

## Conversion of St Paul the Apostle (tr) | January 22, 2012 St Paul's Cathedral | Burlington | Vermont

“I am sending you out like sheep to a pack of wolves...be sly as snakes and simple as pigeons” (Mt 10.16).

Baptismal fonts should come affixed with warning labels, warning labels tip off its users about its risks. You should read the label careful. You should remove it before using it, in order to come to terms with the vulnerability of attaching your life to Jesus' movement. Baptismal fonts should have warning labels. So should church doors, prayer books, bibles, hymnals, singing bowls, pledge envelopes, meditation cushions, communion bread, baptismal chrism, healing oil, blessed water, church school classes, adult forum programs, common-reads, affordable housing homes, social service projects, faith-based community organizing actions, and ministry discernment initiatives.

So Jesus issues a warning for people he calls into ministry, to us on our patronal festival as we inaugurate a new mission plan, and tells us what we are getting ourselves into. “I am sending you out like sheep to a pack of wolves...be sly as snakes and simple as pigeons.” This must have been common advice in the early Christian movement as a missionary precaution.

Evidently it was dangerous, at least by the evangelist's time, to preach Christianity in...Palestine. The zealous Pharisee Paul's persecution of Christians before his acceptance of Jesus... illustrates the danger.<sup>1</sup>

“Sheep among wolves” is Isaiah's powerful depiction of a new age when “the wolf shall dwell with the lamb” (Is 11.6).<sup>2</sup> Jesus, too, hoped for a world of peace and equality, joy and love, wellbeing and harmony. But “sly as snakes and simple as pigeons”? What would such a combination of different, incompatible qualities of “shrewdness and modesty” suggest? Jesus is talking about leadership in a religious community.

The band of disciples is not a safe haven...; they must venture out not only into insecurity but even into defenselessness... The caution of the disciple is to consist not in clever diplomatic moves but in the purity of life that is genuine and wears no masks...<sup>3</sup>

Leaders of religious communities venture out with shrewdness and modesty.

I wonder is being “shrewd as snakes and simple as pigeons” what we mean by “sustainability” and “emergence”? We gather around a central altar to act out our identity, with Christ at the center – “An innovative city cathedral. An inclusive Christian community – loving, exploring and serving.” Our Long Range Plan is the compass for Cathedral life. Our ministry clusters have discerned how to live into this vision in the Operations Plan we present today, so the compass slowly becomes a “GPS.” You are driving and ahead you see many good choices, so you take one and suddenly on the screen you see the word “REPLANNING” and a voice, “Turn around at your first opportunity.” This is the religious perspective – “turn around.” There's no judgment in the voice. It comes in different languages. Jesus describes his mission. “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news” (Mk 1.15) or “Change your ways, and put your trust in the good news.” Turn around at your first opportunity. Trust the good news.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert T. Fortna, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Sana Rosa, CA, 2005), p. 94.

<sup>2</sup> Harrington, pp. 144ff.

<sup>3</sup> Schwitzer, p. 240.

We have learned “to change <our> ways and put <our> trust in the good news.” It’s been challenging. It’s been exciting. It’s been transforming. We held conversations, explored, planned, brainstormed goals, invited people into ministry and established priorities. Our mission plan lays out who will do what, when, and how we will measure results to plot new, innovative directions. The Plan aspires to “Sustainability.” Does a given ministry use our resources well? Does it maintain and add life instead of exhausting and depleting it. The Plan aspires to “Emergence,” to change, a process of coming forth to changes we will embrace in a changed world.

Cathedral programs are administered by parishioners organized into ministry “clusters.” Clusters prioritize Cathedral work – a model of lay leadership that recognizes the ministries given us in that Baptism font. Members of each Cluster decide where their focus should lie, establish priorities and determine how to expend resources, including time. What ministries and programs need to be done. What needs to be let go of, laid aside. Fewer clusters. Sustainability. Initial actions. Intentional focus and choices. Strong lay leadership and succession planning. Powerful connections. Emergent worship and ministries. At its heart is this question: How will we “proclaim the Christian faith a fresh in each generation?” Inherited, established and traditional forms of church serve alongside, incubate and partner with new and “fresh expressions” of church, to enrich the way we practice Christian faith and broaden our appeal to the next, much less homogeneous, generation. What emerges, I hope, will inspire you, people in our City and other parishes in our Diocese, as we change, develop and emerge.

