

So That the World May Know

John 17:20 – 26

Seventh Sunday of Easter/ 29th May 2022

Did you hear the good news? Catonsville Presbyterian Church will be hiring a staff person to serve 10 hours per week as Mission Coordinator! It hasn't happened yet.... But it's coming.

Funds to hire this person have come from this year's Envision Grant, money that is designated for new projects, new visions, and faithful dreams. A reminder that we have an Envision Board which is elected by this congregation at its annual meeting. These dedicated people meet to review grant proposals and then submit those chosen to the session for its approval and vote.

One of those important areas for funding is mission. Catonsville Presbyterian Church has always been intentionally and purposefully engaged in mission, locally, nationally and internationally. It is part of our understanding of what is being prayed for in this morning's text: Jesus' prayer to his Father, to God, that all may be one, and that the world may know his love, and God's love, for all people.

A few words about our prospective Community Mission Coordinator:

They will be tasked with reaching out to our current partner organizations, and they will be expected to participate in local coordinating groups and task forces. This would include CEA – Catonsville Emergency Assistance, our neighborhood food bank and assistance organization. You'll recognize that name from many of our food drives. Their offices are just a few blocks away in downtown Catonsville. This person would also be a connection with the Lazarus Caucus which organizes resources – including volunteers – for the Westside Men's Shelter, located on the grounds of Spring Grove, also in Catonsville.

Best of all, they will work with our own church committees and groups to help us assess and focus and coordinate efforts. With so many needs in our community, it is necessary to identify clearly where the needs are, and how we can work effectively and faithfully with others in the area to care for our neighbors.

I'm excited about this upcoming adventure. I'm excited about how we can each participate – how we can be invited, inspired and encouraged to use our gifts to show

Christ's presence and God's care in ways familiar and probably, ways that are new. As we'll sing in the hymn following the sermon:

*A single great commission compels us from above
To plan and work together that all may know Christ's love.*

(Hymn 733: We All Are One in Mission, Glory to God hymnal)

I'm especially happy to lift up this development because this Sunday is designated by the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. as Mission Worker Sunday. It's a day to recognize, pray for, and celebrate all those who have heard God's call and have devoted their time, their labor, their family life, their financial future to sharing the gospel throughout the world – and for our mission partnerships, the communities and churches in which they serve.

The Presbyterian Church has been engaged in such ventures for 185 years. On the PCUSA World Mission website, it states: "Beginning in 1837, the Presbyterian Church's Board of Foreign Mission sent mission workers into global service to preach, teach and heal."

Our church has mission co-workers in 80 countries who are called to and engaged in transformative ministries. They are described as "called by God to serve three to four or more years alongside PCUSA partners in ministry around the world. They dedicate years of their lives to building bridges, interpreting language and culture and advocating for justice and peace."

(PCUSA Presbyterian Mission: Mission Worker Sunday – May 30)

These faith-filled people serve with a variety of skills and talents. They are teachers, doctors, chaplains, church planters. They preach and evangelize. They are public health specialists, human rights advocates.

Mission co-workers, by their very name, are called to live in solidarity with the people they serve. Housing is simple, but sufficient. Salaries are modest, but provide for the basic resources of everyday life, along with enough money to travel back to their families and home churches in the US every few years. This is not a vocation that will build a retirement portfolio. So why does someone choose this form of service? I can tell you, a little bit, from my experience, having served the Presbyterian Church as a Young Adult Volunteer way back in the 1980s.

It begins for many as a tug on the heart. A spark. A shimmer. I remember getting that spark when I heard a Presbyterian minister say that he had been a short-term mission volunteer in Afghanistan, where he taught reading for two years. Just thinking about it now, I can still remember feeling that catch of breath, that visceral response. For those of you who fish, maybe it's like that first tug on the line... the wondering of whether something will be reeled in or let go. An appropriate image, is it not, for followers of Jesus – the Christ who called to disciples casting their nets on a Galilean sea.

For some people who feel that lure, it may take years to finally “take the hook.” Some choose to spend their careers in “ordinary professions” and then, in retirement, or when they are financially secure, decide that the time is now right for them to serve more sacrificially as a mission worker, using the gifts and skills they've honed over decades in a new context, a new community, and they take that leap of faith.

Others, like myself, choose to enter into these ministries as young adults. Unencumbered by mortgages or family responsibilities, the ages between 18 and 30 can be ideal for entering into mission work. One's health is generally pretty good - there's not a critical need to be that close to a hospital, one is not yet accustomed to comfort or luxury, and best of all, the sense of adventure and exploring fresh vistas warms the imagination and stirs the soul.

I had the experience of being able to serve in several ministries. Back then, there were short-term ministries available and for two summers, during and after college, I was able to participate in programs here in the United States. One was as a summer day youth leader in an African American church in Denver (an exotic location for a New Yorker!) Another was as a summer volunteer at our conference center, Ghost Ranch, near Santa Fe, New Mexico.

I also served a year-long volunteer program as a Young Adult Ministry coordinator in the Synod of the Trinity, which is, basically, the state of Pennsylvania.

All of these opportunities were incredibly formative and inspiring, and my experiences led me to apply to seminary, continuing the path to ordained ministry.

