

October 10, 2004/Season after Pentecost/David L. Edwards

A Vision for Our Community

Psalms 66:1-12 *We went through fire and through water;
yet you have brought us out to a spacious
place.*

Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7 *Build houses and live in them; plant gardens
and eat what they produce...seek the welfare
of the city where I have sent you into exile....*

Reading Jeremiah's Letter Today

God calls Jeremiah to write a letter to the exiled leaders and people of Israel. Remember what went on before: Jeremiah had the painful job of telling the people and leaders that an unavoidable catastrophe was coming. Jerusalem would fall to the armies of Babylon. Furthermore, the deeper reason for this disaster lay in the people's own failure to be a just, merciful and truly spiritual people. Then, as the assault on the walls of Jerusalem was underway, God prompted Jeremiah to perform an act of irrational hope. He bought a piece of the family property from his cousin, land he had no hope of ever personally claiming. This was an installment on God's promised, distant future.

Now Jerusalem has fallen, the people are in exile. The time of foreboding is over. The calamity has happened. The grieving is well underway. Life has changed drastically and forever. Jeremiah sends his letter. Its message is straightforward and clear: Build houses and plant vineyards. Marry and produce children. Live and work for the welfare of the very city where God has sent you into exile. In other words, it's time to get on with it. It's time to live as God's people, yes, smack in the middle of your exile.

As I read this passage on Monday morning during my meditation time, the day following our anniversary celebration, I heard Jeremiah's letter in our own situation. Bev Cosby's sudden death two and a half years ago was an event not unlike what happened in Israel's life or any major change that thrusts us into a completely new and difficult time. Things change forever. We go through searching and questioning. We grieve what will never be again and try anxiously to peer into the mists of what is up ahead.

We can hear Jeremiah's letter as though it had been sent to us. Okay, it is now time to get back to work, to live in this new situation,

doing the work of building and planting, of living fruitful lives and seeking the welfare of the city and the world into which God has sent us. It is time to awaken from grief and searching and take up our life as the Church of the Covenant in a new day and situation.

I have been with you for a year and a half, finding my own place and way among you. During this time, I have been listening for what God might be saying to us now about our life and mission as a covenant community. This morning I share with you a vision for us. It arises out of my listening to God, to you, to our past, to my own heart, and to the current movements of God's spirit among us. In the weeks to come, I want to talk with you about this vision, to hear your responses, and to use this vision as a point of reflection, creative dreaming and renewed activity.

Reaffirming Our Basic Identity

We need to appreciate afresh and reaffirm our vision of Christian life and community. Each person is called by God in Christ to a life of intentional discipleship, to an inward journey of prayer, meditation, study, and personal transformation, and to an outward journey, touching some need in the community of faith itself or in our city or world through the gifts that God has given us.

In our corporate and personal worship we need to keep rooting our lives and life together in God through a contemplative life. This means deepening our capacity for silence and inner listening. Only in this way can we remain sensitive to God's voice and the leading of God's spirit. In a society and world, not to mention a church, that is so distracted and distracting from what is most important, we need to be a community that listens deeply to God. It is out of that inner listening to and love of God that ministries arise which truly meet the needs of the world and at the same time fulfill our own needs to live out of our true identities and gifts.

Covenant Membership still is an important form of the spiritual life, embracing disciplines or practices that enable us to "order our days rightly," as Psalm 90 puts it (NEB). This is the way our community seeks take on the yoke of Christ, remembering always that it is a light yoke of joy and freedom that flows from God's love calling us to a fuller life. Covenant Membership needs to remain the core of our community. It needs to be celebrated, lived out and offered to all as a fruitful way of undertaking the journey of following Christ.

Mission groups must also be reaffirmed as the way we carry out our ministries. Formed around a felt call from God to a particular vision and need, mission groups offer a necessary small group life that

nourishes the inner life and keeps the outward mission grounded in the unfolding will and leading of God. We need to be flexible and open as to the structures and workings of mission groups, while retaining those elements that nurture commitment to the mission, to others in the group, and to our own continuing spiritual growth. There is no exhausting the possibilities of what missions can arise if we are fostering an atmosphere of creative spiritual thinking, praying, and dreaming.

A Whole Community

At the core of our community are those who have felt called to Covenant Membership, bearing ultimate responsibility for the church's life and ministry. But there have always been and are now others who are integrally a part of this community, faithful in their support and involvement, who have not felt called or are not able to make the sort of commitment offered in Covenant Membership. In their own ways they are committed to Christ and to this community's vision, values, and life. These persons are also part of the Church of the Covenant Community and without them our life and work would be diminished and needlessly limited.

In recent months I have shared with the Covenant Members the possibility of establishing another type of membership, call it "Community Membership." This would be open to those who want to express their commitment and belonging to this community of faith, though, for reasons of their own, not through Covenant Membership. Here would be a way of affirming these persons and their commitments. Here also would be a place for children, for youth, and for those whose life circumstances do not make Covenant Membership a feasible option for them, yet who desire to express their commitment to Christ through this community.

I think this is not so much the imposition of something new as a recognition and affirmation of what God has already created in this community. It is not a diminishing of commitment but the recognizing that committed faith happens in different ways in our lives and that what we are about is commitment, whether as Covenant Members or Community Members.

