

“What Hope Do We Have for the Future Church”

In July 1998, I was participating in the Monroe Relay for Life. It was evening, and we had gathered for the luminary ceremony. Across the football field, luminaries were lit, spelling out the word, “HOPE”.

While I was sitting in the stands, I received a call from my brother letting me know that our dad’s cancer had returned, and the news was not good. It was terminal.

I was in shock. We all were in shock, including my parents. Looking out on the word “HOPE,” I wondered what hope my father had?

My siblings and I began to make arrangements to drive back to Johnstown, Pennsylvania where mom and dad were living.

When I was back with them, Dad had a doctor’s appointment. His first since he had received the diagnose.

Sitting together in the doctor’s office, we listened as the doctor explained the options before Dad. The first was to do nothing, and let the cancer run its course. It could be weeks or a few months, if he chose to nothing. That was eye opening.

The doctor then explained several experimental options that, while offering no promises of a cure, did provide some hope that dad would have some type of future, though none of us knew what that would look like.

So we planned their 40th wedding anniversary party, inviting family and former members of the congregations where dad had served.

Dad was serving the Bethany Presbyterian Church, a small membership congregation, much like our own, in downtown Johnstown. It was just up the street from the Lutheran Church where they had been married.

One of the things that gave him some hope and life, challenging as it was, was continuing to lead worship. He did this up until two weeks before he died.

Staci and I were able to co-lead worship with him three weeks before his death. It was the last time we saw him alive.

Hope for a future is what many of us want to cling to even in the face of uncertainty and death.

Some of you have faced health issues, like cancer, and have opted for experimental treatments that, while making no promise of a cure, offered you or a loved one, some hope for a future, for however long that future might be.

As Bob Dylan sang: “The times, they are a-changin’”. And so it has been with the historic global “Church,” with churches throughout the history of our country, and even more so in today’s society.

The news is not good, and the pandemic has only sped up what was already facing churches of all denominations and theological beliefs - progressive and conservative.

Peoples worship attendance and church involvement have been changing for decades. Membership has been dealing as well.

The early followers of Jesus who gathered as noted in our passage from Acts, did so faithfully, every day, sharing all their resources and giving to each as had need. Wow! What an image of the beginning of the “Church!” Except that, as one scholar noted, and is evident through the rest of Acts and the letters of Paul, that the Church faced conflict and division, putting into question its future.

As I shared via Mark Elsdon, it is estimated that close to 100,000 churches will close over the coming year. Mark said, that even if that is an over estimate and only 50,000 close, it still changes the landscape.

Even though history is filled with the graves of hundreds of thousands of churches that have closed and thousands more close each year, the good news is that the Body of Christ, the Church, has survived.

If you remember, the motto of the Cambridge High School Class of 2022 was “With every ending comes a new beginning.”

Theologically, we speak of death and resurrection. We also know that before there can be a resurrection, there must be a death.

Born out of the church closings, new life constantly emerged. Churches evolved in new and creative ways. Some merged, selling their buildings and building a new one as they formed a new congregation. Some shared space together, combining their resources to give new life to ministries that had been lost. Some have torn down their beloved buildings, and rebuilt adding affordable housing and community space, sharing ownership with other groups. Some no longer meet in a building, but have in people’s homes, as the early followers of Jesus did.

In each case, people had to let go of what had been, accepting a death of sorts, to find hope for a future as the Body of Christ. Not every church that has done this has lived a long and healthy future. As I mentioned, the worship

habits and commitments to a congregation has changed and continues to change.

This morning, I am inviting us to prayerfully reflect together on the following questions about our own future, and what our involvement and commitment to the future of the ministry of OCPC might look like if we are to have a future.

In preparation for our conversation together, I would invite you to prayerfully reflect on the following:

Mark Elsdon, of Director at Pres House, co-founder of “Rooted Good” and author of **“We Ain’t Broke: Uncovering Hidden Resources for Mission and Ministry”** through his research, that one estimate is over the next year, close to 100,000 churches will close. He also shares that an estimated \$3.5 billion of church property will change ownership in 2022.

In his upcoming book, **“Gone For Good”**, Mark writes: **“As tens of thousands, and billions of dollars, of church-owned property is sold or re-purposed throughout the United States in the next decade, will those properties be gone for good (forever)? Or can church and civic leaders work together so that these properties become a new kind of social good in our communities?”** <https://www.melsdon.com/goneforgood>

1. What does it mean to be the Body of Christ, the “Church” in today’s world?
2. What will the Body of Christ, the “Church”, including OCPC, look like in the future?
3. How has being the “Church” changed since followers of Jesus first gathered together?
4. How has being the “Church” changed over your own lifetime?
5. How has your own involvement and commitment to the “Church” changed over the years?
6. How will your involvement and commitment to the mission and ministry of change in the next 3-5 years?
7. When you consider the age of our congregation and make up of membership, who do you see as the future leaders to fill the roles needed for our ministry and mission?
8. What changes in our approach to ministry might we have to make to offer a future to this congregation?
9. Are you willing to make changes in order to have a future ministry?

10. Do you/we have the energy to make the necessary changes?
11. How are the lives of the people in the Cambridge area impacted by the ministry of OCPC? How would their lives change if we were not here to provide ministry?