



A New Curve

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Having returned to Idaho after many years away, I'm struck by how much has remained the same. Most of my favorite restaurants are still around, and it's easy to navigate on familiar roads. Two hospitals (including the one where I was born) still dominate our medical options. We wrestle over conservative values, libertarian principles, and progressive inclusivity.

And yet, much is wildly different. In Boise, there's this thing called Treefort (think of Summerfest spread all over town, but it's music and art and yoga and axe throwing and...). I have yet to figure out how to experience it well.

Southeast Wisconsin is seeing its own share of change amidst what's familiar: efforts to revitalize or gentrify neighborhoods; an influx of Afghan and other refugees; go-to businesses closed for lack of employees. With more people, we confront new ideas and new demands on infrastructure and social services. Our legislative battles are more pointed. The distance between our towns is shrinking, it seems, but the urban-rural divide remains a cultural barrier.

In the midst of both familiarity and upheaval, we find the church. In some respects, our churches are comfortably the same, especially as we journey in this Lenten season...trodding again that well-worn path. Your beloved Clerks of Session recently completed their annual statistical reports, and we saw both membership gains and losses. We might be pleased that we've weathered the pandemic and chaos around us without needing to adjust too much.

Stability, however, is not necessarily our greatest ally. Presbyterian pastor and church consultant Tod Bolsinger recently made this point, when discussing change during our Presbytery Gathering. On the bell-curve lifecycle of a congregation, he often works with churches who are on the downward slope and experiencing decline. He emphasizes to them that *if they do nothing, they will continue to decline. If they move backward (trying to reinvent the past and how things used to be), they will decline even faster.*

The only thing we can do, he challenges us, is to start a new curve. That is, we need to reinvent ourselves, our understanding of call or mission, our structure, our programs, or our outreach. Reimagining ourselves requires us to listen to where the gospel wants to speak today. What is the good news for a community that is feeling overrun by "outsiders"? What is the gospel message for communities facing challenges like affordable housing, underfunded schools, and lack of access to medical care? For congregations that like stability and being grounded from week to week, starting a new curve might sound exhausting or frightening.

And yet, the church has always been called to be in this uncomfortable space between what has been and what will be. Franciscan priest and renowned author Richard Rohr writes, "If you are not ready to change, don't seek out God." True spiritual encounter, he explains, changes our politics, our attitude toward money, our use of time, our relationships toward foreigners and the weak, our attitude toward war and nationalism. "Be prepared to have a very different lifestyle afterward."

In this time of transition, we are given the opportunity to design our new curve. Let's imagine that future as we listen for what the gospel wants to speak today.