously extends the thinking beyond these boundaries, beyond what we can imagine; it is trying to see beyond the horizon of our imagination.

So, we should ask ourselves whether our beliefs are getting in the way of our faith; whether they are endangering our faith.

I think it would be good if we let go of our beliefs and dearly-held convictions, and learn to become once again a true community of faith; to be the church that God calls and means us to be. Let me say that again: **Let go of our beliefs and dearly-held convictions, and learn to become once again a true community of faith; to be the church that God calls and means us to be.** Can we still do that? **Can we still do that?**

I challenge you to say: YES!

So that we may become a *communitas* that is united by not knowing where we will end up, but that is searching together to discern what it is that God calls and intends us to be, and how to play our part in realizing the kingdom of God.

Will you accept that challenge?

Amen.

Prayer Concerns & Celebrations

Rev. Peggi Boyce, pastor at First Presbyterian Church, Antrim, NH, and Moderator of the Presbytery of Northern New England, passed away on Thursday afternoon, January 19th, after having a series of severe heart attacks over the past two weeks. In addition to the memorial service held earlier this week, the Presbytery will also celebrate Peggi's life at the March Assembly meeting. In lieu of flowers, contributions can be made to the First Presbyterian Church, PO Box 186, Antrim, NH 03440.

Prayers for the families of two beloved members of the Burlington church who entered God's peace at New Year's: Elder Jay David and Deacon Nick Horeanopoulos.

Sharon Wright would appreciate your prayers. She had surgery on Wednesday, expects to be back home this weekend, and in recovery at home for a couple of weeks.

Please pray for improved health for Bob and Peg Ferguson.

David and Kelsey Bogdan celebrate the birth of their son, Aaron.

****Note:** If you would like to share your prayer concerns with the Presbytery of Boston, please contact us at: presbyteryofboston@verizon.net. We continue to pray for the ongoing needs of those whose concerns are not listed.

Fellowship of Presbyterians Unveils Name for “New Reformed Body”

‘TOWN HALL’ MEETINGS GIVE NEW YORK CITY PRESBYTERIANS CHANCE TO WEIGH IN by *Jerry Van Marter, Presbyterian News Service*. **ORLANDO, FLA.** – The “new Reformed body” being created by the Fellowship of Presbyterians here this week will be called the Evangelical Covenant Order of Presbyterians, the 2,000 Presbyterians gathered here were told this morning (Jan. 19).

“We thought about three words,” said the Rev. John Ortberg, pastor of Menlo Park (Calif.) Presbyterian Church. “‘Evangelical’ because we are not afraid of the gospel. ‘Covenant’ because part of our treasure is that our God is a covenant-making God and churches ought to be in covenant with each other. ‘Order’ because we commit to a way of life together so that God can raise up a new order of Christians.”

The acronym for the new denomination — participants here will adopt a new doctrinal statement which includes the *Book of Confessions* of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and a new polity as well as a mission statement and list of values — is ECO, Ortberg added.

It comes from the word “oikos,” Ortberg explained, “which means ‘household’ and implies thriving organisms and healthy eco-systems ... and affirms our conviction that denominations exist to serve churches, not the other way around.”

“‘Of Presbyterians’ is also part of the name because we are Presbyterians, after all,” Ortberg said.

That congregations are central to ECO is evident in its mission statement: “To build flourishing churches that make disciples of Jesus Christ.”

But a vision is not enough, said the Rev. John Crosby, pastor of Christ Presbyterian Church in Edina, Minn. “It must be informed by values.”

Crosby outlined the nine values of ECO:

- Jesus-shaped Identity — “the key is making disciples rather than orthodox believers.”
- Biblical Integrity – “A faith that is not just taught but shapes the life of your community.”
- Thoughtful Theology – “not papers for intellectuals but rearing followers who are able to reflect and apply their faith to their lives.”
- Accountable Community – “caring environments that allows integral faith to emerge.”
- Egalitarian Ministry – women and minorities in leadership.
- Missional Centrality – “the whole of the gospel to the whole of the world; what would you lose if your church went away?”
- Center-focused Spirituality – “calling people to the core of Christianity, not fixating on the boundaries — we are NOT truth cops.”
- Leadership Velocity – “growing and developing leaders who are culture-changing, risk-taking innovators.”
- Kingdom Vitality – “congregational life is not about size, but trajectory.”

“These values,” Crosby said, “will make and keep us a movement, not a bureaucracy.”

Ortberg and Crosby emphasized that creation of ECO will be time-consuming and “messy.”

