



minister

A journal of the American Baptist Ministers Council Speaking to the Practice of Ministry
Vol. XXXI, No. 1 – 2008
Published Periodically at Valley Forge, PA

*The Ministers
Council:
Relationships That
Incarnate Love
by Kate Harvey*



The Rev. Dr. Kate Harvey has served as Executive Director of the Ministers Council of the American Baptist Churches since 1995. Her pastoral experience was with the First Baptist Church in America (1987-95) and Central Baptist Church, Providence, Rhode Island (1979-87). Prior to entering ordained ministry she taught high school French and worked as an employment counselor. Her education includes: B.A. from the State University of New York at Albany, M.Ed. from the University of Cincinnati, M. Div. from Andover Newton Theological School and D.Min. from Hartford Seminary. While serving as Vice President of the American Baptist Churches in 1994-95, she experienced a compelling call to work on behalf of pastoral colleagues through the Ministers Council. She is the mother of five children who have presented her with twelve beautiful grandchildren – so far. She and her husband John have purchased a home on a lake in Tennessee ideally suited for extending hospitality to children, grandchildren, and friends.

A picture can never depict the fullness of reality but nevertheless truly is worth a thousand words. In fact, we preachers who value words highly and seek to shape them meticulously as the tools of our trade really get it that a picture's power is beyond all our well-turned phrases to paint truth.

I reflected on this the other day as I was sorting through my collection of photographs in the never-ending process of preparing to retire and move from Paoli, Pennsylvania, to Tellico, Tennessee. The journey through the piles of pictures was a journey through the past three decades of ministry. Each one has unbelievable power to conjure up not just the events imaged but all the emotions of those high holy days as well as those mundane moments of ministry, the preaching and the teaching, the weddings and the funerals, the picnics and the potlucks,

the endless hours of meetings with committees and the endless hours with books and at the computer, or even way back when at the typewriter.

But most of all, the photos bring to mind the relationships at the heart of ministry, some easy and natural, many requiring difficult work, all of them beautiful because they play a role in the journey of real human beings toward God's vision of what shall surely someday be. It may not surprise you that some of my most traumatic relational experiences in ministry have risen through seeking wholeness of the denominational body in the midst of our conflict over issues. It may, however, surprise you that I do not regret one single second of that work, even the most painful. On the journey toward that day when God shall be all in all, God has called us to hold on to our sisters and brothers as we wrestle with the gospel and its meaning for our time. Relationships are the heart of our work as ministers because it is through the Pentecostal web woven when we are in one place of one accord that the Spirit moves in power.

My transition from the pastorate to serving as Executive Director of the Ministers Council in 1995 was driven by a sense of call to take on the challenge of working toward systemic wholeness in the American Baptist Churches USA, out of which congregations and pastors might flourish and prove effective in reaching their world for Christ. My deepest spiritual intuition is that God yearns for humanity to become a poster of heaven people, every nation, tribe, peoples and languages encircling the throne of God and the Lamb Jesus Christ as imaged in the book of Revelation. Since the way of a circle means that the closer we come to God at the center the closer we are to the sisters and brothers alongside, that goal invites us to hold on to one another across all our differences as we wrestle with how the Bible informs us in this new day.

The first stage of my work with pastoral leaders across the United States focused on a top-down approach to that circle. Strategies included such systemic, nation-wide emphases as encouraging a pre-2000 practice of Jubilee to heal and renew the

ground for the seed of new things God was planting among us by freeing one another from the debts we hold against each other, and Sabbath as the theme of a national and regional staff gathering to renew our relationships with one another and our trust in God's abundance when we are tempted to perceive scarcity.

In the miraculous synchronicity of God's ways with us, God transformed my perspective through the generous gift of a 2001 sabbatical as a Merrill Fellow at Harvard Divinity School, funded by the Ministers Council of the American Baptist Churches USA, the Louisville Institute, and Harvard Divinity School. That time was dedicated to reflection on the covenantal implications of quantum physics and the work of the Spirit through the human relational web. Those three months so radically shifted my approach from top-down to bottom-up that all of my work since January 2002 has been shaped by that angle of vision. Precisely where pastoral leaders live and move and have our being is where relationships are forged that will transform the whole web.

A major thread of the work has been Together in Ministry, funded by the Lilly Endowment Sustaining Pastoral Effectiveness project, for resourcing clergy to form collegial covenant groups where the web of the Spirit might bind them for wellness, strength, effectiveness, and accountability. Another thread was the Jerusalem Council project of local clergy gatherings for dialogue and discernment on biblical interpretation of homosexuality. At the national denominational offices, two Valparaiso grants have funded monthly lunch gatherings for staff on the practices of honoring the body and testimony, to undergird our support of one another on our faith journeys in the midst of all the storms assailing denominations. Yet another piece of the work has been the establishment of a pattern of biennial national clergy conferences. An active website has been developed to facilitate communication and resourcing of our endeavors.

I have loved you and every second of the work with you. But now I have passed the age of 65 and the time for retirement from this phase of ministry has arrived. The Ministers Council will transition in leadership through the arrival of our colleague Joe Kutter as Acting Executive Director even as it continues Together in Ministry and simultaneously enhances our relational emphasis through intentional focus on strengthening and resourcing con-

stituent councils for their work locally. Leadership changes but the work of implementing our established strategy goes on.

Change is the ever-present dynamic of life, is it not? It always seems that we have never been this way before, and never more so than now. None of us is immune to transition that shapes our days, either of the sort we choose and embrace with joy or the sort that seizes hold of us and we engage with fear and trembling. Change happens, and none of us should enter into it alone.

Thank God for the Ministers Council, the professional association of American Baptist pastoral leaders, founded in 1935 to bind us together for support, accountability and advocacy. Along the way in the 1980s and 1990s Joe Kutter and I both served as editors of Minister, the Ministers Council journal that speaks to and from pastoral leaders. Minister has itself transitioned, from print format to e-zine because the electronic format has become accessible and cost effective.

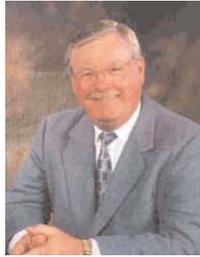
This entire issue of Minister focuses on the theme of transition. The eloquent articles that follow bear testimony to the changes in lives and ministries of beloved colleagues who are companions with us on the journey. "Companion" literally means "with bread." Colleagues who companion us on the way are a significant means of God's provisioning us with abundance every step of the journey. Their stories strengthen and sustain us as we travel through our own times of transition.

At its conclusion, the Gospel of John reports that "there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written" (John 21:25). We might echo that truth in asserting that the whole world cannot contain enough words for ministers of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to begin to convey such wondrous love of God for this entire benighted, beloved assortment of humanity. Where we begin to transform the world into God's glorious vision is through relationships that incarnate love and weave a web that is whole and holy.

"Now write what you have seen, what is, and what is to take place after this." ~ Revelation 1:19

The Next Transition

by Joe Kutter



The Rev. Dr. Joe Kutter is completing 39 years of pastoral ministry during which he served five congregations. He has also served as a seminary trustee, President of the Ministers Council, as chaplain to the General Board and General Board Executive Committee, and in a variety of regional and community leadership roles. He begins his term as Acting Executive Director of the Ministers Council September 1, 2008.

I write this in mid-May knowing that life is about to change. I have agreed to serve between two and three years as the Acting Executive Director of The Ministers Council beginning September 1. It's a major transition.

In September, 1969, my wife of several days and I, attended our first worship service at The First Baptist Church, Haddonfield, New Jersey and I entered ministry as an Assistant Pastor. It was a great people with whom to start. Still a student at Crozer Theological Seminary in Chester, Pennsylvania, I commuted to the half-time job with responsibility primarily with youth and education. September, 2008 marks the thirty-ninth anniversary of my entry into pastoral and congregational ministry.

I have been blessed with really good congregations whose members have included quiet Christian saints of remarkable vitality, faith, integrity and nearly pure goodness. From Haddonfield to solo pastorates in Kearny, NJ and Dearborn Heights, MI, and then to lead pastor positions in Royal Oak, MI and Topeka, KS, I have accepted calls to lead congregations in a variety of places and cultures and have discovered that every call was an invitation to do something new. But in every place, I have preached Sunday after Sunday to the same group of people. I have walked with families through grief and celebration. I have married and buried and dedicated. I have administered through board systems that had different names but were remarkably similar. With every change, there was a core ministry that remained the same.

And now it's going to change. It could well be that I will never again preach to the same congregation on consecutive Sundays. I'm leaving the hallowed place of nearly-automatic invitation into the lives of people who are grieving or celebrating or just plain wondering about life. I'll be a bit of a stranger in the places where I am called to lead worship or to preach. And, my Oh my, will the process of administration change! I'll have to settle into a brand new nearly-alien process.

I am a veteran of congregational politics and, to be honest, rather enjoy the process. In churches, there are two ways to make decisions. The first is tyranny and the second is politics and I choose politics. I like the process of helping to shape wholesome processes for congregational decision-making and have been known to offer a corrective word to those who prefer to operate in the shadows, and through internet gossip. Leading a group spread across the nation is going to be very different from the local congregation but I fully expect to learn how.

