

# The Future of the Church

Hebrews 11:29-34, 12:1-2

First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois

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Your Session that God has called through your election has been meeting to discuss (*drum roll, please*) elevators, electricity, and heating.

Our 1967-ish elevator will need to be replaced sooner than later, as our exceptionally friendly repairman tells us that there are no parts made any more to fit that elevator—not even on Ebay (!). And the boilers we use to heat our building are in the same shape. Add to this, our electrical service in both buildings needs to be updated. Replacing these things will cost a small fortune.

You have a very good Session. They're on top of this. We have money in the bank. We have you in the pews. And, thank God, we have God. **Or, to put it more rightly, *God has us.***

Despite the fact that God is with us, it's easy to worry about the future of the church. Most churches are getting smaller. Fewer and fewer people in this country attend church. Will we be able to pay our bills 25-years from now? How will congregations housed in historic buildings like ours be able to afford the steep upkeep? None of this considers the cost of staffing, the cost of utilities, even the rising cost of toilet paper.

Let the hand-wringing begin.

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Many in the world-wide church fret when they think about what the future church will look like. A decade ago, Tom Long wrote<sup>[1]</sup> that many church pastors suffer with future fatigue.

*“Once upon a time, ministry involved preaching, counseling, leading worship and guiding congregations in mission. All were demanding tasks, to be sure, but they were nothing compared to what is expected of pastors today—predicting the future. Clergy conferences now trumpet words like emergent, postmodern, next and futuring, a*

*vocabulary born out of apprehension that the church is crumbling around us and the future is a giant meteor hurtling toward our doomed planet.”*

When people look backwards into the past, they see a church that had more people, more programs, more, more, more. When people look forwards into the future, they see fewer and fewer congregants.

But being tugged by the glories of the past and the unknowns of the future can leave us listless and dulled to the present. A church with one foot in the past and one in the future doesn't have a leg to stand on in the present.<sup>[2]</sup> Is that the kind of church you want to be part of?

Me, neither.

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Our Session has developed a—well, I'm not sure what to call it. It is a “working attitude.” The idea is borrowed from Abraham Lincoln's days of steering barges on the Sangamon River. Let's steer to the next bend in the river. We cannot see beyond that. Let's be responsible for the voyage we are on today, not the voyage we can't predict for tomorrow.

In other words, be faithful. Be faithful in the now. Don't get stuck looking backwards. Don't get stuck gazing into the murky future. Moses and David and Gideon and Mary and Martha didn't worry about our problems; they worried about and worked on their own problems. They are remembered because they were faithful in their day. Jesus says, “So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today.”<sup>[3]</sup>

Today's to-do list is quite enough.

Mal Nygren wrote a pamphlet for this church celebrating our 150-year anniversary. In it, he masterfully talks about the decisions our church made in the past. The gist, is they were being faithful in the moment. Some decisions seemed unwise for the future; but they weren't living in the future. They were living in the present. They formed new churches when they could have been building up their own membership. They spent money on various church projects overseas when they could have piled up a bigger savings account at

home. He said the church kept making one “unbusinesslike” decision after another.<sup>[4]</sup>

Why? Because we are called to be faithful now, not tomorrow.

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The writer of Hebrews wants to encourage the church by reminding the church of all the people who had come before them, and, by the grace of God, had kept the faith. The people mentioned are not perfect people, but they are people through whom God worked. The writer is saying, *you are one of those people*. So, take heart. Have courage. Rejoice in the Lord. Do not be discouraged. Keep the faith.

The writer of this letter to the Hebrews wants his readers to believe that as God worked through the Bible-story headliners, God, sure enough, is and can work in and through you and me. And as our ancestors trusted the promises of God, we are invited also to trust.

Yesterday at the funeral of our beloved Bill Gamble, Rachel and I preached on the passage from Hebrews that we read today. The writer of Hebrews wanted to encourage her readers by mentioning how God had been faithful in the past working through the ministries of our ancestors.

This weekend we celebrated the lives Diane Miller and Bill Gamble. This afternoon, we thank God for Wanda Tichel. Next Friday we thank God for the life and witness of Babs Suter. As we remember these saints, we can almost tangibly see God at work, blessing our world, blessing our families, blessing our church.

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To live out God’s call, one has to be present enough to hear it in the first place, not stuck in some romanticized past or mystified by some unknown future.<sup>[5]</sup> We listen together. We work together on the issues before us. We rejoice that God blesses our efforts and gives us fellow saints with whom to share the journey.

*THIS* is the day the Lord has made. *Today*.

Let us rejoice and be glad in it.

With God's hope and joy, let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us.

AMEN.

**Hebrews 11:29-34, 12:1-2** <sup>29</sup>By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as if it were dry land, but when the Egyptians attempted to do so they were drowned. <sup>30</sup>By faith the walls of Jericho fell after they had been encircled for seven days. <sup>31</sup>By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had received the spies in peace.

<sup>32</sup>And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets-<sup>33</sup>who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, <sup>34</sup>quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight.

<sup>1</sup>Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, <sup>2</sup>looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

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<sup>[1]</sup> (Faith Matters, Christian Century, June 21, 2012)

<sup>[2]</sup> This is a great line I'm sure I stole, but from where I can't remember. Perhaps from a country song? Perhaps from a New Testament scholar? From both? It's a great line I wish I could claim.

<sup>[3]</sup> Matthew 6.

<sup>[4]</sup> *The History on an Unbusinesslike Church* by Malcolm Nygren, in celebration of the 150-year anniversary of First Presbyterian Church, September 2000.

<sup>[5]</sup> Tom Long continues: "A systematic theologian I know once gave the closing address at a church futuring conference in the early 1970s, when Alvin Toffler's *Future Shock* was all the rage. Following papers by culture critics, sociologists and others who were making confident prognostications, this theologian said, in essence, 'I am a theologian. I have no idea what the future holds. I know only that it will be held in the hands of God.' Years later he came across the conference papers. After rereading them, he said, 'You know, I was the only one who was right!'"