

Celebrate the Gifts of Women Sunday

March 3, 2013

In 2013, Celebrate the Gifts of Women Sunday honors women through whom God is transforming the church in an emerging era. Though the official Celebrate the Gifts of Women Sunday is March 3, 2013, your congregation or women's groups may use this resource on any day that you choose.

We know that God has always been at work forming and reforming the church, but these days, the sense that we are being reformed feels heightened. Transformation in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) takes many shapes: movements like NEXT Church and the Fellowship of Presbyterians, as well as new and exciting programs like "For Such a Time as This" and "1001 New Worshiping Communities." God's spirit is clearly stirring up change. And through all of it, women are active in God's transforming work.



The Overcoming Worshipper, Cassandra Donnelly

Women Transforming the Church in an Emerging Era

By Shannon Kershner

God's grace and full of that which sustains life. The mountains, hills and trees revel in God's goodness by "bursting into song and clapping their hands" (55:12). The transformation is not

Glimpses of God's vision for the church—as in Isaiah 55:1–13—inspire us to be open to change. In this particular text, the prophet powerfully proclaims that God's alternative reality is both here and on the way. The message holds both challenge and promise. The prophet echoes Woman Wisdom from Proverbs 8–9, challenging us to stop spending resources on "that which does not satisfy" (55:2). If we stop spending our time, talent, energy and finances on those things that will not satisfy, then we will be able to "delight ourselves with the rich food" of transformation—healthy ministries and mission—that God has already begun to bring about in our very midst.

The prophet paints a picture of God's eternal reality in which all people are valued, drenched in



simply for *us*, but for all creation! Women throughout the PC(USA) ground themselves in the reality of divine promise, thereby discovering their freedom to do new things and older things in new ways.

Women Leading Transformation

One woman through whom God is working transformation is Theresa Cho, associate pastor at St. John's Presbyterian Church in San Francisco. In 2012, Theresa served as moderator of the Presbytery of San Francisco. During that time, many churches in San Francisco were facing the challenge of stagnant and struggling ministries. The question being asked was "How do we help churches die?"

But Theresa and others were not convinced that was the correct question. They were uncertain about the right question, so they came together to discuss possibilities. A crucial revelation was that the presbytery isn't a separate entity, but that the pastors and churches are the presbytery. Living into "We are the presbytery," they took matters into their own hands.

The city of San Francisco has one Mandarin, one Cantonese, one Japanese American, one Taiwanese American, one Indonesian, three Korean American, two African American, one Latino American and six multicultural PC(USA) congregations. One of them has 500 members, twelve of them have fewer than 100 members and seven of those congregations had no pastor or interim leadership. The Presbyterian churches in San Francisco are a clear example of diversity. Theresa realized they did not know each other, which made corporately answering the needs of the churches nearly impossible.

So Theresa and a leadership team of five other local pastors personally invited pastors and leaders from all 22 churches to come to an Urban Legacy Convocation. Twenty of the churches sent representatives to the gathering, where they talked about their contexts, challenges and fears, what kind of leadership was needed for the future and what they hoped their collective legacy might be. It was an invigorating time that launched not only new

friendships, but also a reenergized sense of the way God was transforming the church with and through their witness—a taste of the new reality proclaimed by the prophet Isaiah. For more information on church transformation in San Francisco, visit www.theresaecho.com or www.sfurbanlegacy.wordpress.com.

Another woman leading transformation in this new era, MaryAnn McKibben Dana, is a part-time pastor of Idylwood Presbyterian Church in Falls Church, Virginia, part-time author and full-time mom. MaryAnn is grounded in the vision that Isaiah proclaimed—a sense of God's eternal reality in which all people are valued and sustained by God's grace. She is living out that vision by trying to help families rediscover Sabbath together, even when their schedule screams "too busy!" In her new book, *Sabbath in the Suburbs*, MaryAnn takes the reader on a year-long journey with her family as they took to heart the commandment to keep the Sabbath. She documented their experience so as to provide a guide for all kinds of families who long to do the same. It is her hope that as families are renewed and transformed, so will the church be renewed and transformed.

MaryAnn also sees Isaiah's proclamation as a promise being born even now. She expresses that promise in a video that she recorded for the *We Are Presbyterian 2011* project. Her contribution to that project was titled "A New Diagnosis" and in it, she suggests that our churches are not dying, but rather, are pregnant with God's new possibilities. She is convinced that the pain churches in transition are feeling are labor pains and not death pangs. For more information, see her video at <http://vimeo.com/25360983>.

These are just two women out of many through whom God is actively at work transforming the church for an emerging era. You probably have stories and examples of your own. Work those stories into a sermon that weaves together the vision that Isaiah proclaims with the ways that vision is already being lived out through the ministry and mission of women within our denomination.