“This is an uncertain time,” Crosby said, noting that 60 percent of respondents to a pre-gathering survey said they were in “a period of discernment” about denominational alignment. “We are not angry, we are determined ... we are not ‘after’ or ‘against’ *them* — we all need time, space and grace We want to flesh out the options and then let God lead so we have the sense that we’re all working together.”

Ortberg agreed. “We want to honor, not dishonor, our brothers and sisters in the PC(USA),” he said. “Why bother? What problem are we trying to solve? The problem is not denominational ambiguity or ecclesiastical disunity or even ineffectiveness; we are doing this because people are going to hell and Jesus came to save them and we must be instruments of that salvation.”

Ortberg said hell prevails “every time a child is neglected or a marriage ends or a lie gets told or money gets hoarded or generations get divided or a workplace becomes oppressive or a culture of shamelessness emerges.”

Too many churches settle for “pretty good” and “pretty good is not okay with Jesus,” Ortberg said. “Our job is to put hell out of business.

“I have no desire to be part of a church that believes pretty good is okay while the gates of hell remain open,” Ortberg continued.

“I want to be part of a community that is willing to give everything we have to fulfill the redemptive purpose God has set before us. God has done it before, God will do it again,” he said. “Will you devote your life to be part of such a church?”

<http://www.fellowship-pres.org/evangelical-covenant-order/>

Presbytery Meetings

FEBRUARY

- 1 – CPM, 6:00 pm, NPC
- 2 – COM, 7:00 pm, NPC
- S&B, 7:00, NPC
- 7 – Nominating, 11:00, NPC
- 9 – Special Council Meeting, 7:00 pm, NPC
- 13 – CEM, 1:30 pm, NPC
- 15 – Trustees, 12 noon, Sudbury

“Presbyterians Today” Lenten Devotional Guide

This Lenten guide, perfect for congregations, families or personal devotional use, contains Scripture readings, meditations and prayers for each day of Lent, concluding with Easter Sunday. Full-color photos of Holy Land sites enhance the readings. Order copies for your congregation now while supplies last and to ensure delivery before Lent. Call [\(800\) 524-2612](tel:8005242612) and request PDS 12116-11-012 or order online. Single copy, \$4 (plus shipping and handling). Substantial discounts for bulk orders.

Transforming Divisive Conversation: A Workshop for Clergy and Lay Leaders

Like all communities, faith communities are characterized as much by their diversity as by their shared identity, beliefs and values. Conflict can arise around differences in theology, worship, identity, and transition. *Transforming Divisive Conversation* will explore ways that congregational leaders can approach conflict, prevent corrosive interactions and help their members engage each other in constructive ways.

March 1, Watertown, MA

Facilitators: Bob Stains & Rev. Michael Duda

Early Bird Special: \$125 (Ends Jan. 19) Regular Fee: \$150 - Please register by Feb. 9

Sponsored by The Public Conversations Project, a conflict-transformation nonprofit in Watertown. The PCP prevents and transforms conflict driven by deep differences in identity, beliefs or values. To learn more and/or register online, visit us at <http://www.publicconversations.org/workshops/transforming>. Or contact Program Coordinator Seth Karamage at skaramage@publicconversations.org or (617) 923-1216 ext. 24.

Events

***Note: If you know of an event that would be of interest to the Presbytery of Boston members, please send your information to: presbyteryofboston@verizon.net.**

February 15 – “*Crisis, Faith and Action: Transitioning to a Beloved Community in the Era of Peak Oil, Climate Change, and a Dysfunctional Global Economy.*” Massachusetts Bible Society February Luncheon with Guest Speaker Dr. Steve Chase, Quaker Transition Activist. 12:00 – 1:30. Location: The Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts, Lawrence Room, 138 Tremont Street, Boston, MA. Suggested donation at the door: \$15. To register: Phone: 617-969-9404 or e-mail: admin@massbible.org Website: www.massbible.org

February 16-18, 2012 Disaster Response Training for Presbytery Teams - - Stony Point Center, Stony Point, NY. The training is designed to prepare and energize **presbytery teams of 4-6 persons** each from all the presbyteries in the region. The cost of **\$190 per person** covers room and board at Stony Point for 2 nights, double occupancy, and 7 meals. To receive a team registration form, please write to: saraburke@elizabethpresbytery.org or phone 908-755-3776, ext. 6. **Registration deadline extended to January 31.**

February 16-18 – “*Becoming a Multi-cultural Church: Building Inclusive Communities,*” Princeton, NJ. Participants will hear about and learn best practices of theological, ethical, social and pastoral frameworks for engaging multicultural ministry as Christian leaders and clergy, particularly in building dialogue and community in the areas of: interracial/ethnic relations and ministry, socio-economic disparities, and gender differences. The institute will close with a panel discussion lead by the leaders of the institute where leaders and the participants will have a chance to share their questions, concerns and hopes of an intentional diverse ministry. <http://www.pcusa.org/events/20074/4th-institute-multicultural-ministry-building-incl/>

March 11 – The Church of the Covenant (67 Newbury Street / **Boston**, Massachusetts) is pleased to announce the **Installation of Reverend Rob Mark** on Sunday March 11th, 2012, at 3:00 PM. All are welcome!