An example may be an experiment for the five Saturday evenings and five Sunday mornings of Lent. A happy convergence of factors has come together to make this Lent an auspicious time for a liturgical experiment. On five Saturday evenings, we will hold an alternative, emergent Lenten liturgy; and, on Sunday mornings, we will meet in one service to worship together on Lent’s five Sundays. Then, on Palm Sunday we return to three Sunday morning services. We enthusiastically invite you into this experience. From time to time, we gather (like today) as a single worshipping community. The common response has been, “That was fun; we like worshipping with people we don’t often see. We like the combined choirs and the multi-generational experience! Let’s do it more.” Last summer, our services were held “in the round,” with the altar in the middle of the nave (like today). Again, the response was positive. Many like the sense of the whole, visually and liturgically, and want more.

We have never tried a single service over a given period, to feel what it is like to be together as a whole for more than a few scattered Sundays a year. This will give us the opportunity to be together for five consecutive Sundays, to share our experience to focus on the common theme of “desert” in preaching and study, and join in discussion and evaluation. The service will take place at 9.30 a.m. followed by Education for All. Our Long Range Plan invites us to develop new liturgical experiences. When we experiment with a Saturday evening alternative service, we also want to extend our creativity to an offering everyone can enjoy on Sunday morning. I look forward to the richness that will result, with all our resources focused on one service. It’s a short experiment. Would it work for the summer or for Advent? We don’t know, and we won’t until we try it. You might take mental or physical notes and share these during our feedback times.

Oscar Romero, the martyred Archbishop of San Salvador, once talked about ‘A Future Not Our Own.’

We plant seeds that one day will grow.  
We water seeds already planted,

knowing that they hold future promise.  
We lay foundations that will need further development.  
We provide yeast that produces effects  
beyond our capabilities.  
We cannot do everything.  
And there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.  
This enables us to do something,  
And do it very well.  
It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning,  
a step along the way,  
an opportunity for God's grace to enter and do the rest.  
We may never see the end results,  
But that is the difference between the master builder  
and the worker.  
We are workers, not master builders,  
ministers, not messiahs.  
We are prophets of a future not our own.

St Paul was an innovator. Inspired by Paul, the Christian movement became something larger than ever imagined. Paul's new, emergent experiment is inspirational for our work here.

Last Sunday I announced my intention to retire at the end of April, so it seems that Peggy and I are working on our own Sustainability | Emergence | Project. There is never an easy time to say goodbye. I am immensely proud of the bold, positive attitude that has begun to transform St. Paul's. It establishes a stable foundation for new clergy leadership. Ours is an amazing religious community. You are very inspiring people. It's been a privilege to be here. We want to spend some time following our children around the country and globe, spending more time together enjoying each other's life, as we explore our own developing and expanding interests – the rest we'll leave in God's hands and we will see. It's very hard to think about no longer being part of St. Paul's. I hope we will use well the time ahead to say a good goodbye. The Christian life involves pilgrimage and change—entering into a new future about which the only thing we can be certain is that God will be with us.

Annie Dillard once commented

A well-known writer got collared by a university student who asked, 'Do you think I could be a writer?'

'Well,' the writer said, 'I don't know....Do you like sentences?'

The writer could see the student's amazement. Sentences? Do I like sentences? I am twenty years old and do I like sentences? If he had liked sentences, of course, he could begin, like a joyful painter I knew. I asked him how he came to be a painter. He said, 'I liked the smell of paint.'<sup>4</sup>

Do you think I could be a Christian? Well... Do you like change? Will you go on a pilgrimage into an unknown future where God will be there for you? Do you like questions? Are you willing to offer yourself in order to make a difference for the wellbeing of the world? Will you shine the Gospel into your world?

We plant seeds that one day will grow.  
We water seeds already planted,

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<sup>4</sup>Annie Dillard, *The Writing Life* (New York, 1989).

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The Very Reverend Kenneth W. Poppe  
Dean | Rector