A Service in the Worship of God

Call to Worship

Based on Isaiah 55

One: God's thoughts are
not our thoughts,

Many: God's ways are not our ways.

One: Yet, God has chosen to be known
with us, among us, as one of us.

**Many: God has chosen to use us for
God's hope-bearing work.**

One: Let us worship God!

Call to Confession

Sisters and brothers in Christ, God knows our pain and our needs, even before we can give them speech. The gift of confession gives us the space to be honest about those things, so that we are no longer held captive by them. Once again, let us open our lives to God's forgiving presence and resist the powers that might pit us against ourselves and against each other.

Prayer of Confession

Creating and nurturing God, we seek your justice for our lives, yet we ignore injustice all around us. We seek your peace, yet we are complicit with the rhetorical and literal wars that rage around us. We celebrate the gifts of women whom you are using to transform the church, yet we allow suffering and oppression based on gender to continue. We know you are not done with any of us, but we act as if we must be finished products.

Forgive us. Forgive our neglect of ourselves and each other. Forgive us for forgetting who we are, your precious daughters and sons. Forgive us for our lack of imagination about what you might be doing in both the church and the world. Hold us in your mercy as a mother gathers her young in her arms. Give us a place of grace that we might

grow in your light. Grant us your forgiving love in the name of Jesus, who welcomed and celebrated women, who gave strength to the weak, who set us free from the powers that enslave us, who is our Savior and our brother. Amen.

Assurance of Pardon

Based on Isaiah 55

Let us return to God, so that God might have mercy on us, to our God, so that God will abundantly pardon. For God's thoughts are not our thoughts. God's ways are not our ways. And God promises that we shall go out in joy and be led back in peace. We can stand firm on that assurance. Friends, in Jesus Christ we are all forgiven. We are all made new. Amen.

Prayer for Illumination

Liberating God, work powerfully in this place. Clear our vision, so that we can see you moving in and through us. Free our imaginations, so that we can glimpse your work of transformation, which is already taking place. Liberate us from complicity, so that we might join you and work for the day when all people and all creation are free. Speak to us in these words of ancient scripture and set them loose in our lives. Amen.

Scripture Readings

Isaiah 55:1–9

Psalms 63:1–8

1 Corinthians 10:1–13

Luke 13:1–9

Suggested Hymns

Earth and All Stars (PH 458)

There's A Wideness in God's Mercy (PH 298)

We Are Your People (PH 436)

Though I May Speak (PH 335)

Let Us Talent and Tongues Employ (PH 514)

Intercession for Healing*

One: God, our creator, your will for us and for all your people is health and salvation;

Many: have mercy on us.

One: Jesus Christ, our liberator, you came that we might have life and have it in abundance;

Many: have mercy on us.

One: Holy Spirit, light of Wisdom, you move around us and fill us with your holy, transforming presence;

Many: have mercy on us.

One: To the triune God, the source of all love, life and healing, let us offer our prayers. For all women in need of healing, who can no longer see your image in their bodies or souls,
(Silence)

Lord, in your mercy,

Many: hear our prayers.

One: For all women disabled by violence, whose cries for help no longer leave their lips, whose silence suffocates their spirit, who cannot imagine that you are at work in them,
(Silence)

Lord, in your mercy,

Many: hear our prayers.

One: For all who are troubled by confusion or pain, who can only see the past, for their imaginations about the future have been stolen,
(Silence)

Lord, in your mercy,

Many: hear our prayers.

One: For all women whose increasing years bring weariness, who feel lost in this world and can no longer fight the fight,
(Silence)

Lord, in your mercy,

Many: hear our prayers.

One: For those in our lives and in our world who cause pain, who do violence, who are entrapped by the powers of death so they can no longer see clearly,

(Silence)

Lord, in your mercy,

Many: hear our prayers.

One: For women who are angry at you and the world, whose anger is justified and should be shouted from the mountaintop,

(Silence)

Lord, in your mercy,

Many: hear our prayers.

One: For women who are just now finding their voices, who have discovered the courage to speak up, who dare to imagine that you are indeed working your transformation of this world through them,

(Silence)

Lord, in your mercy,

Many: hear our prayers.

One: Into your hands and your heart, O Wisdom, we commend all for whom we pray, trusting in your mercy, believing that you grant us new visions and new energy, like you granted Isaiah, through Jesus Christ our brother and Savior. Amen.

Blessing

May the God of freedom, hope, compassion and strength fill us all with visions of new selves, a new church and a new world. Like Isaiah, may we stand strongly on a foundation of hope, made possible by the transforming power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Shannon Kershner is pastor of Black Mountain Presbyterian Church in Black Mountain, North Carolina.

*The Intercession for Healing was adapted from the "Service for Wholeness—Congregation" found in the *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993), pages 1009–1011.