Mostly, I expect to lose the powerful sense of community that vitalizes good congregations and the place of respect that is afforded to pastors, at least until it is squandered by some form of ineptitude. In a way, that is brand new to us, Peggy and I will have to find and create a new community where we can belong.

We'll have to go church-shopping. I have not done that since college. I wonder what kind of church we'll shop for. Whatever we do, it will be a transition.

After writing and re-reading the previous paragraphs, I'm wondering, "What was I thinking?" We taken some "hits" along the way, but it's been a very rewarding way of life. I have been the recipient of far more respect, kindness, and love along the way than disrespect, meanness, or nastiness. Looking back, we have received grace upon grace and blessing piled on blessing. Why change now when retirement is so very close at hand and the MMBB annuity is so very very promising?

There are two kinds of reasons that interplay with one another to cause me to believe that this is an invitation from God through the Ministers Council. One has to do with vocation. My respect for the ministers who serve our Lord through American Baptist congregations is nearly limitless. It is true that we hear, from time to time, about some lazy or incompetent, or unethical ministers who really mess up

churches and people. That happens. But what a skinny minority they are! The overwhelming majority of our colleagues serve with integrity and purpose and great faith. We have a few stars who help to create very large congregations and we have lots and lots of women and men who serve congregations of modest size with a kind of faithful ministry that I find simply inspirational.

And now, using the resources of The Ministers Council, I have been invited to offer encouragement and support and resources to colleagues in ministry that I love and admire. The congregation is God's primary vehicle for the ministries of Christ's Kingdom and one key to congregational faithfulness and fruitfulness is ministerial leadership. Effective congregations tend to have effective ministers. Those who accept God's call to ministry are participating in the single most important venture that one can find in this world and I want to play some small role in holding this role up for the honor and recognition that is deserved.

Some may ask, what about the priesthood of all believers? My observation is that the ministries of lay people are best empowered through the effective leadership of ministerial leaders. I am not asserting any kind of elevated spiritual status. That is contrary to everything I believe about essential spiritual equality at the foot of the cross. But I do believe that our ministers play a critical role in the empowerment of laity to fulfill the mission and ministry of Christ's church.

My second set of reasons is more personal and familial. While the Ministers Council office will continue to reside at the Mission Center in Valley Forge, my office will be wherever I have a computer and telephone. We will continue to live in Topeka and I will "telecommute" to Valley Forge, I will essentially work from a virtual office. My hope is that we will experience more personal flexibility to enjoy family events. I hope to make a few more of my grandchildren's birthday parties and soccer games in Detroit. While I'll travel more (not a particular blessing) I also expect to have fewer evening meetings (who is going to meet with me in Topeka?) and to save some weekends for family events. I've heard of a thing called "The three day weekend" and I hope to find one or two. I do not plan to work less but I do expect to work differently.

I am already experiencing anticipatory grief. There are beloved people here whom I feel that I should, when the time comes, bury. There are some wonderful kids that I should marry. There is a community here in which I am very comfortable and that I love. But we do believe that we have received, through the Ministers Council leadership, an invitation from God and our RSVP is "Yes".

I will honor that part of our Code of Ethics that calls us to sever professional ties when we leave a congregation. I'll not do damage to the church in which I have invested eleven years of labor by messing it up after I leave. I will accept and endure the grief of that decision for the sake of the people and church that I love.

I believe that God is inviting me to do a new thing. At this time of maturity in my life, it seems that God still calls and I hope to faithfully respond.

*Strength to Yield
to the Will of God*
by Christine Smith



The Rev. Christine A. Smith is Pastor of Covenant Baptist Church in Wickliffe, Ohio, where she holds the distinction of being the first woman pastor, as well as the first African American pastor, of the congregation. For the past fifteen years, Rev. Smith has served (and continues to serve) as a trustee for the Cleveland Baptist Association. Under her leadership, the Association established the CBA Fund for Theological Education, designed to provide scholarships to ministers and lay leaders who need financial assistance in their pursuit of seminary training.

Reverend Smith is the proud wife of Aristide Smith, Jr., and mother of three children: two happy, active boys, Aristide III and Caleb; and the most recent addition, a beautiful daughter, Aris Christine. For God's loving kindness and tender mercies, Christine simply says, "To God be the glory for the things He has done!"

"Young, enthusiastic, encouraged, and affirmed to pursue a doctorate in Womanist Theology, I set my sights on entering a Th.D. program at Boston University. My plans, however, and God's plans were two different things - I was called to become a pastor."

"I almost named you Phoebe," my mom would fondly recall. While carrying me, she had a dream her deceased paternal grandmother told her she would have a baby girl and she should name her Phoebe. I wouldn't learn the significance of that dream until many years later.

Prior to marrying, my mother almost became a Catholic nun. She'd gone up to the last stage of the process when she decided not to take her final vows. Momma frequently expressed a feeling her life would never be happy because she somehow neglected to fulfill her calling. She said as she left the convent, she prayed that God would call one of her children into the ministry.

Fast forward: I was raised in the Catholic Church, but somehow never really felt connected. I went through First Confession and First Communion, but at the age of twelve, I told my parents I no longer wanted to go to church. My brother and sisters had stopped attending and my parents only went periodically. Mom was greatly distressed by my decision, but Daddy said, "If she doesn't want to go, don't force her." So we stopped going.

The next year, I began attending church with two friends from school. One was Baptist and one was Pentecostal. Influenced by both churches, I grew to love God's Word and desired to increase my Biblical knowledge and understanding. Disturbed by the Pentecostal belief one had to speak in tongues in order to be "filled with the Holy Spirit," I ultimately made the decision to join the Baptist Church. Much to my family's chagrin, I was baptized at age 15 and became a faithful member of the Second Baptist Church in Akron, Ohio.

I was given a paperback copy of The Way Bible which I read day and night. I particularly loved the Proverbs and the Book of Revelation. Leaders in the church took note of my unusual dedication and devotion and began to give me small assignments. The Sunday School Superintendent asked me to serve as the church school secretary. Next, I was asked to assist with the Board of Christian Education, putting up bulletin boards. Soon, I was asked to become an assistant Sunday school teacher and eventually I became a full fledged Sunday School teacher and Bible study leader.

One day, an associate minister said to me, "God has called you to become an evangelist." I was shocked! Not only was I shocked, I was very trou-

bled by this thought. Remembering my time with the Pentecostals, the only women preachers I saw were evangelists and missionaries. Certainly none were pastors – that was for men! The women evangelists and missionaries wore no make-up, pants, or jewelry. They had their hair pulled back in a bun, wore long dark dresses, and carried large Bibles everywhere. This was not the garb of a teenager! I was horrified at the thought of being one of them! Every time I saw the minister who gave this unwanted prophecy, I went in the other direction. Interestingly, he was not the only one who began to "see the gift" in me. Sometimes while with friends, people would ask, "Are you saved? You have a glow about you. God has a calling on your life." Each time I heard the words, I would cringe. What would become of me? What about my dreams of marriage and children and a career? NO – this calling stuff was not for me!

One day when I came home from school, I was sitting in my bedroom reading my Bible, as was my daily routine. I heard the voice of the Lord say, "Christine, I've called you to be an evangelist." The voice was not audible, but it was loud in my head. I was so troubled by the message I began to cry. I felt burdened for weeks and months until finally I went to my pastor and shared what I felt in my spirit. He was not surprised.

Over the next several months, my pastor and I met to talk about ministry and the steps I would need to take to become a licensed minister. At the age of 17, I preached my initial sermon and received a license to preach the Gospel. Upon graduation from college, I taught for half a year and then went to seminary in the fall of 1987. My home church was very supportive and paid for my first semester's tuition, room, and board. I was hired as a research assistant in the Bible Department and received several scholarships and a major fellowship from the Ford Foundation. The Fellowship (Black Women in Church and Society) was part of a major grant secured by Dr. Jacquelyn Grant, Professor of Systematic and Womanist Theology at the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta, Georgia. Greatly influenced by the program and impressed with Womanist theology, I decided to continue my studies and pursue a doctorate.

My last year of seminary was a time of anxiety. I was given many opportunities to preach in local churches and at school. I could feel the Spirit pulling me toward pastoral ministry, but that was not what I

wanted to do. Besides, no opportunities were readily available. I wanted to become a professor. However, things were not falling into place. Although I had excellent grades, many academic honors, and strong recommendations from my professors and advisors, doors were not opening for me. Several classmates and professors began to ask, "Chris, are you fighting God? Has the Lord called you to the pastorate?"

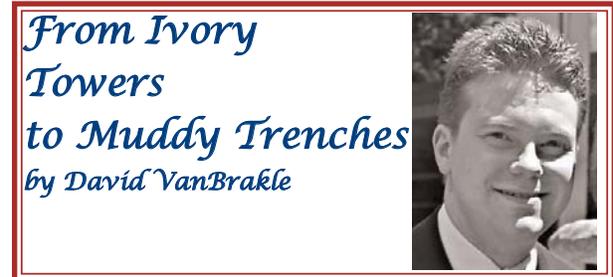
Frustration and disappointment mounted. After several applications to various programs, I was finally invited to accept a fellowship in the Doctor of Theology program at Boston University. What a thrilling, exciting opportunity! However, the same week, my pastor from home called and offered me the position of assistant to the pastor. Oh no! I knew deep within myself what God was calling me to do, but I wrestled with what I wanted to do. As I struggled between choosing obedience or indulgence, I fasted and prayed, anointed my head with oil, and literally drank some oil in order to gain strength to yield to the will of God.

