



The Chance

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Rev. Dr. J. Herbert Nelson, II, spoke the hard truth last night. The Stated Clerk of the General Assembly acknowledged that our churches are shrinking and many are struggling to find pastors. He warned that some of our congregations might close because they are unable to accept necessary changes. Perhaps sensing our question of whether this future was the one that had to be – like Scrooge questioning the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come – the Stated Clerk offered hope.

“God is giving us a chance to be relevant,” he told the assembly at our first quarterly Presbytery Gathering at Rock Prairie Presbyterian Church. We have a choice. We can change the gloomy future that he depicted. It requires us to try new approaches, even if we don’t get them right the first time. We take what works and keep it; we put what didn’t work on a shelf because we might need it later, he explained.

Most important, we need to listen to our communities. Rather than come with an agenda of what needs to be fixed, we begin by listening. Our neighbors will inform us as to their priorities, so the church can respond accordingly.

He was clear, however, that we must ground ourselves in our Christian faith. There can be no question who we follow. First and foremost, we choose to follow the Lord and to do what the Lord requires of us. Being relevant by listening to our communities doesn’t mean that we blow with the wind toward whatever new trends society offers. We don’t deviate from the Lord’s insistence on justice and love for neighbor. We remember the admonition in Matthew 25 to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, tend to the sick, and visit those in prison. As we strive to become a [Matthew 25 denomination](#), one congregation at a time, we establish our values and our calling.

Then we listen. We experiment. We try something we’ve never done before. The days of cookie-cutter ministries are long gone, the Stated Clerk noted. “We have to be creative.” Our mission is to transform every place we go – whether as the General Assembly which will meet this summer in Baltimore or as congregations embedded in our communities. “If a city is not any better after we leave than when we came, then we have no relevance.” This message is true not only for places we might visit on mission trips, but the towns in which we do ministry day in and day out. Are we making our communities better by being there? Opening our doors on Sunday morning helps, but we ought to ask our neighbors how much it helps. Do they have different priorities for how we can help?

Our future is in our hands. God is giving us a chance to be relevant. We should not squander that gift.

