**Missouri Mid-South Keynote Notes to Share**

**“Your 2021 Church Council Toolkit”**

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January 30, 2021

Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you; consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings; for it is well for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by regulations about [daily matters], which have not benefitted those who observe them… Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God. Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls and will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with sighing—for that would be harmful to you.” *–Hebrews 13:7-9, 16-17*

Morning Session: Tools for a Healthy Church Council

The Church Council is the governing body that empowers the ministry of the church.[[1]](#endnote-1) The Council is responsible for the big-picture work of governance: vision-casting, goal-setting, forward-movement, decision-making process, oversight and accountability. The Council establishes policy that empowers people to do the Church’s work. From there, they delegate individual tasks of ministry to staff and to volunteers. They make sure that the resources exist to do those ministry tasks.

When it comes to the work of individual Council members, and anybody in any leadership position in the church, I have just one key rule: *know what your job is, and do it.* The corollary to this is: *don’t do what is not your job.*

When we talk about what should be in Your 2021 Church Council Toolkit, the second thing I’d lift up is this: *nominating members to the Church Council is one of the most important decisions a current leader can make about the future of the church.* Your greatest resource on your Church Council (and again, with any leadership position in the church) is the people who are elected to serve in their roles. The key qualification for Council service is that the members you nominate to any leadership position must be “people of good-will,” *people who are capable of putting the Church’s needs above their own personal preferences and desires for the church*.[[2]](#endnote-2)

Often, Council members understand themselves to be representatives of a group or Board within the church. When members of a Church Council think they have been convened in order to represent factional interests, that ends up creating factions in the Church. Council leadership needs to be understood the other way around: the Council members must represent the interests of the Church, on behalf of the Council, to the Board to which they are assigned. A Council member’s responsibility is to the Church as a whole, not to a particular group within the Church.

The third item I would suggest for Your 2021 Church Council Toolkit is *flexibility*. We have just been through—are still in the midst of—a huge shock to our systems. For the most part, we have not yet addressed the long-term challenges to policy and governance that the coronavirus pandemic has set before us. We have been in crisis mode, and in crisis mode, we operate with provisional measures. We need leaders who are confident in what they’re doing, but who aren’t so bound by the old ways that they can’t be effective in this unfolding future.

Afternoon session: The Gift of Pandemic Life

We are now in what Susan Beaumont calls a “liminal season” – when old ways of doing things are no longer serving well, but new ways have not yet clearly emerged.[[3]](#endnote-3) We are maintaining systems and programs of a bygone era because we don’t know what else to do. It’s hard to move into new ways of being and doing Church when you don’t know what Church is going to look like. Walter Brueggemann says in *The Prophetic Imagination[[4]](#endnote-4)* that the job of a prophet is to help their people imagine the world that comes next, because until we can imagine it, we can’t work toward it—but what do we do when we don’t yet know the prophets and we don’t yet have the imagination of what will be next? In the liminal season, there is nobody who knows what resolution looks like.

The gift of pandemic life is that we have been forced to abandon maintenance mode. The pandemic has given us cause to reassess our priorities and find new ways to do what is of value—and let go of what doesn’t serve. The changes that 2020 has brought have had environmental impacts, relational impacts, financial impacts, social impacts, and theological impacts. And more and more, people are talking openly about how they don’t want to go back to the way things were before the pandemic. Especially in the Church. This year has taught us that we can do new things, that we can learn new ways, that we can connect to one another creatively, that we can be the beloved community even as we worship separately in our homes.

Leaders set the example—and the most effective leaders set an example that people just want to follow, they don’t have to say “Hey, look at me! Be like me!” That happens because “the outcome of their way of life” is attractive. Effective leaders set norms and standards of behavior that appeal to their communities, and the outcomes of those behaviors are of value to those communities. “Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.”

The tasks of leadership:

* presence.[[5]](#endnote-5) A leader is present to their community, not just showing up, but actively engaged with the people of the community, attentive to their situation. Presence is a conscious and intentional quality of the leader’s existence. Particularly in times of crisis, leaders use their presence to create and hold space that promotes the well-being of the community.[[6]](#endnote-6)
* relationship. Leadership is covenantal, relational.
* listening. Leadership adapts when new input is added and new insights are gained.
* collaboration. Leadership is not power over, but power *with*, especially in churches that use congregational decision-making processes!
* integrity. A leader’s words and actions must match one another, and must match the values of the church they are serving. That integrity must be rooted in constant self-examination, checking-in with themselves.
* define the mission—and to define what is NOT the mission-and remind the church often of what the mission is. The task of a leader is to define the mission, and keep it at the forefront of our work so that we do not get distracted or fall into old patterns of behavior. Not everything is your church’s mission! We have to be able to differentiate between passion and mission.
* make more leaders.[[7]](#endnote-7) Leadership is forward-thinking. We are not here to preserve the past, but to empower the future. Making more leaders is not about self-replication, it’s about lifting up the gifts of others.

We need to start asking, “What is the outcome of our way of life, and *is our faith worth imitating*?” I believe that it is worth imitating—but how is anybody supposed to know if we don’t tell them? The United Church of Christ is the church that so many people ARE looking for. We need to be the leaders that the people outside our churches will want to follow. This means we need to be vocal, and public, and brave, about who we are as a Church, and what our mission is. We need to be careful and intentional about the messages we send out and the spaces we create within. We need to be actively working *for* racial justice, *for* the planet’s health, *for* economic justice. The gift of pandemic life is that we can rebuild our church communities with those goals at the center, and make them happen. We can be the leaders whose faith others want to imitate. The gift of pandemic life is no less than the opportunity to build God’s kindom come on earth.

1. Dan Hotchkiss, *Governance and Ministry: Rethinking Board* Leadership. Alban Institute/Rowman and Littlefield, 2009. Hotchkiss makes a valuable distinction/framework for understanding governance vs. ministry. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Hotchkiss says something similar in reference to fiduciary responsibility, p. 83-86. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Susan Beaumont, *How to Lead When You Don’t Know Where You’re Going: Leading in a Liminal Season*. Rowman and Littlefield, 2019, page 7. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Someday I will find my copy and cite this properly! [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Beaumont, page 23ff. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Gianpiero Petriglieri, “The Psychology Behind Effective Crisis Leadership” in Harvard Business Review, April 22, 2020. <https://hbr.org/2020/04/the-psychology-behind-effective-crisis-leadership?autocomplete=true> [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. With thanks to my dear friend Rev. Marvin Silver, who introduced me to this idea 10 years ago. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)