As I lay prostrate on the floor of my efficiency apartment, praying and crying and preparing to say no to one program and yes to another, the Lord brought back to my remembrance all the voices of those who years before had spoken prophetically. With some variation ("You've been called to be an evangelist," or, "You've been called to be a pastor..."), all voices pointed to the fact God was calling me to serve in the preaching, teaching, and prophetic ministry of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

After much struggle, I called Boston University and turned down the Doctoral opportunity. In the next breath, I called my pastor and said, "Yes." That was in 1990. In 1995, I was ordained by Olivet Institutional Baptist Church in Cleveland, Ohio (The Rev. Dr. Otis Moss, Jr., Pastor). After serving many years as an associate minister, a minister of Christian Education, a pastoral counselor and a chaplain, in 2006 the Lord opened the door for me to become Senior Pastor of the Covenant Baptist Church in Wickliffe, Ohio.

As I look back over those years of resistance, trepidation, hesitation, and ultimately obedience, I now have great peace the decision I made was the right one. While the educational field is of great importance, there is such a need for pastors who are willing to shepherd God's hungry, thirsty, and oppressed people. Being a pastor gives me the

opportunity to touch many lives – to stand in the gap – and hold out the light for many who are suffering and on the verge of giving up hope. My deceased great grandmother was right: Phoebe, the female leader of a home church in Rome, possibly should have been my name.



The Rev. David VanBrakle is currently serving as the pastor of Michigan Avenue Baptist Church in Saginaw, Michigan. He graduated from Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School in May of 2007 and married his wife, Erica, in December 2007.

During my last semester of seminary, one of my professors told me, "Be prepared for the bumpy descent from the ivory towers of academia to the muddy trenches of congregational life." My heart sank into my stomach, because I was already wondering if I really wanted to go into congregational ministry! The transition into the pastorate for me was lonely, especially since most of my friends either seemed indifferent at best to the concerns of the church or, at worst, to loathe organized religion. Less than a handful of my friends within my age group decided to go straight from college to seminary, and those who enrolled in seminary planned to go into specialized ministries.

I am not sure if I can pinpoint the specific reasons so few of my friends pursued the pastorate. Frankly, I'm not sure I have a rational explanation for my own career choice. I do know my discernment for my call would have most likely been pushed aside if it were not for the support I received and continue to receive from my family, my home church, and various mentors. The main thing which helped me with the transition from seminary into the pastorate was that I already had a clear idea of what was involved and how to do ministry even before I first felt my call in high school.

As a youth in my home church, I was held to the expectation that as a member, I would participate in church activities. By the time I left for college, I had

many opportunities to participate in normal youth group activities: lock-ins, late night camp discussions, learning the basic Bible stories. My church experiences, though, went beyond just youth activities. I had opportunities to make visitations to sick and elderly members through our church's visitation team. Our pastor asked me to assist in regular worship services, and I helped organize other activities for church functions. Those in leadership positions identified and reinforced my various skills and took the initiative to involve me in ministries which would build my leadership abilities. They were very understanding of the limitations of inexperience.

Recently, I mentioned to our worship team that we need to have more youth involvement within our worship service. One of our leaders protested this idea because the individual felt worship was too serious a time to risk the possibility that some of our rambunctious youth might be less than respectful of our Sunday experience. If I had not been welcomed and even encouraged to participate in worship as a youth, however, I question whether I would have the desire to participate in leading worship today as an adult. I have discovered as I transition from a student to a leader within the church, the things I learned as a youth carry on into my thinking now. (Author's note: In Development, we refer to this concept as a "critical" learning time. It's much easier for most children under the age of five to learn a second language which they would find challenging to learn as an adult. Most adults are intimidated to the degree they don't even try.)

The difficulties arising in my transition from seminarian to pastor are not just the changes in my life, but also with the changes my congregation faces. The church and wider community I have joined is in a time of immense flux. We are geographically located in a changing urban community. The decline in the local automobile industry is leaving many people in our community unemployed, and many of the children who traditionally stayed and maintained the future of our church now move away from the community and our church to seek other economic opportunities. In seminary, I was aware of these factors in society in a theoretical sense. In my parish, I see and feel the reality of how these forces impact my congregation every day.

One of the reasons I was drawn to this specific congregation is because they know the future vitality of our church rests on changing to meet the needs of the surrounding community, and they are committed

to make those changes. Yet, even with a deep understanding of the need to change and the resolve to do so, the comfort of maintaining traditions can be compelling in the face of an unstable world. The group process involved can lead to frustration, especially when the majority would like to see something changed, or when I would like to give a creative idea a try, but a select few work adamantly against changing or trying something new. I truly believe the answers are within the members of our church, but on occasion find it difficult to employ words to encourage our collective spiritual growth and pursuit of continued relevance to our changing community. This is hard work and there is no road map! What helps me is the belief that our God forgives beyond our comprehension, and that I am part of a network of colleagues with whom I can talk, vent, and share ideas. My personal network consists of mentors, new and old friends, and family. They are people I respect and can trust to give me honest feedback. At the same time, I am inspired that as my congregation struggles with the significant challenges of day to day life, they still find the faith and energy to want to help others and serve as the body of Christ.

Ultimately, my community continues to support my transition from seminary to the pastorate. That community helped raise me and continues to help refine my ministry. Immersed in a society which promotes materialism, we are surrounded by changing fads created to make us want and buy more things. Against what I understand to be a large body of evidence to the contrary, I believe many people in my generation desire a deeper understanding of life. Others seek communities to help transform their lives. Such communities are not to be found in congregations stuck in ongoing debates. The Church must strive to become a community dedicated to becoming cross-generational, from youth to elderly, and encompassing the diversity we choose to define in our world.

Even with stresses that come with change, I have been excited about my transition into the pastorate, because no growth occurs without stress. I can see both the strength of tradition and the power of change occurring at the same time within our congregation. As it turns out, I've not lost the joy of intellectual stimulation from the ivory tower, but have gained the perspective of what it all can mean to people who want to be more like Jesus. This is exactly what I've always wanted to do.

Learning How to Dive

by Erica VanBrakle



Erica VanBrakle graduated from Central Baptist Seminary this past May. She is currently doing a unit of CPE in Saginaw, Michigan, where she lives with her husband, David, who serves as Pastor of Michigan Avenue Baptist Church.

I was on my high school's diving team and can remember the first time my coach taught me a new dive. He sat in his chair and verbally described how to execute a new dive. I got up on to the board, my head racing with the million different ways I could hurt myself, and chickened out. I would do this for weeks, which infuriated my coach. The next time he taught me a new dive he came over to the board, walked me through the new movements and described each step of what I was supposed to do once I was on the board. This time I got up on the board and once again my head raced with all of the ways I could hurt myself. This time, though, I pushed the thoughts aside and concentrated on each instruction my coach had given me. Unlike the first experience, I trusted my coach, as well as myself, and preformed the dive successfully. Transitioning from seminary to the ministry has been a lot like my first two experiences learning new dives.

The graduation speakers I have heard at seminary have all given graduates the same commission: to follow God's call as they go out to serve in ministry the same way we followed God's call to seminary. It was easier for me to follow my call into seminary, because it was a personal decision. The search and call process, however, includes others and involves dealing with deeply embedded struggles. With all these external forces, it is easy to listen more to the voices of doubt than to listen to God's voice.

I have heard the stories of when seminarians had numerous resources to call upon in their final year of seminary to help make the transition into one's call smoothly. Unfortunately, those days have passed and many students are left to transition with

little support. Many seminarians struggle to find a call before the student loan bills come in. Others who feel called to take a church in an economically depressed area are left trying to figure out how to develop a package the church can afford while still putting food on the table.

Transitioning has been both a personal and shared experience. Emotionally transitioning has been a personal journey that has uncovered a new process of how I deal with change. Thankfully, neither my husband David nor I was completely alone in this process. Both of us had support from our church communities and had mentors who encouraged us and pushed us. Having reliable mentors who have been there to answer questions, listen to us, and pray for us has been invaluable in the transition process. Connecting with seminarians in the same transitioning process has also been helpful. Those relationships help remind us we are not the only young adult pastors who are in the midst of this new season in our lives.

Just like learning new dives off a diving board, the transition into ministry from seminary can be isolating and frightening. It is fortunate there are others who have gone before who will step up and become reliable mentors to help us through this time of transition. We also acknowledge God has been with our mentors, friends, and families who have supported us in the academic pursuit of our call and continue their support throughout the transition into ministry and every season of our lives. In the moments when we find ourselves struggling and feeling lost and alone, we remember that when we jump, we do so with support. We acknowledge that perhaps some who have gone before had better means of support in that transition, but we do not dwell on that. Instead, we jump into the ministry to which God has called us – wherever and whenever that time and place may come.

After this I looked, and there in heaven a door stood open! And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this." ~ Revelation 4:1

*Life Transitions:
Some Thoughts
from
the Journey
by David Wood*



“Please be patient with me: I am currently going through a transition called life.”