And yes, I did do almost a year of international mission service. Again, through the Presbyterian church, I was called to teach English in a rural middle and high school in western Ethiopia. It was an incredibly satisfying experience and I was genuinely proud at the progress all of the students made throughout the school year. It turned out to be more of an adventure than I had expected because of the ramping up of the civil war that had been going on there for many years. But I learned something of solidarity... of

seeing the strength and fortitude of my colleagues as basic supplies dwindled and resources became scarce. Their courageous spirits inspire me still and I discovered myself consciously following their example, especially during the stresses of the early days of the pandemic.

Serving alongside people in the name of Jesus, worshiping with them, working through daily rhythms, laughing, singing... these create the very things that Jesus prayed for his followers: a sense of unity develops, a mutual care. Indeed, there comes a deep desire for the well-being of one another that doesn't leave once the days of mission service are over. To this day, I read with care about events in that country. I hold them in my prayers and fervently wish them peace, goodwill, prosperity and wholeness. And yes, my heart is broken when I hear of wars, and famine, and hardship and death.

This is what serving in mission does. Whether it is hands-on mission, like many of us experience as we work in a soup kitchen, or a clothing drive, or if it a more empowering form of mission - changing the quality of lives instead of meeting immediate need, as the mission co-workers are called to do, - all this forms relationships, and opens us up to long-term caring. It deepens our connection to Christ, and we begin to know him and live in him more fully.

When our hearts are broken open in this way, we even seek to engage in ways that impact systems of injustice. We are motivated to work together for structural changes – addressing issues such as global poverty, and reconciliation amid cultures of violence.

Today we are grateful for the opportunities to grow in faith and ministry as we look forward to the work of our yet-to-be mission coordinator. And we are thankful, too, for those mission co-workers who devote their lives, their careers, to partnership with churches and communities around the world.

We have a Mission Yearbook in the Presbyterian Church; you can read it every day on their website. The photo in the bulletin is from the cover. Each day highlights a ministry and today, on Mission Worker Sunday, we read the letter from mission workers Elmarie and Scott Parker who serve the region of Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq.

Elmarie writes:

Scott and I are living alongside of and accompanying our friends, neighbors and partners as they navigate multiple, simultaneous crises – economic collapse, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the aftermath of the Beirut port explosion... the future feels bleak to many people...In Lebanon.. families who were already economically vulnerable now often only have one meal a day, parents

often go without so that their children have something. The situation is even more severe in Syria and for many in Iraq.

She writes of her sadness as she states:

I could not bring myself to say 'Happy Easter' this year. There has not been anything happy about the past 18-plus months for the vast majority of people around us. I found myself longing for something more substantial than what 'happy' connotes for me. "Happy" doesn't seem a solid enough word to convey the great sustaining hope we receive through Christ's experience of tremendous suffering and death prior to his resurrection. What is the substance of the hope we receive through our Lord's resurrection? How does the hope of Resurrection Sunday nourish and sustain a community, a family, a person when the realities of Good Friday continue without any end in sight? How is hope nourished and sustained in my spirit and in the spirits of the beloved community around me?

Elmarie's letter continues as she gives witness to the ministry of service throughout the community: resources shared, food and other necessities distributed, despite never quite knowing where these resources will come from. Friends far and near provide diapers, food, clothing, medications and medical treatment to more than 400 of the most vulnerable families. "The funds keep coming in," she says, "and supply boxes keep getting shared."

I am inspired by her closing paragraph:

I was talking with another friend and partner of the PC(USA) a few days ago, she writes. I asked her, "What do you think nourishes hope among the people here in Lebanon today?" ... She replied, "It's knowing we are not alone. We are a community together who are building again – investing in others, investing in our places. Our partners are with us. The risen Lord is with us."

"That they may be one... as we are one," prayed Jesus.

Sharing the good news of Christ in common ministry is a blessing. To engage in mission is to give a personal face to Christ's love.

As we pray for the work of this congregation, of mission co-workers throughout our country and the world, I also want to encourage you to see if you are sensing a call from God - how are you a partner in Christ's service? How are we "touching the lives of others by God's surpassing grace?" (Hymn 733: We All are One in Mission)

If you are a young adult, between the ages of 18 and 30, there are opportunities for just-under a year of service both in this country and abroad; it's actually from August to

July. There's opportunities to serve in New York City, in New Orleans, in Scotland (yes, Scotland!), the Philippines, Peru. I read through postings on Facebook this week that there is a shortage of volunteers this year and they are extending the application process through June. Give me a call if you're interested. Need a gap year? Want to go outside your comfort zone and see how your skills can be used to serve alongside people of faith who are responding to poverty, violence and injustice in their communities? How can you learn and grow in your faith as you do this? How might this year of service reveal God's desire for your life, your vocation?

We all are called to mission. We are the followers who Christ prayed for. "I made our name known to them," he said, "and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them."

As the Presbyterian Mission website says, "The joy of the Gospel calls each of us to participate in the redemptive ministry of Jesus Christ. We are called and commissioned as disciples in this world, equipped for ministries of healing, reconciliation and hope."

So let us pray this prayer from today's Mission Yearbook for those who serve this day on behalf of the Presbyterian Church USA in the name and service of Jesus Christ so that God's love may indeed be known:

Gracious God, your love knows no bounds. You call people to serve alongside your children, our siblings around the world. We pray for our PC(USA) mission co-workers and the people with whom they partner. Protect them and encourage them. Help them and help us be encouraged, guided and taught by our partners in mission. In Christ's name. Amen.