

Discernment Session 3: August 11, 2019

Summary

Nineteen people attended this session. We began around 11:30 AM and concluded around 1:00 PM, although a post-session conversation continued until almost 2:00 PM. We sat in a circle. Everyone had a marker and paper.

The executive committee met a week and a half prior to the meeting to discuss the [Jason Butler](#) article from Faith and Leadership (posted at the end of July) in which he addressed the need for disruptive change in a church in order to address a congregation's habits. Butler noted that a congregation's habits are not necessarily bad or good and that they can be practices or characteristic of its culture. Habits, however, can get in the way of a congregation's renewal.

The executive committee raised the possibility of using 2020 as a sabbatical year. Given that urging, a sabbatical framed this discernment session.

We began by hearing scripture:

The Lord spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai, saying: Speak to the people of Israel and say to them: When you enter the land that I am giving you, the land shall observe a sabbath for the Lord. Six years you shall sow your field, and six years you shall prune your vineyard, and gather in their yield; but in the seventh year there shall be a sabbath of complete rest for the land, a sabbath for the Lord: you shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard. You shall not reap the aftergrowth of your harvest or gather the grapes of your unpruned vine: it shall be a year of complete rest for the land. You may eat what the land yields during its sabbath—you, your male and female slaves, your hired and your bound laborers who live with you; for your livestock also, and for the wild animals in your land all its yield shall be for food. (Lev. 25:1-7)

People wrote our habits on paper, one habit per sheet. Then, each person posted the habits on the wall. We went around the room sharing our thoughts on the habits we chose and accompanying reflections.

Discussion Major Points:

- We generally recognized a need to change
- Change, though, is in tension with not wanting to give up habits we cherish.
- Observing Sabbath changes the way we feel the world around us and the way we live in it. It opens space for us to do some deep work towards our future.
- Change will entail discarding habits, which may be difficult to embrace.
- Fundraising. Do we have to do it? It takes a lot of work and aging makes working them physically harder. Fatigue is a real issue. On the other hand, our fundraising, such as the Holly Berry Fair, draws in the community. Fundraising is also necessary to sustain the congregation financially.
- Worship generated several questions:
 - Why do we worship on Sunday mornings?

- Why do we have communion only once a month?
- (During the post-session conversation in response to a habit about sitting in the same pew every week.) Should we get rid of all the pews so we can sit in chairs? Doing so will make the sanctuary space more flexible to use it beyond worship and can be used more creatively in worship.

As people posted the habits on the wall randomly, sorting and categorizing them later, they seemed to fall into the following areas: Post-worship Hospitality, Worship, Fundraising, Administration, and Miscellaneous (better characterized as individual habits which did not fall into any one of the other four groups.)

The largest single group was worship. The habits themselves fell into sub-groupings:

- Worship time and style
- Music, hymnody and special music
- Monthly communion
- Special worship services during the year
- Other practices in worship:
 - Sitting in the same location
 - Worship practices such as: liturgist, candle lighting, clapping

The miscellaneous habits included: Centering prayer, Supporting the food pantry, Christmas dinner, Book study

We did not remove any habits, although having a sabbath from fundraising was one that garnered some support.

Pastor's Reflections:

We might think of this session as an inflection point. It enabled us to see what we do, without assigning any value to them. When we see what we do, we can begin to ask questions:

- Why are we doing it?
- What value does it have for us now?
- Would this habit serve us better if we make changes to it and what would be those changes?
- If we want to make a significant change in the way we function as a congregation, what habits need to be saved as they are, what habits need to change, what habits need to drop, and what habits might we adopt that we don't do now?

Thinking about the way the habits were grouped, the two most significant general habits to consider are fundraising and worship.