



Our Massive Transition

Last month, I was re-reading a portion of *The Missional Leader* by Alan Roxburgh with a group of pastors, and I came across a section that speaks to the situation we are going through in our world today, as we enter this new year. Listen to this:

“It is not only the church that has been experiencing discontinuous change; our whole society is in massive transition. Since the end of the Cold War, society has encountered a growing number of fracture lines. Our lived experience is that no one knows how to address these fractures, and our learned ways of working out our place in the world no longer seem adequate. The result is confusion and anxiety.

“German sociologist Ulrich Beck summarizes the reemergence of insecurity, even before a post-September 11 world, as people’s primary experience. He says, ‘Studies show that more and more people consider their life and well-being under threat. Unemployment no longer threatens only marginal groups, but also the middle sections of society, even groups (such as doctors and executives) which, until a few years ago, were considered the very quintessence of middle-class economic security. Moreover, this is happening on such a massive scale that the difference between unemployment and threatening unemployment is becoming insignificant to the affected parties.’

“People are losing their orientation. The political, social, and economic systems that brought prosperity over the past fifty years no longer function and people see no alternatives. They feel caught in a web of change they neither understand nor control. The result is a high level of anxiety, insecurity, and confusion. At the same time, most people have no words to explain these experiences, nor names for the forces shaping their lives and creating insecurity. This is because the stories that used to explain their experiences no longer seem relevant or applicable. People feel anxious and paralyzed.

“As Beck tells us, we live in a social context ‘in which everything that was conceived of as belonging together is being drawn apart’; the accepted, normal story of twentieth-century middle-class life has been shattered and nothing but uncertainty appears to be taking its place. We are in a global-risk society where traditional means of forming life (family, church, nation, business, law, and politics) have been drained away, leaving a world that appears without direction.”

This is a description of what I see. We are going through a massive transition. While our economy is at all-time lows, the level of confusion and anxiety are at all-time highs. People are looking for answers, and many of the answers we are looking for are eluding us. The society we have been used to has broken down, and a new one has not

yet emerged to take its place. The stories that gave our lives meaning now seem empty and we are in need of a new story to take its place. We live under this huge cloud of worry, fearful of what lies around the next corner.

As the level of anxiety rises in society, it rises in the church, as well. In the coming year, we can expect the level of conflict to increase in our congregations, because that's what happens when people become anxious. We take out our fears on each other. Instead of ministering to each other, we attack each other, and it slows us down in our efforts to be sent into our communities. Our level of stress will grow this year, and at certain points along the way, it will not be pretty.

Jesus Christ does not remove us from difficult times. But, in the midst of life's difficulties, we continue to be sent out by Christ's Holy Spirit to people and communities that are in need, that don't know what they need, and that don't know Who they need. In *2 Corinthians 4:8-9*, Paul says,

"We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken, struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies."

It is a time of confusion. It is a time of massive transition. It is a time of great need. The paradigm of what it means to be a church and a presbytery are changing in significant ways. New stories are emerging that will shape us as the people of God for the near future. We need insights from one another in order to hear what Christ is up to in our world today, and how the Holy Spirit is wanting to re-shape us for this next generation. I hope you will participate with us, as we grow in our awareness and understanding of the collective ministry God is calling us into in this new year. Please be in prayer for the presbytery, our congregations, leaders, members, and participants. Let us seek the Lord together, as we move from being primarily a governing body, to being primarily a relational community, to becoming primarily a mission agency. It's a time of massive transition. Let's see what Christ will do in 2009.



Respond to: ClarkCowden@PresbyterySD.org