-- Ashleigh Brilliant

“It could be that the purpose of my life is only to serve as a warning to others.”

-- Ashleigh Brilliant

The Rev. David Wood was born and raised in Australia and moved with his family to Wichita, Kansas, when he was a teenager. He became an ordained pastor in the American Baptist Churches, USA, in 1984. He has served congregations in Connecticut, Maine, France, and Kentucky. David was the first Associate Director of the Lilly Endowment funded Louisville Institute (1998 – 2001) and now lives in Auburn, Maine, where he serves on the staff of the Fund for Theological Education as the full time Coordinator of Lilly Endowment’s Transition into Ministry Grants Program. He is married to Jennifer, a high school art teacher. They have three children: Julia (21), James (18), and Jordan (18). Julia is a junior at the University of Southern Maine. The boys will be attending Calvin College this fall.

If there is one theme that is present from start to finish in the Bible—it is transition. All the movement from one place to another is unrelenting: fall, exile, sojourn, journey, return, wilderness, running the race...you get the picture. It is all through the biblical narrative even though the word is not. The noun ‘transition’ does not even come into use until the mid 1500s when all things fixed were being dislodged from their traditional moorings. We’ve been in transition ever since.

I am now 51 years old. Over the course of my life thus far, I have lived on three continents, resided in 13 different cities (and 15 different houses, not counting dormitories), and served in some pastoral capacity in eight different congregations—the longest was for seven years. I was raised in Australia, reared in Kansas, baptized Church of Christ, ordained American Baptist, educated at Oral Roberts University, Gordon Conwell Theological

Seminary, Yale Divinity School, and Harvard Divinity School. In seven of the past nine years, I have served two positions simultaneously—pastor of a congregation and managing grant programs for Lilly Endowment. The grant program for which I am now the full time coordinator is called “Transition into Ministry.”

One might think that with all this experience of transition in my own life, I would have achieved some degree of skill and confidence in negotiating my way through it. Such an assumption could not be further from the truth. As a matter of fact, at this stage of my life, I feel less competent than ever when it comes to making a transition. I have a friend, also a pastor, who told me he never preached a bad sermon. The only problem was, he would say, it was always on the way home after Sunday worship. I have never made a bad decision in my life. The persistent problem has been that too many of them were made long after roads had diverged in a yellow wood.

In my earliest years, I was fully immersed in the standard teaching that God had a detailed plan for my life. The chief demand on my life was to discover the way God had marked out for me and then to walk in it. I was hiking in the Camden Hills of Maine last year with a good friend who is an expert hiker. He taught me how to look for and find the swatches of paint on trees that marked the trail we were on and kept us on the right trail when trails converged and diverged. Finding the blazes on the trail of God’s plan for my life has been far more difficult than I would have ever imagined. To be quite honest, the blazes disappeared long ago. I’m not sure they were ever there in the first place. Over the years I have found the words in Hebrews 11 describing Abraham to be increasingly true of my own life: “By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going.” We walk by faith, not by blazes. But, thanks be to God, we do have friends.

First convictions die hard. At every diverging of pathways I faced, I could not escape the belief there was a pre-ordained way to be discerned and chosen. Not being from the Calvinist wing of the Reformation, I could never shake that fear that I could very likely choose wrongly and suffer a kind of permanent vocational dislocation—a dislocation that would only be compounded by efforts to get back on track. Having in me enough of the Calvinist sense of “total depravity,” I was always predisposed

to think I was choosing poorly. I don't think I have ever dislodged myself from that primal conviction (no matter how hard I tried) or from the anxiety about transition it triggers. Be that as it may, through it all, here are just a few things I have learned about negotiating transitions:

- As important as prayer is to discernment, sustained, open, and honest conversation with friends is indispensable to making good judgments. Actually, it is precisely the kind of transparency friendship engenders that makes prayer so discerning. My inherited patterns of discernment are far too embedded in the biblical narratives of call and response that posited the isolated individual before God in a direct, usually very detailed, conversation: Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, David, Samuel, Paul...you know the list as well as do I. The only problem is, I have never heard, in any way that resembles any of those encounters, the voice of God. But as long as I stayed in those narrative constructs, I had to muster the confidence God had spoken, else I could not move. This inevitably led to making statements about what God wanted I had no authority to make and set me up, down the road, to call into question the basis for being on the path I had chosen. But at the time of the decision, it was a handy device to justify my decision to those who questioned my judgment.

- The time to move on is not when one can state with some degree of certainty, "My work is done here." Whether or not that is the case is not for us to claim, for it is something we can never know. Pastoral work is never done. The only time the Apostle Paul talks about finishing a race is when he is facing death. To make the claim we have done all God intended for us to do in a certain place is to abdicate responsibility for the choice we are making. Which brings me to my pet peeve: never ever, under any circumstances, blame God (or anyone else, for that matter) for your leaving. Take full responsibility for the choice you are making to leave and leave the rest to God and to the good (or bad, as the case may be) judgment of those who bear the sorrow of your leaving and share the joy of your arrival. (Of course, there are usually mixed emotions on both ends of the transition...but that's another essay!) Trust the work of the Spirit in you and in them.

- No matter what one chooses after all has been weighed and considered, always the greatest and most enduring challenge in any and every transition is to live into that choice. Inevitably, down the cho-

sen road, the full dimensions of the choice made and all its hidden caveats will be revealed. When that revelation confronts us with completely unanticipated distress, it is instinctive to call into question the legitimacy of the chosen path. To indulge that impulse is to become like "a wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind" (James 1:6). To be called to a place, a people, a role, is to engage that place, people, and role as one who is called—regardless of time and place. One's calling is not predicated upon a particular set of circumstances. How one functions within any given set of circumstances has everything to do with being called. I have real questions of how many of the choices I made in years past to move on I would have made if I had trusted enough to walk by faith and not become obsessed with the question, "Am I called to be here?" or, "Is this the right place for me?" To be sure, there are times when a place, a people, a role becomes overtly and verifiably destructive. The time to stay is not then. But those times are very few and far between.

- This brings me to my final point: with every transition, there is always a period of disorientation. Sometimes, those periods of disorientation are prolonged and intense. Disorientation is not a sign one misread the trail markers. Disorientation is always a sign I have reached the place where I must finally choose to trust that God is in this place, with these people, and in this work I am now in the midst of.

Throughout this essay, I have focused entirely upon the transitions we chose. I will leave it to others in this collection to explore the countless transitions we face in which we have no role in choosing—the "thief in the night" encounters of life. However, I will say this: I hope it is clear that everything I have said above indicates why those "unchosen" transitions are the best possible training for the transitions when we imagine we are doing the choosing.

A concluding thought: The story of Jacob has become a focal point for me as I seek to practice my calling in the place I find myself these days. In Genesis 28, Jacob is on the run from Esau. He finds himself in the middle of nowhere in the thick of night. Taking a rock for his pillow, he falls asleep. He dreams that from the very place in which he lay, there is a ladder reaching to heaven with angels ascending and descending. In the dream, the Lord stands beside him and says, "Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go." When Jacob awakes, he declares, "Surely the Lord was in

this place—and I did not know it!” He goes on to claim the God-forsaken place (spiritually and physically speaking) in which he finds himself is “none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.”

There are many roads in many woods and God is to be found on every one of them. And that makes all the difference.



The Rev. Amelia Chua is a member of a Together in Ministry group in northern California. Her latest documentary film, called “Four Women in Ministry,” is based on the stories of the women in her group.

Transitions have been hard for me. I write about this particular one because for the first time in decades, it doesn't hurt anymore.

When I went to seminary, I prepared myself to serve through the American Baptist Churches. I knew the denomination was supportive of women in ministry, and I was encouraged by the officers of the national Asian Caucus, my pastor, and my local church. Before my graduation date, I visited with the regional executive minister to inform him of my upcoming placement need, I filed my information with the American Baptist Personnel Services, and I spoke with as many pastors as I could to make my availability known.

Looking back, I feel I was very naïve. I didn't factor racism and sexism into my equation. Anglo churches do not generally seek an ethnic person for a pastor, and Asian American churches generally do not consider a woman. I was never asked to provide pulpit supply, nor was I given information about any potential local church placements within the American Baptist Churches.

When I was in seminary, I had heard some women graduates “disappear.” When the process did not work for me, I started to understand what that

phrase meant. After over a year of waiting for a call from a church, I had to repeatedly check deep within, because I could see on the outside, nothing was happening.

Deep within me, I saw a flame and the obligation to tend it and keep it going. It was a call to serve, and it was intertwined with my life force. Of all the stories about call I had heard, I kept remembering the one where the vocational call was compared to a virus. Once the virus got into your system, it integrated with your own cells. It became a part of me - and it drove me.

I did not expand my denominational horizon because of a wider vision of the church. I picked up the phone and called other judicatory officials out of a vital need to be included. I visited and followed up on every major denomination I felt led to telephone. I gave myself 20 minutes to cry between phone calls before I would call up the next stranger on my list.

Some strangers were angels in disguise, hosting me with their time and encouragement even when they had nothing to offer as placement. They listened and shared ideas and names of the next person I might contact. They were like the sips of water that kept me alive and driving toward the next transit. Realistically, however, we Christians are not compassionate all the time. One judicatory official called me “opportunistic.” She voiced that opinion within eight minutes of our meeting. That incident was particularly sad because she also was an ethnic woman in ministry.

