

Woodie W. White

CHRIST makes the Difference

I remember it well.

I was still somewhat new” as a pastor, seeking to learn the craft of ministry in my inner-city parish. A newly elected bishop was assigned to our Episcopal Area, and early on began to make an impressive impact on congregations and pastors. His gifts were several but among them were strong relational skills and remarkable candor.

The new bishop began a series of personal visits with small groups of pastors to engage them in challenging questions about ministry, but more pointedly about *their* ministry.

At a luncheon meeting with a group of inner-city pastors, the bishop began by posing the same question to each of us: “What is your ten-year plan for ministry?” That was 1964! Thus began my journey into “futuring.” Long before it became the popular and important discipline it is today, an

insightful and foresighted episcopal leader challenged his pastors to envision the future and to accept the reality of change. Of course, when the bishop posed the question, I didn’t have a clue! Ten-year plan? I hardly had a ten-month plan.

What I remember to this day, how-

God so loved the world!
God cared first, then God acted.
Method, mode, style follow caring.
They cannot replace it.

ever, is that change became a living reality for me. I expected it, even if I did not always welcome it. What I never did was to fear it. It became a part of my living landscape. But in my wildest imaginings I never envisioned the scope or rapidity of change experienced in my forty years of ministry.

Indeed, I continue to be dazzled by the futurists and their projections of a

changing cultural landscape. These new “prophets” seek to assist the church and the society to prepare for and engage the future and its changing landscape with courage, competence and, I hope, compassion.

The Book of Discipline outlines in considerable detail expectations of episcopal and other Church leaders. It says in part, “Reading the signs of the times, analyzing, designing strategy, assessing needs, organizing a wide range of resources, and evaluating programs and personnel are yet other skills critical for leaders.” ¶ 402.3.

The landscape for ministry is its context. All ministry is contextual. “Can the pastor do ministry in this context?” is the question I raise again and again when seeking to arrive at a decision about a pastoral appointment. Futurists, sociological and theological, help us prepare for and better understand the context—landscape. However, in the midst of a changing landscape for

ministry and diverse contexts there are some essentials that do not change.

Recently a pastor shared an insight that gripped my mind and spirit. In discussing a particular ministry context and congregation, he said, "I guess they (the people) don't care how much I know, until they know how much I care!" Changing trends, new technologies, modes, styles, gadgets and even jargon can never and must never take the place of the caring of ministry. God so loved the world! God cared first, then God acted. Method, mode, style follow caring. They cannot replace it.

In the midst of a changing landscape for ministry, there are some human and spiritual hungers, needs, frailties, and fears that do not change.

- People still have a sense of estrangement, whether because of their sexual orientation, skin color, accent, social or economic status. They want to know first, do we care?
- In the changing landscape of ministry, there is still the probing question of the nature of evil and its apparent capriciousness.
- The meaning of meaning is pondered by the rich as well as the poor.
- Justice and mercy are still required of every society and every soul.

The changing landscape does not change these realities, only the context in which they are addressed. **In the final analysis, it is not nearly as important whether one sings from a screen or a hymnbook as it is whether one sings from the heart. Nor is it as critical that one lifts a hand in worship as it is what one does with that hand after worship.**

In every changing order, and some have lived through many, the challenge for the Church and Christian—lay and clergy—is how can "old" truths be presented in fresh and new ways in the changing landscape. Or how can "new" truths be related to "old" values and core beliefs in the changing contexts.

In one of my annual conferences the words "Christ makes the difference" is beginning to appear on letterheads, as greeting and closing in correspondence, on brochures and conference material. It is a claim of the Church, and witness of those who have experienced that difference. Yes, Christ makes the difference and is the difference!

One must know the landscape, the changing landscape, in order to more effectively proclaim this Truth amidst other claims, competing values, diverse challenges and other "truths." It is a challenge but it has been so for every age. I suppose our Lord glimpsed the future, saw the changing landscapes that would be faced by his disciples, and promised:

...And remember, I am with you

always, to the end of the age.

—Mt. 28:20

Woodie White is Bishop of the Indiana Area.

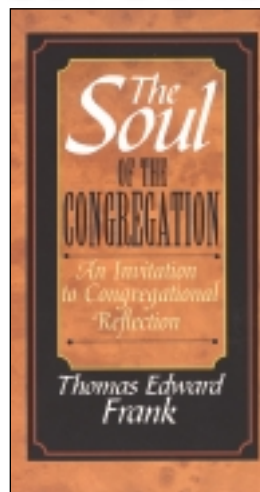


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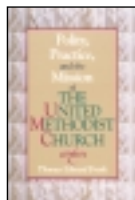
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