March 23 – *Compassion, Peace and Justice Training: Presbyterians and Economic Justice*, New York Avenue Presbyterian Church, Washington D.C. 8:30 am – 5:00 pm. In these difficult economic times which further divide our nation and world between the “haves and the have not’s,” it is necessary for Presbyterians to lift up the ministries that address these growing economic disparities. The ministries of Compassion, Peace and Justice of the PC(USA) are coming together for the 2nd Annual CPJ Training Day in Washington, DC, to educate Presbyterians on the role that the PC(USA) is playing in helping people to overcome and survive these difficult times. CPJ Training Day is hosted by the Presbyterian Office of Public Witness; Presbyterian Hunger Program; the Presbyterian Peacemaking Program; Self-Development of People; Presbyterian Disaster Assistance; the Presbyterian Ministry at the UN; Mission Responsibility through Investment; Environmental Ministries; Presbyterian Health, Education and Welfare Association; and Child Advocacy. Register at: www.pcusa.org/washington

March 23-26 – *Ecumenical Advocacy Days* – “*Is This the Fast I Seek?*” (Isaiah 58) is the theme for the 10th Annual [Ecumenical Advocacy Days](http://www.advocacydays.org) in Washington, D.C. The Ecumenical Advocacy Days will explore Economy, Livelihood and Our National Priorities. In this era of economic and political urgency, as critical decisions are being made about U.S. federal budget priorities and as national elections are fast approaching, join other Christian disciples in seeking a global economy and a national budget that breaks the yokes of injustice, poverty, hunger, and unemployment - heeding Isaiah's call to become "repairers of the breach and restorers of streets to live in." Experts will offer a faith-based version for a just economy and training on key U.S. policy issues and grassroots advocacy, culminating on Monday with lobby visits on Capitol Hill. See www.advocacydays.org for registration and other information.

April 21 – *Presbyterian Women's Sisters Stand and Walk Together* [Presbyterian Women's](#) in the Synod of the Northeast's Sisters Stand and Walk Together is beginning enrollment for its third class on Saturday, April 21, 2012, from 9:30am to 3:00pm. Sisters Stand and Walk Together is a 3-year program designed to acclimate and motivate new immigrant women from congregations within the Synod to Presbyterian Women. Thus far, participants and organizers have come from four continents and six countries: Brazil, Ghana, Korea, Nigeria, Taiwan and the US. There is no cost to the participant. The purpose of the program is to prepare these women for leadership roles not only within Presbyterian Women but [also] throughout all levels of the PC(USA). Sisters Stand and Walk Together seeks to prepare the women through leadership development training including forums and workshops where cultural differences are explored and leadership shared. For further information, contact: Charlotte Hasselbarth, Moderator of Presbyterian Women in the Synod of the Northeast at 518-356-0637.

April 28, 2012 – *Presbytery Day*, at **Needham** Presbyterian Church. Presbytery Day will feature Eric H. F. Law and trainers from the Kaleidoscope Institute. There will be a program for youth, which will include the preparation of a media presentation for use later in the day. Please encourage youth (Middle School and High School) and young adults to attend. The adult courses will be of interest to everyone involved in the life of their local church or the Presbytery. Don't miss this special opportunity!

May 25-28 – *Voice: Montreat's Signature Conference*. People throughout history have heard God's Voice calling them to be people sent out into a world that is desperate for new imagination and leadership. Using their own voices, they have brought radical transformation to societies across the globe. How might we, too, be among those who hear and follow that Voice today? See: www.montreat.org

June 27-July 8 – *Summer Youth Institute*, sponsored by the Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, to meet at GA. A brochure is available in the Presbytery office. See: www.pts.edu/syi

July 18-22 - Online registration for the 2012 *Presbyterian Women Church-wide Gathering* opened December 1. The Gathering will be held in Orlando, FL, July 18-22. Registration booklets will be available at the January Presbytery meeting.