With the Asian American Baptists, I was open about my wider search. In areas that are less than comfortable, Asian Americans often operate in non-verbal communication. Without a word spoken, I knew my loyalty to the Baptists was questioned. I questioned my own loyalty ~ to the community, to the denomination, and to God. Do I stall the Holy Spirit to wait for a church call? How do I discern when they don't synch up in time? I had to sort out whether I served the people, the church, or Christ. For me, they did not always lead to the same conclusion.

In a patriarchal system, a woman often has to wait her turn. The “daughter” was/is sheltered, unseasoned, and kept in waiting upon the disposition from

her elders. However, with Baptist polity, I could see the patriarchs had nothing at their disposition. I made the decision to grow up and be response-able to the situation, thereby painfully breaching a couple of relationships dear to me.

The United Methodist denomination was the last one I approached. I knew the polity was very different, and in my ignorance, I questioned if God had to speak to the bishop in order to speak to me. Anyway, an Asian American clergy sister spoke to me on the phone first and gave me some idea of how to initiate the conversation with denominational representatives. I met with the district superintendent, who happened to be Asian American. We met for 45 minutes on a Monday. He closed our meeting by saying all their churches had pastors appointed a few months back at the start of their appointment year. I thanked him for his graciousness in meeting with me and left him a copy of my resumé. On Wednesday, he called back and said he had a church open - would I be willing to pastor? I was ordained American Baptist with a United Methodist church as my call. Since then, the United Methodist Church has recognized my ordination and appointed me to pastor Anglo and Asian American congregations.

With this invitation to write an article for the Ministers Council, I've realized how the transitions have come full circle. I have had the opportunity to welcome other ethnic sisters into my office and to provide information and encouragement and a sip of tea as they searched for their placement. I've been invited back to the national Asian Caucus and through the Asian desk of National Ministries to lead programs. I've had the privilege to serve on three conference planning teams with the national American Baptist Women in Ministry, most recently in April 2008 when I spoke on the "Top 10 Things You Need to Know About Asian American Women in Ministry." After I spoke, an African American woman seminary graduate came and thanked me for sharing her story. Listening to her, I felt my own healing. It has been the women who kept me in the loop.

Transitions have moved me from the role of daughter, to sister, and colleague. Many people of faith from many different communities have helped along the way so I could grow in synch with my call. I am now an experienced pastor. I have functioned within different polities and cultural settings. I have reconciled with those I love and I have come full circle. I am very blessed. God is good.

*Fanning the
Flame
in Ministry
by Yvonne Martinez
Thorne*



Dr. Yvonne Martinez Thorne is a bilingual (English/Spanish) faith-based counseling psychologist practicing in Chestnut Hill, Pennsylvania. She is married to Rev. Dr. Leo S. Thorne, Associate General Secretary for Mission Resource Development at ABCUSA.

There have been times when I have been acutely aware of God's movement in my life. This happened most recently in the summer of 2006 when I attended a World Mission Conference at Green Lake, Wisconsin. One night, after viewing a video production containing images of human suffering around the world, I heard a voice in a dream say to me, "I know you have cared for people all of your life, but do you really care?" I woke up from the dream filled with sorrow. How could I have been caring for people, yet not really caring for them? I sensed in this question God was holding me to divine accountability. Following a period of discernment, I came to realize God was calling me to care for others in a different way – to share God's transforming love through the gospel of Jesus Christ.

As far back as I can remember I have always had a deep sensitivity for the suffering of people. As a young child, I was actively concerned for the well-being of my Latino family and those around me. Perhaps this was in part the result of difficult and changing times in our communities and in our nation as witnessed in the Civil Rights Movement, the counter-culture revolution, and the Vietnam War. As a young adult, my compassion for others was channeled into my work as a social work assistant at a community health care facility. Several years later, I had a strong desire to help others in their search for wellness and wholeness in their lives. After completing my undergraduate education, I enrolled as a full-time student in a doctoral program at Columbia University in counseling psychology.

At the same time I was in pursuit of my doctorate degree, I also sensed God's movement in my life. I was blessed to live on "Seminary Row," a culturally

and religiously rich section of the upper west side of New York City that houses Union Theological, Jewish Theological, and New York Theological Seminaries. In that milieu, I developed many cherished friendships with seminary students. Seemingly out of nowhere in that academic context there emerged from deep within me the question, "Who is caring for the shepherds?" In response to what I perceived as God's leading in my life, I spoke with my academic advisor and inquired about the possibility to include courses in theology and pastoral counseling as part of my doctoral studies. He denied my request and told me I should pursue this interest upon completion of my doctoral program. Fortunately, God continued to stir in me the desire to care for the shepherds.

I have worked as a faith-based counseling psychologist with adolescents, adults, couples, and families across ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic backgrounds seeking to bring health and healing in their personal lives and relationships. I have also been blessed to care for the shepherds through adjunct teaching at seminaries, opening a private practice for ordained clergy women seeking wellness and wholeness in their personal lives and in their ministries, and serving as a psychological consultant to clergy, lay leaders, seminarians, and judicatory leaders. I have learned much about the Church and its leaders' struggles to be authentic and accountable in ministry. Particularly poignant have been the stories of clergy women struggling with the legitimacy of their call and their need to honor their sacred feminine in ministry and in their personal relationships, while confronting the reality of their church's ambivalence about women in ordained ministry. The opportunity to work with clergy women seemed to ignite within me a desire to be more intentionally involved with church leadership and denominational life. Little did I know God was also using these experiences to fan into flame my own call to ordained ministry.

When I finally discerned God was calling me into ordained ministry, I struggled with the realities of pursuing yet another intensive and arduous graduate program. Informed by my experiences as a doctoral student and a seminary professor, it was with some trepidation I anticipated the academic rigors of a theological program. Was I up to the task of learning a theological framework with language, concepts, schemas, and praxis different from the psychological framework I learned and proficiently used in my work as a counseling psychologist? I

struggled with reconciling why God would call me out of a fulfilling counseling ministry in which I had invested many hours and sacrificed much for in preparation, and place me in ordained ministry where clergy women often struggle with their call and the ambivalence of the congregations they serve. Why would God be calling me to this? Besides, we already had a pastor at home, and I was content being a pastor's spouse and ministering alongside him.

Yet in my spirit, I deeply sensed God's call and desire for me to fan into flame all the gifts God had given me for ordained ministry. In September 2007, I enrolled as a full-time student in the M.Div. program at Palmer Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. I have also maintained my private practice (at a reduced level, of course) as a counseling psychologist. When asked how I am able to combine all of these elements, my answer is always, "By the grace of God and a supportive husband." I am finding theological education with its multidisciplinary study of theology, history, and philosophy, to be more challenging than my doctoral education. My first year at seminary has underscored the importance of strengthening and equipping clergy for ministry. It has also strengthened my Christian beliefs and knowledge of doctrine. My call to ministry continues to be affirmed with each new course, and I am learning to fan into flame the gifts placed in me as a child to help strengthen and equip the Body of Christ. I am coming to understand the words of Jeremiah 1:5: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart, I appointed you as a prophet to the nations."

They sing a new song: "You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation; "you have made them to be a kingdom and priests serving our God, and they will reign on earth." ~ Revelation 5:9-10

*Transition in
Ministry
Continued*
by David Chapman



The Rev. David L. Chapman serves as Pastor of the High Street Baptist Church in Roanoke, VA. He is a past Vice President of the Ministers Council.

I was privileged to write a transition in ministry piece for "Minister" back in the Spring of 2004. The article was a snapshot of my then 27 years in ministry. I closed that particular article with these words: "I know not what tomorrow holds as a minister and as a pastor, but I'm so thankful I know Who holds tomorrow."

Well---a year later, in the spring of 2005, I found myself trying to peep around the corner that divides today and tomorrow to see if God really had a firm grip. I had become content after 16 years of fruitful, in-depth, expanding, and of course, at times trying ministry at the Union Branch Baptist Church in Chesterfield, Virginia. I could see myself retiring from Union Branch. Then to my spirit comes this still small voice, quiet whisper, distant beat of a drum (some of you know what I'm talking about): "Get ready to go - your work is finished here." In the other ear I could hear the Temptations of Motown Fame singing, "It was just my imagination running away with me!" At Union branch, there was a nice home, good neighbors, a growing, loving, warm, supportive congregation, new sanctuary and office complex, steadily increasing pay, excellent benefits and supportive care, and retirement looming on the horizon.

At Union Branch I knew who was who and what was what. We never realize the value of this and how empowering it is until we have to go to a place in our lives where we don't know who is who and what is what, especially at the age of 56. For me, my age became a more significant factor in affecting my faith than I would have ever imagined. I can remember when in my 20s, 30s, or even 40s, I could be compared to my namesake David. When presented with a challenge to my faith, I would take that sling shot and a few small stones and run to meet the

challenge. At 56, I found myself more like Gideon – "Lord, are you sure it's me you want? If so, let this fleece be dry in the morning and the grass all around it wet." Well, it's now tomorrow morning, Lord...

