

Church Vitality Day June 23, 2018

Lunch Presentation/Conversation: Changing the Verbs

Prayer

The world is changing. Church is changing. Change is the air we breathe in society today.

Change is a wonderful gift to us.

Changes in the world in our own lifetimes have meant that some diseases that led to an early death now have a cure, or a treatment that allows for a longer or a better quality of life.

Changes in the world in our own lifetimes have meant that groups that once had no access to leadership and power are now in positions of responsibility and trust.

Changes in the world in our own lifetimes have meant that we can stay in touch with each other, and share information, and build upon each other's ideas in ways we might never have imagined.

There are downsides to change, of course, particularly when so much changes so fast. It is hard for us to keep up. People often respond to change with fear. But people aren't really afraid of change, not of change itself. We don't fear change per se, but we do fear the losses that come with change. The loss of the liveliness of children in the house when they grow up and move away; the loss of a sense of community at church when church friends move away; the loss of a sense of purpose when our job ceases to exist because the whole industry has become computerized. Change brings losses, and that leads to fear.

A time of dramatic and rapid change, a time when losses mount because of change, a time when at least some in our congregations are afraid - that's exactly the time when we need to look closely at the language we use and all the assumptions that language represents. That's the time to change the verbs.

### **So a first change of verbs - from Lose to Gain.**

Imagine what we could do and be if we focused not on what we are losing as church and society change, but on what we are gaining.

Focusing on loss makes our world very small. It keeps us locked in to what and what is and cuts us off from what might be. Focusing on what we are gaining broadens perspectives and horizons.

So to move from Lose to Gain, try something new. The reality for most of us in the church is that we are failure averse. We are so afraid of failing, so afraid of what we will lose if we are not successful in every endeavor that we can become crippled. Look at it this way, though - Jesus' mission was a spectacular failure. He was executed after just three years. To the eyes of the world, he looks like the biggest loser. But look what God did with failure! Look at what God can do with loss. God transformed the loss of Jesus' life to spectacular gain for the world.

Try something new. Put your whole self into it. If it doesn't work, let it go, learn what you can and try something else. Try. Fail. Try. Learn. Try. Shift the verb from Lose to Gain and trying will become easier. Failure not be failure at all, but a step on the journey.

Remember the word of scripture: "I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ." (Philippians 3:8)

## **A Second change in verbs - from COME to GO.**

I hear with some frequency congregations lamenting that people aren't coming to church the way they once did. Long time members aren't coming the way they once did. There aren't as many visitors as there once were. *“If only visitors would come, they'd see what a great community we are, they'd want to be a part of this church, they'd find a home here. So how do we get them to come?”*

The reality for many, if not most, congregations is that people are not coming the way they once did. Visitors are not coming as much as the congregation hopes for. And it's not really surprising. Imagine yourself a visitor who screws up the courage to try to come to your church. First, those first time visitors have got to find the church, and find the entrance into the parking lot. If there are too many cars in the lot and there's not a space, they might become discouraged and turn around. If there are few cars in the lot, they might wonder if they've got the right time, they might fear that the congregation will be so small that they won't be able to slip in anonymously. But say they do park, they've then got to figure out which door to use to get into the worship space. Then walk through the gauntlet of overeager greeters who might come across as almost desperate or through the gauntlet of people who don't even notice them. They get through all that and then have to figure out where to sit - taking the risk that someone will approach them and say “You are in my seat” and instruct them to move.

It might sound like I'm overstating the challenges for a first time visitor, but I've had every one of those experiences when I've been a visitor at a church during a vacation.

The people who take the first time visitor risks most courageously, in my observation, are people in the military or in government service who are committed to being a part of a congregation and who know they've only got a

couple of years to make connections - so they dive right in. For others, especially for people who didn't grow up in the church and for the coveted Millennials, it's hard to come to church.

Congregations can do inventories of their property and of their practices to get a sense of how hard or easy it is for visitors to get to worship. Congregations can partner with other congregations and send their members to each other's churches to as first time "visitors," then share discoveries. There are things you can do to welcome visitors better, but there is no one size fits all magic pill that is going to get people to come in the first place so that you can welcome them, not during a time when they are simply not coming anymore. So what if we changed the verb from "Come" to "Go."

If people are not coming to where we are, then we as the Church, the living, breathing body of Christ in the world, must go to where they are. We have to go out into the world to proclaim the gospel in our actions. We have to be Christ's hands and feet and eyes and ears and voice wherever we are. Congregations are trying many things as they go into the world.

Laundry Love

Conversations in coffee shops.

Worship outside for and with homeless people

Ministry in a shopping centers. (Of course the challenge is that many shopping centers are dying as people do more and more of their shopping online.)

So - have an online presence.

Obey Jesus' command to us, a command recorded in the Gospel of Matthew (28:18-20)

*"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the*

*Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”*

Change the verb from Come to Go.

A third change of verbs:

**From “Have” to “Be”**

Circumstances for all congregations are changing in a dramatically changing world. Change is happening for all congregations, without exception. Many are quick to say that all of this change demonstrates that the Church is dying. But the Church is not dying. The Church, with a capital “C” - cannot die. Because the Church is the living, breathing body of Christ and that body, once slain and raised to new life, cannot and will not die again. The Church is alive.

Individual congregations, though, can die. Every congregation goes through a life cycle, just as every living organism does. A congregation is born, it grows, it declines, perhaps it is renewed or reborn and grows again, then at some point it declines and dies. Congregations have been born and have died for 2000 years of Christian history.

During every stage of its life cycle, and particularly in a time of decline when a congregation might wonder if it is approaching death, a vital question to ask is:

Do you want to BE the Church, the living breathing body of Christ, alive and active in the world? Or do you want merely to HAVE a church?

Do you want to BE Christ’s very own hands and feet in the world for the sake of the world? Or do you want to stay just the human body that you are?

Do you want to HAVE a church (small “c”) or do you want to BE the Church? (Capital “C”)

Shifting the verb from HAVE to BE is a part of renewing the life of the congregation, and is a necessary part of going into the world for the sake of God’s love.

Now you ARE the Body of Christ, Paul wrote to the Christians at Corinth in his first letter to them. *“You ARE the Body of Christ and individually members of it.”* It is a matter of being rather than having.

That shift from HAVING a church to BEING the Church is leads to a fourth shift of verbs.

**A move from SURVIVE** to - - so I know you’re thinking I’ll say “thrive” or “live.” But I think that change of verbs needs to be from SURVIVE to DIE.

Yikes! What could that possibly mean?

The truth is that whichever verb a congregation chooses - whether they choose to Have a church or to Be the Church, they will die. But listen carefully to this, because the distinction is vital.

If a congregation chooses to have a church, to hold on tight to the way things have always been done, to try to go back to the good old days, or to continue the same old patterns in the same old ways, they will die.

If a congregation says yes to Being the Church, to being the living, breathing Body of Christ in the world today, they will die. Because God will change them

in ways they can't even imagine. God will work in and through that congregation in ways they can't control or predict. And that means they will die to old ways of being of congregation. But we Christians know what God can do with death - because we've seen the resurrection and the life in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

As Paul wrote in the epistle reading we heard last Sunday, *“if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new.”*

So:

Change the verbs;

From COME to GO

From HAVE to BE

From SURVIVE to DIE -

All in order to thrive and live and be the faithful communities that God has created and called us to be.

Now I invite your responses, stories, questions or other reflections on changing the verbs.

Questions for conversations at table during the remainder of the meal time:

1. What did you hear in this presentation that most helps, challenges, supports or annoys you?
2. What verbs do you think need to be changed?