Two Centers of the Church of the Covenant

For over a year the Festival Center Mission Group has been responding to God's call and leading to establish a place for community and mission in the inner city of Lynchburg. The Festival Center is located in the first floor of the historic Western Hotel, which

is part of the College Hill neighborhood. This beautiful old building is owned by Lynchburg Covenant Fellowship and has been home to other ministries and missions since its rescue from demolition about thirty years ago.

I feel that God is calling us to embrace the Festival Center as a kind of second center of the Church of the Covenant. It is a place where we can be present with people living in the inner city, build community with them, and carry out together ministries that enrich their lives and our own. The Church of the Covenant has always upheld the priority of being involved with and serving those in our city who are struggling in poverty and powerlessness. Bev Cosby had for a long time envisioned this community being present in the inner city, even perhaps moving there. The Festival Center is giving us the opportunity to have a place where we can make that involvement real and ongoing.

At the same time, we have this beautiful place here on Boonsboro Road. When I began my work with you, I lived for seven weeks on the second floor of this Church House. During that time, I saw that we have here a yet undeveloped potential for a retreat ministry. There is a quietness and contemplative atmosphere on these forty acres that is truly water in the desert for those seeking a space for silence, prayer, enjoying the beauty of creation, and tasting the life of this community. Yet there is also the unobtrusive activity that goes on, with the Lodge of the Fisherman dinners, the NA groups meeting two evenings a week, Camp Kum Ba Yah, L'Arche, and other activities. Here people might come for a day or several days of retreat to find rest and renewal for their spirits and stimulating contact with a community that strives after a life of contemplation and service. Here people might come for personal and group retreats, entering into conversation with us about how the church can truly be the church and how we can live fully the life of faith in today's world.

I think God is showing us the possibility of two centers of our life and ministry, a center of presence and mission in the inner city, and a center for retreat and renewal here. The connection and interaction between the two can be truly exciting and enriching.

The Festival Center Mission Group will continue its life and work downtown. We are applying for status as a non-profit organization and are forming a board that will be made up of persons living and working in the College Hill neighborhood and ourselves. This follows the pattern of the past, the church giving birth to ministries so that they stand on their own. However, I feel that this needs to be different in an important way. I want us to prayerfully

seek how the Festival Center can be embraced and retained as that second center of our church. God may be calling us to purchase the Western Hotel from LCF. Irma Seiferth, Executive Director, has been more than generous in holding onto this building and putting money into its renovation that LCF really doesn't have for that purpose, all in hopes that we will be able to establish a vital ministry there. But at some point, LCF will likely face the financial necessity of selling the property. I feel that this is just the right and special place where God has sent us, where those who come into the Center feel warmth, comfort, and a spirit of love. There is no place more perfectly located for the kind of presence and ministry we are doing. Is God calling us as a church to claim this building for God's purposes? Buying property for God's purposes is certainly consistent with our past. Is this what God is calling us to do now, like Jeremiah buying that piece of land as an act of courageous and seemingly irrational hope, an investment in God's future?

Already at the Festival Center there is a weekly program for children, with several of us adults working with and building community with the children of the neighborhood and their families. An AA group meets each Sunday morning. Daily worship is carried out in the Cosby Chapel, where people of any faith or no faith may find peace and a time of spiritual rest and renewal. We are hoping to establish a computer education program for people in the neighborhood and beyond. Toward the end of his life, Bev felt that our community needed to make children a priority, for he had been deeply moved by the work of Marian Wright Edelman and the Children's Defense Fund. Besides our own children's program, we have partnered with Sylvia Hobson and her College Hill Neighborhood School to work for our mutual service to children. Sylvia has agreed to serve on our board and will be speaking here at our worship on October 31. We envision a coffee shop and craft and book store where people from the neighborhood and beyond can come and enjoy a cup of coffee, a glass of tea, perhaps a simple soup and salad lunch, and where we can get to know each other across barriers of race, religion, and socio-economic status. Louise Tate, our UCC friend from North Carolina, has offered to keep us supplied with crafts from SERRV, the Church of the Brethren organization that purchases items from poor artisans in developing countries at a fair price. We want to include these for sale along with art and crafts by people living in the inner city so that we have both a local and a global dimension. We have begun to talk about the call to begin a new worshiping community along the lines of our community here, in support of the mission of the Center, a

community of worship that is intentionally interracial. The possibilities are endless and exciting. Of course, we will need people who are willing to give of themselves and their gifts to some aspect of it all.

And here it is the same, so many possibilities for developing our potential as a retreat area. The second floor of this building can be further made available for persons on retreat. We can envision the expansion of retreat facilities and programs. And we can explore ways that the Festival Center and the church here can interplay in creative and life-giving ways. These too will need persons called to them, bringing their gifts to bear on such a ministry and mission.

Today I invite you to join me at the sermon discussion table in the Lodge where we can talk further about this vision. And next Sunday I invite all to a community meeting following lunch in the Lodge where will be have an opportunity to respond to this vision after you have had some days to reflect on what I have shared. Whatever dreams and visions emerged in us, whatever directions God leads us today, may we receive the same invigorating word from God in this present moment—it is time to build, to plant, to seek the welfare of this city and world into which God has sent us.

Let us pray: God of possibilities and new life, we give thanks for the movements of your spirit in our minds, our hearts, and our community. May we receive today the same message you sent by Jeremiah to the people in exile—build and plant, be fruitful, and seek the well being of the city and the world into which you send us. Awaken each of us to the gifts you have given us and the particular things you call us to do. In all of this, refresh us as a people of vision, commitment, and mission. Amen.