In March of 2005, the challenge began to take shape. I received a request to be the guest preacher for the High Street Baptist Church of Roanoke, Virginia. High Street was searching for a pastor. Truth be told, I was not looking for a church. I had a good one, one that, in my opinion, was exceptional. But in the back of my mind I could hear, "Your work is finished at Union Branch." High Street was one of the better known pulpits in the state of Virginia and was noted in many parts of the country. Many ministers just wanted the opportunity to preach in its pulpit. High Street had a distinguished list of former pastors who were noted preachers: Noel C. Taylor, Fred G. Sampson, Robert J. Smith, to name but a few. The Rev. Noel C. Taylor pastored the church for over 37 years with the distinction of being the first and thus far only African-American mayor of the city. After his retirement, the call was extended and a new minister assumed the pastorate of High Street. During his administration, the church experienced a split. To add insult to injury, because of the church's noted status in the community, the split was a very public event. I accepted the invitation to preach at the morning worship service on March 18, 2005. Shortly thereafter, I was asked to submit my resumé for the congregation's consideration of me for the position of pastor.

By this time in my career, I had turned away advances from other churches that wanted me to apply because I knew God wanted me to stay at Union Branch. This time it was different. "Your time is up," the voice in my head said. "Your work is finished here." Well, I submitted my resumé, believing that God was at work in it all. One year later, on March 1, 2006, I drove onto the grounds of High Street Baptist Church with an overwhelming mandate to be their next pastor. This was the culmination of almost a year that included a thorough background check, an extended interview and preaching regimen, and signing the first contract as pastor of a church in my 28 years of ministry. Going to Union Branch included my wife, two daughters and son. Our arrival at High Street was minus our three children, who were all young adults by then and out on their own. It's been two years and three months since I accepted the challenge of becoming the pastor of High Street Baptist Church. I was sent to a

people who had been deeply wounded and who had lost trust in pastoral leadership. Year one was one of the most stressful that I had ever experienced in ministry. I could say that the stress was a result of being 56 and taking on such a major task, or coming into a situation not knowing who was who and what was what, or for the first time facing opposition before I could hardly get my feet on the ground. I had to conclude it was none of the above. I've concluded the stress was due to my lack of faith in a God who is able to keep us in the midst of, while seeing us through, any situation, especially if God has called us to be there. We've come a long way, High Street and I, and we've got a good ways to go; but as for me, I know not what tomorrow holds as a minister or as a pastor, but I'm so thankful I know Who holds tomorrow.



The Rev. Jerrod H. Huguenot is the Intentional Interim Minister of the First Baptist Church of Bennington, Vermont. A life-long American Baptist, Rev. Huguenot has served on denominational and regional boards and committees. He is also the President of the Roger Williams Fellowship (www.therogerswilliamsfellowship.org). He is married to fellow Central Seminary alum Kerry Shermer. They share their home with two theologically diverse cats and one dogmatic hound. (Photo credit: Tim Hunt, Catamount Photography)

When discussing the experience of congregations in transition, one contributor of **Temporary Shepherds: A Congregational Handbook for Interim Ministry**, draws upon a line from a Marc Connelly play, **Green Pastures**. Spoken by an old deacon, the line goes like this: "Everything nailed down is bustin' loose!" After quoting the astounded deacon's line, the essayist makes the following observation:

Congregations tend to think that they do not change over time, but nothing is further from the truth. Congregations change sig-

nificantly as they respond to different pastoral leaders, to changes in their societal context, and to alterations in their internal circumstances. (p.8)

Alas, most congregations perceive interim periods as fallow times, when in reality, a season of interim ministry can be a time of great fruitfulness. If a congregation reimagines interim ministry as an opportunity for reattuning the congregation's vision, they give themselves permission to embrace the possibility that this time between (settled) pastors can be more about the prospect of a new day for the ministry and vision of the church. It also relieves the church and its next incumbent minister of the expectation the next pastor will be misperceived or subconsciously desired to be "the messiah figure" who will carry out magical "fix it" work for the congregation when he or she arrives on the obligatory white steed.

Especially in longer contracted periods of service (18 months to multi-year), intentional interims can help with the "tangled knots" of congregations long overdue for honest and sustained self-analysis. Intentional interim ministers can equip congregations to ask "big picture" and "frame-bending" questions about the congregation and its horizons. (Gil Rendle and Alice Mann's **Holy Conversations** is an excellent primer for structuring and facilitating this work.) Short term interims might leverage some positive change with congregations; however, a longer period of time ensures congregations will work more incisively with the many facets of a church: congregational history (written and unwritten); governance and leadership transitions; articulating a congregationally-discerned vision for ministry; learning conflict management skills; reinvigorating stewardship conversations - the list of possibilities goes on! With more time and less rush, congregations in transition can learn it is okay to "bust loose" of old wounds, habits, and myopias!

From my own experience, let me share a few observations from the practical side of things. At First Baptist, Bennington, Vermont, the church began efforts to regroup after the last minister departed in September 2005. Upon the advisement of their regional executive minister, the congregation voted to call an intentional interim minister for a three year period. Looking back at the past two years, I credit much of the forward movement which has occurred to the early and firm resolve of the congregation not

to rush through an interim time. The result has been the opportunity to breathe a bit and lower the anxieties congregations harbor when change occurs. While it sometimes has felt like a wilderness journey, there now is much more desire to seek out the Promised Land of “something new and vital in our midst.” A longer, less rushed interim period has helped the congregation deal with long-standing and present day challenges with more focus and clarity.

As *Temporary Shepherds* observes, congregations are wise to pay attention to changes in their societal context. A time of interim ministry can be a great experience in the making for lay leaders to examine the real needs of their community and assess how well their identity or ministry is aligned, or more likely, out of step, with their ministry context. While churches understandably focus on their internal needs, an interim period is a great time to reacquaint and retool their ministry for and with the present-day needs around them. Churches can move from maintenance to missional ways of living out their vision for ministry. Resources available through National Ministries and NM staff member the Rev. Dr. Ronald Carlson, Missional Church strategist, provide valuable tools for congregations needing help to begin exploring new opportunities for ministry and mission.

What might be the untapped missional potential for this ministry context? In Bennington, the town and surrounding area has changed greatly over the past two generations. The textile mills folded up, and Bennington is still seeking a sustainable socio-economic identity. Southwestern Vermont deals with an increasing level of rural poverty and economic hardship. Many households are feeling the brunt of the statewide crisis of lack of affordable housing for working class families. Bennington is also the sexual assault capital of Vermont, with increasing incidents of domestic and community violence being reported. Looking at these social and economic realities, how well do the congregation and its ministries connect with the changing face of our community? Do we know our community well?

To be honest, very little of First Baptist’s ministries reflected an attentiveness to their community context two years ago. Now we are working on creative ways to address critical community needs, all the while exploring what the next chapter in ministry needs to look like. In dialogue with social service

providers, we are forging community partnerships and retooling ministries to help build up the community. In early 2008, we partnered with National Ministries to provide a non-sectarian, two day training on community conflict transformation skills. This event attracted sixty persons, drawn from a cross-section of Social Services, the court system, the local hospital, the business and non-profit sectors, and a good gathering of people representing Bennington’s diverse faith communities. Little by little, we are reshaping our understandings of what sort of voice and presence a local congregation could have in our ministry context.

It feels a bit odd that my first full-time parish calling as a young adult is to serve as an intentional interim minister. Then again, this is a strange and unique time to be a mainline Protestant, trying to figure out what life and ministry look like in a firmly (or at least solidifying) post-Christendom era. As we American Baptists look with wonder and anxiety (or perhaps angst) about the denominational restructuring underway, as regional offices deal with the woes of understaffing and programming cuts, and as congregations feel the crunch of mainline decline, it might be tempting to presume the future should be feared a bit. But then I remember that deacon’s line as I see a congregation nudging itself toward a new script, a new story, a new vision just unfolding. May all God’s gathered people yearn to hear, “Everything nailed down is bustin’ loose!”

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**Go When
There's
an Opportunity**

by Don Ng



The Rev. Donald Ng has been the Senior Pastor of First Chinese Baptist Church in San Francisco, California, since 1998. He served on the national staff of American Baptist Churches Educational Ministries in areas of youth ministry, conferencing, curriculum development, and Asian American Christian education. Rev. Ng grew up in the First Baptist Church of Boston, and is a 1975 graduate of Andover Newton Theological School, Newton Centre, MA.

As I finished my sermon for May 25, 2008 – the last one I will preach before beginning a three month sabbatical - I noticed when I saved it in my laptop file, it was my 413th sermon. I have been Senior Pastor of First Chinese Baptist Church in San Francisco for the past 10 years, preaching most Sundays – and now it was time for me to go away.

The multiple pastoral staff team from the church has a strong commitment to support its ministers with annual continuing education resources, as well as granting a sabbatical for every seven years of service. I have already gone three years past my seven years, and was told by one of my colleagues that unless I took a sabbatical, she won't be eligible for hers!

When the Apostle Paul concluded his first letter to the Corinthians, he mentioned that brother Apollos was unwilling to come yet, but when the opportunity came up, he would (I Cor. 16:12). I'm sure Apollos had good reasons not to visit the Corinthians, just as I had good reasons not to take a sabbatical. But now, I have an opportunity to visit Israel, and it's time for me to go.

