**Christian Community**

 **Identity**

 Presbytery Care Network National Gathering

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Ephesians 1:3-14

What a marvelously dynamic time to be a pastor in the Christian Church.

* membership continues to decline
* revenues are difficult to generate
* with peoples lives busier and busier it is harder and harder to procure volunteers for programs.
* Elders come to Session meetings ill prepared, coming in after a 10-12 hour day at the office.
* Sunday School teachers come in on Sunday morning having spent what they consider a generous 45 minutes - hour in lesson preparation the night before.
* Deacons, afraid of infringing on someones life are reluctant to make a phone call or a home visit.

What an exciting time to be a pastor in the Christian church!

While the above examples may be extreme - and there are often very faithful church members who are generous with their time for programs and preparation -still, it is a challenging time to be a pastor. And, I am convinced it is an exciting time.

I believe we are in a pruning time in the Christian church. The plant has gotten big and gangly in the last several generations. It is time, now to trim the dead wood - to cut it back, to prune it so that it might flourish. Let’s be clear - the biblical image of pruning has God as the gardener - not us. As many in those faithful generations die off, there are many younger people who hunger for faith and depth and meaning and life - and they thrive in our churches. And, there are others who find the call of the Christian faith simply too demanding and costly, as the rich man in the Gospel of Mark who turned down Jesus invitation to discipleship because he was wealthy - and Jesus called him to give away what he owned. He just couldn’t do it. There are others who find the Christian faith simply irrelevant in todays world. The bush of the church is being pruned – we’re getting smaller. And, I believe, healthier.

One of the exciting aspects of that, I believe, is the opportunity to discover anew, discover again, who we are - bare bones - who are we as the Christian church? What is our foundational identity?

For a community to be authentic, it must know who it is, and who it is not. Driven by fear of diminishing membership numbers and the consequential diminishing income, many congregations have forgotten who they are as they seek to market themselves to people living in a secular culture. They have become market-driven. Consequently there are blurred boundaries and a fuzzy identity. Seeking to welcome all, they’ve forgotten to maintain what it is they are welcoming the newcomers to.