More than a year ago, I began to explore the possibility of studying in Jerusalem. I have always felt my seminary education would not be complete until I visited Israel, and for the past 33 years of full time ministry, I have wanted to go. I strongly felt a Master of Divinity program should include a visit to the Holy Lands, and that these pilgrimages should take place before one's retirement. According to my MMBB account, retirement is not that far away! So given that, I have had a single-mindedness to visit Israel this year.

If one is intricately involved in the life of the church, as I have been, it's difficult to be ready to go. With the added transitions of another pastor on maternity leave, a vacancy in another pastoral position, and our church administrator vacationing at home in China, we found we will be short-staffed while I am on sabbatical. To minimize our office tasks, we are printing monthly, instead of weekly, worship bulletins containing all the information for that month. Instead of monthly issues of the church newsletter, we are publishing and putting online one large newsletter for the entire summer. While I am away, our minister of christian education and our pastor emeritus will provide pulpit supply, and proclaim the Good News.

As we know, there is never a good time to be away for a sabbatical. As God's servants, we are adept in coming up with convincing reasons to stay involved and to allow opportunities for rest and re-creation to pass us by. Sometimes, we actually believe the church can't get along without us. But the fact is the

church got along long before we arrived, and it will remain a vibrant and faithful church long after we are gone. God has provided me with an opportunity to go on sabbatical, and I am ready and willing to go - not only for my sake, but for the holy sake of the church. When I return, I will be blessed to see the many miracles God has done in my absence.

Post-Sabbatical Planning

by Jeff Haggray



The Rev. Dr. Jeffrey Haggray serves as Executive Director Minister of the District of Columbia Baptist Convention. Jeffrey and his wife, the Reverend Shelby Martin Haggray, are the parents of three children. They reside in Washington, DC.

Old habits die slowly, and not without a fight, especially “unhealthy old habits.” This insight became very apparent to me when I returned to work following my three-month sabbatical. By the way, speaking of a fight, I should have fought for a different assignment when asked to write this reflection about my transition from sabbatical back into the practice of ministry!

I can write more passionately about the splendid plans I made prior to going on leave, with my emphasis on self-care, spiritual formation, and the desire to learn more about spiritual direction. If pre-sabbatical planning were my topic, I would say I approached my sabbatical advisedly, reverently, and in the fear of God.

My sabbatical was long overdue. Since graduating from seminary twenty years ago, I have “held down” – metaphor intended – a full-time ministry position without taking time off either for family leave, health, or employment transitions. Even when I have changed pastorates, I always started preaching in the new pastorate the Sunday after leaving the old pastorate, driven by my own sense of call and by assumptions about the urgency of each ministry assignment, coupled with a practical need to remain gainfully employed.

Prior to the 2007 Biennial meeting hosted by DC Baptists, I acknowledged I was tired and heading toward a collapse. I figured out I probably had enough time to choreograph a safe landing versus crashing dangerously. Thankfully, the District of Columbia Baptist Convention’s permission-giving board heard my plea for a sabbatical on first mention of it, immediately adopted a sabbatical policy, and granted the leave I requested. My leave extended from November 1, 2007 – January 31, 2008.

My goals for my sabbatical were neither scholarly nor world-changing, although they were potentially life-changing for me. My body was out-of-whack. I was mentally exhausted and, speaking spiritually, operating on fumes. My plans were to hire a fitness trainer; join a health club and go each weekday from 8:30 – 11:00 a.m.; rest and replenish my body from 11:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m.; pray, study, and reflect on my spiritual journey from 1:00 – 3:00 p.m. - whatever form that took; and pick the kids up from school at 3:15 p.m. In my case, sabbatical leave from my job did not entail leave from my family. More quality time at home with my family was crucial to my renewal. My plan also called for no meetings, no conference calls, no speaking or preaching engagements, and no counseling of anyone else for three months. I give myself high marks for using my leave time as planned.

However, I have been asked to write about how things have gone since returning to work. Honestly, given I had no plan for maintaining my new healthy lifestyle upon transitioning back to work, things have pretty much gone as planned. That is, not so well at first. The real objective during sabbatical was to implement new habits which would become part of a permanent healthy lifestyle. Although I planned for and successfully implemented those habits while on leave, I had no plan for continuing the discipline of those healthy habits upon returning to work.

I recognize simply wanting a healthier lifestyle does not a healthier lifestyle make. Therefore, in recent weeks, I have taken measures to recapture the sabbatical bliss I once knew, and to “hold it down” as part of my lifestyle. Going forward, my permanent self-care plan calls for incorporating healthy actions into my daily professional life - this did not happen when I returned from sabbatical.

Beginning this spring, I am getting out of bed an hour earlier each day for personal devotional time, long before the kids begin stirring. I am going to the

gym just a few blocks from my office, three times each week before going into work. Also, three times each week, I am scheduling time on my calendar for study as part of my normal work day.

I am having some success in managing a healthy diet. Part of my success in this regard is because the entire staff at work shares a desire to eat more healthily, which means the food-related events at work are featuring more fruits and veggies as main courses, and unhealthy items are being eliminated from our menu. In my experience, fifty percent of the health challenge confronting all clergy is managing what we eat in the ministry setting.

Last, but not least, I am working closely with my staff to be more strategic in scheduling organizational meetings and planning our work, so we all aim at healthier work-styles with regard to our region calendar. Developing healthy habits around management issues, meetings, handling mail, email, and phone messages, managing due dates and deadlines with multiple denominational partners, congregations, and clergy requires not only hope but specific planning with calendars and collaboration in hand.

In closing, my transition from sabbatical to work has shown me that in finding my right "life rhythm" which incorporates self-care, ongoing spiritual formation, quality family time, and ample commitment to a productive professional life is an ongoing effort, and not simply a one-time accomplishment achieved during sabbatical leave.

*And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true." Then he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life."
~Revelation 21:5-6*

*The Latino Ministers
Council of New Jersey:
A Transition from
Dream to Reality
In Celebración De La
Organización Del
Concilio De Ministros
Latinos De New
Jersey*

*by Edwin Aymat and
Ignacio Cartagena*



The Rev. Edwin N. Aymat has been the pastor of the First Baptist Church of Irvington, New Jersey, for 30 years. This is the longest tenure in the history of this church. He plans to retire at the end of 2008. Rev. Aymat has served on the General Board of ABCUSA, and currently is a member of the Essex Association Ordination Committee. He has been married to his childhood sweetheart for 38 years. They have three grown children, two grandchildren, and a very active Coton-Eskimo puppy.

The Rev. Ignacio Cartagena is the pastor of North Baptist Church in Jersey City, New Jersey. An ordained minister of ABCUSA since 1980, Rev. Cartagena holds a Masters Degree in Theology from Evangelical Seminary of Puerto Rico. In addition to serving as the Director of the Latino Center for Theological Studies and of Voz Profetica, an Hispanic Baptist magazine, he is the Chairman of the Ordination Committee of the Essex Association of ABC New Jersey. Rev. Cartagena serves as the President of the Latino Ministers Council of New Jersey.

The idea for a ministerial professional organization was born during the ministry of Dr. Bernardino Martinez, then the Hispanic Coordinator in New Jersey. Subsequent area ministers followed up on Dr. Martinez's idea, and there were conversations about an Association of Hispanic ABCNJ ministers working in cooperation with the wider ABCNJ family.

After Dr. Martínez died in 1996, Lenny Ballesteros was chosen as an interim minister to fill the position of Hispanic Coordinator. During his tenure, progress was made toward creating an Hispanic Association. In true Baptist fashion, a committee was formed to draft an organizational outline which soon took the

form of a proposed constitution and general by-laws. The fine work of Dr. Joaquin Cruz, the first contributor to these documents, was recognized, and the proposed constitution and general by-laws were brought before the Hispanic pastors for discussion and input.

The next administration was that of Luciano Márquez, who served a term and a half. He resigned in order to accept a position with ABCNJ as Associate Regional Pastor/Area Minister. Edwin N. Aymat finished Luciano Marquez's half term as president of the fledgling organization; Rev. Aymat then served another full term himself. During this time, the constitution was amended to permit an ample membership participation. The name of the organization was discussed in the light of the word "Latino," which refers to a wider range of language and cultural diversity than the word "Hispanic" defines. The appropriate change was made and the document was finalized and enthusiastically received by the Hispanic/Latino pastors. It was noted that as part of the process, the Code of Ethics of the Ministers Council would be adopted.

Ignacio Cartagena is the fourth and current president of the association. During his tenure, the process of seeking a closer link with the Ministers Council was explored and pursued with vigor. We met with the members of the Ministers Council in New Jersey, and with the cooperation and assistance from The Rev. Joe Gratzel and The Rev. Dee Dee Turlington and others, our association was in contact with Dr. Kate Harvey, Executive Director of the Ministers Council.

In light of our nexus to the Ministers Council and the wider participation we envisioned, it was proposed the title of the organization be modified from "Association" to "Council." We heeded the guidelines proposed by the Council to "join the Ministers Council through your local constituent council," which in our case referred to the ABCNJ council. It was decided the Latino council should receive dues from their membership. The dues would then be divided proportionately between the regional and national organizational dues.

The successful collaboration with the talents and enthusiasm of such a diverse group of leadership in ABCNJ finally birthed an organization from this long gestation period. The presidency of Rev. Ignacio Cartagena finally brought to fruition the dream long

shared. On the 17th of May, 2008, a worship service of great joy and celebration marking the founding of La Organizacion Del Concilio De Ministros Latinos De New Jersey was held at Mount Pleasant Baptist Church in Newark, New Jersey, with Dr. Lee Spitzer and Dr. Kate Harvey offering their congratulations and blessings to the gathered Latino pastors and their church members. The transition from dream to reality has been realized.

Navigating Ethnic Ministers Council Waters

by Darla Dee Turlington



The Rev. Dr. Darla Dee Turlington, Senior Pastor of the First Baptist Church of Westfield, New Jersey, is Immediate Past President and Senator of ABCNJ Ministers Council and Senate Representative to the Executive Committee of the National Ministers Council. She values the diversity of the gathered American Baptist family and salutes the Ministers Council for finding ways to bind us together.

For as long as I have been an ordained ABC minister, I have noted and appreciated the presence of Hispanic brothers and sisters at ministerial gatherings of ABCNJ. They were, to varying degrees, bilingual, and they always accommodated the fact that I am not. Their camaraderie with one another was lively and full of laughter, and they readily shared it with all who cared to converse with them.

I knew they had an alternate place for professional association, the Latino Ministerial Association (LMA), which held meetings in Spanish. I was pleasantly surprised when in the spring of 2006, Rev. Ignacio Cartagena, President of the LMA, invited me, as the current President of the ABCNJ Ministers Council, to address the LMA about the Ministers Council and its benefits. I was pleased when the executive committee of LMA asked about becoming a constituent council.

My own executive committee discussed the idea and endorsed it, noting the concern that having a separate ethnic Council might further isolate our Hispanic colleagues. So we proposed an ABCNJ

Latino Ministers Council would recruit members to three organizations simultaneously: Ministers Council ABC (national dues); Ministers Council ABCNJ (nominal dues); and the Ministers Council equivalent of LMA (with its own determination of dues).

The LMA needed only formal by-laws consistent with the purpose of the Ministers Council to meet the qualifications for a constituent council. They produced these in short order, and I took their request to be recognized to the MC Senate in August of 2007, where it was approved.

The officers of LMA received this news with joy and pledged continued recruitment of American Baptist Latino ministers in New Jersey, support of ABCNJ Ministers Council, and full participation in national Ministers Council.

They are true to their word. This year, the LMA has collected dues for national and regional Ministers Council, in addition to their own. Their executive committee met with ours to coordinate calendars. Some of their members continue to participate in ABCNJ MC events, with the same energy as always. Their president will be at Green Lake in August as their Senate representative. And we are planning a jointly sponsored workshop in the fall, with the speakers' outlines provided in Spanish.

Welcome on board, my friends! Bienvenidos, Latino Ministerial Association!

After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice saying, "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!" ~ Revelation 7:9-10

Transitions Within American Baptist Churches USA

by Roy Medley



The Rev. Dr. A. Roy Medley serves as General Secretary, American Baptist Churches USA

Dear Colleagues in Ministry:

Over the next year you will hear a lot about the proposed restructure of our national structure. This will involve some major adjustments for what we hope will be a more missionally focused structure. This is the product of a 3 year conversation within and among the General Executive Council ("GEC"), the ABC officers, and the General Board.

Let me begin by outlining the process for consideration:

1) The General Board, which has been in dialogue with the GEC as the work has progressed, has received the final proposal. The proposed structure will be fully reviewed and discussed in plenary session this June. Implementing bylaws (which are technically what need to be approved) will have a first reading by the General Board at this meeting. A first reading is "for clarification, to point out areas of potential reservation, or to suggest to the sponsor such modifications in writing (within 30 days) that may remove reservations at the time of the Second Reading."

2) The materials received by the General Board will be made available to congregations for their study and discussion. This will include a Power Point presentation. Every region is being urged to offer information forums, since this is a product of the GEC of which the Executive Ministers are members. General Board members will also be asked to make sure information is disseminated.

3) In November, the General Board has a Second Reading of the proposed implementing bylaws. At this session they will vote whether to recommend these bylaws to the 2009 Biennial delegates. Only biennial delegates in session "have the authority to add to, amend or repeal the ABCUSA bylaws."

4) If approved, the bylaws will be officially forwarded to every congregation for action by delegates at the 2009 Biennial in Pasadena. From June through the Biennial, ongoing education will be provided congregations.

What do we hope to achieve?

1) To get ABC out of the bind we have been in when our structure has been interpreted as hierarchical with the General Board having authority over national boards, regions, and local congregations. This has been especially difficult when the General Board has been expected to legislate binding answers to difficult issues.

2) To clarify the primary focus of national board members by having them wear one hat. General Board members now serve on the General Board as representatives of their congregations. They are also the directors for ABCUSA and members of the national program board corporations. They may also be elected as Director for one of the program boards whose directors can only come from General Board membership. Are you confused already – then you get the picture! This structure at times makes for a conflict of interest. It also means very little attention has been given to the direct work and responsibilities of ABCUSA because most of the General Board meetings consist of moving in and out of other corporate meetings. In the proposed new structure, there will not be a General Board whose members serve with multiple hats. It will be replaced by a Board of General Ministries which will oversee the work of the Office of General Secretary. Board members will serve one board as a Director with primary responsibility to oversee the functions of that board and its staff: National Ministries, International Ministries, or General Ministries. The boards will be interrelated but not interlocking. MMBB's board structure will remain as it is now.

3) To become more missional in the national structure, we will focus on the Church's mission at the Mission Summit at Biennials and the Mission Table afterwards. The Mission Summit will be a way of conducting the Biennial which will prioritize learning about the task of mission in today's context, training constituents, and hearing from the churches. The Mission Table will be a gathering of ABC mission partners – national, regional, local churches from every region, colleges/seminaries, Ministers

Council, ABW Ministries, ABEC, and others – which will occur after every biennial. Its purpose is to be a mission “think tank” for the denomination. It will survey the world landscape as to important mission challenges, hear our churches' perspectives, and network ABC mission partners around common mission priorities.

4) The National Leadership Council (replacing the GEC) will further focus on how the seminal thinking of the Mission Table is translated into practical programs and applications to enable the fulfillment of the charter goals of the mission boards and our ABC focus statement: “American Baptist Churches are healthy missional churches that nurture devoted disciples of Jesus Christ who live their lives in mission and ministry for the healing of the world through the love of God.” In addition to the self-evaluations done by every mission partner, the National Leadership Council will review how well we are doing overall in meeting denominational priorities.

5) The delegates in session at the Biennial will still have the final word concerning the bylaws of the Board of General Ministries. Likewise, no board can propose changes in its bylaws affecting its relationship to ABC without the approval of the Board of General Ministries or, in the instance of the Board of General Ministries, the vote of the other boards and the biennial delegates.

6) Diversity and representation remain key values. Across the boards and at the Mission Table, the breadth of our denomination will be represented. We will continue the rotation in the election of ABC officers. While each board will be smaller in number than now, when each board is counted and one adds in the church representatives at the Mission Table, there is an increase in local church presence.

7) While our current system has delivered on representation, we have not always had specific skills present for the optimum functioning of our boards. Board members have generally been chosen on the basis of “who can represent our churches, association, area, or region?” rather than on the basis of “what skills are needed to enable our mission boards to best accomplish their tasks?” The new structure will enable the boards to seek within ABC membership the skills needed for their ministries while maintaining our commitment to reflecting the many faces within the denomination.

8) We have also hopefully struck a healthy balance between American Baptists never being able to say anything and the need for greater consensus on ABC social statements. The GEC is suggesting that for any new Social Witness Statement (notice it is not called a policy statement) to be an ABC statement, it must be approved by $\frac{3}{4}$ of the covenanting regional and national boards (excluding MMBB).

All in all, it is our hope this new structure will capture the best of what the last structure brought us (diversity, representation, and coordination), while also correcting some of its flaws (board members with multiple hats, focus on legislation, high costs).



Membership

You are eligible for membership if you are ordained, commissioned, lay professional, or a student in seminary who is eligible for inclusion in the Directory of Professional Church Leaders of the American Baptist Churches, USA, serving an American Baptist Church or auxiliary organization, and when you pay dues through a constituent council or to the national office of the Ministers Council.

Mission

The Ministers Council is the professional association of ministerial leaders within the American Baptist Churches. We are colleagues working together to:

- Connect colleagues through Together in Ministry collegial covenant groups
- Establish and maintain professional and ethical standards of the Christian ministry
- Give support to the members of this body and be an advocate for them in their professional associations
- Resource ministry through www.ministerscouncil.org
- Interpret the appropriate roles of professional ministerial leadership to the constituent parts of our denomination and to the local American Baptist Churches
- Encourage the recruitment and nurture of candidates for the various church vocations
- Provide a means for expression and debate by members of this body on issues that affect the professional ministerial leadership of the American Baptist Churches in the USA
- Cooperate with the appropriate units of the American Baptist Churches in the USA in matters of mutual interest and concern, including: recruitment, placement, compensation, continuing education, and counseling

How to Connect

Join the Ministers Council through your local constituent council. Contact information is posted on www.ministerscouncil.org under the “Who We Are” link.

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