

A Letter to the Next Pastor of Christ Church

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Christ Church is a congregation with a ministry of healing through free health clinics for a community with significant barriers to health and well-being.

1 Colossians 1: 24-29

I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church. I became its minister according to God's commission that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, the mystery that has been hidden throughout the ages and generations but has now been revealed to his saints. To them God chose to make known how great among the gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. It is he whom we proclaim, **warning** everyone and teaching everyone in all **wisdom**, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil and strive with all the energy that he powerfully inspires within me.

Dear Pastor,

Welcome to what I hope will be one of the great honors of your life—it was for me, and, honestly, this was something that I had to remind myself of often because it was also one of the greatest struggles of my life. You have accepted this task, I'm sure, with all the hopes and expectations of the joy that will surely come, and because I know you are not a naïve person, but a mature Christian, you also know personal sufferings lay ahead. While honor and privilege are not too strong of words to express the feeling of having been trusted and loved by the people of Christ Church and our larger community, I must also tell you truthfully, I have not known pain as sharp and temporarily devastating as the pain of loving this community.

Perhaps the greatest wisdom I have gained is how to be both utterly helpless and desperately hopeful at the same time. This is a lesson I learned from my colleagues—the nurses who work in our church's free health clinic. I saw them care for people with cancer who could not afford treatment—utterly helpless and desperately hopeful. They offered relentless hope in the face of shame and disappointment as they treated the wounds of patients with substance disorders. From the nurses, I learned how to care for the largest segment of your new congregation, who do and do not show up on Sunday: Those in the pit of addiction, those with minds tossed in a tornado of mental illness, sex workers, neglectful parents, children whose paths seem as set as the mechanical rabbit at the dog track.

It is not acceptable in the American vernacular to talk of helplessness, but truthfully, Pastor, there is little you will be able to do to fix the things you will see, which you will feel you *must* fix. You will be able to help a little, and mysteriously, what little you do will be more than you know. But you will be utterly helpless to do much regarding the things that will bring you to your knees.

Pastor, your main task is to do more than fix or solve. “The mystery,” the Apostle teaches us, is that, “*Christ* in you is the hope of glory.” Pastor, you are utterly helpless but you must be desperately hopeful, for that is the Christ in you—not for your sake or for your glory, but for the sake of *this* community whose true hope (and for very, very many, *only* hope) is the hope of glory.

In the first chapter of his letter to the saints of Colossae, the Apostle writes, “It is [Christ] we proclaim, **warning** everyone and **teaching** everyone in all wisdom.” And so that is what I hope to offer you, Pastor, warnings and, perhaps, hopefully, some wisdom.

Many years ago, when I was interviewing with Christ Church in Pennsylvania, I sat at our kitchen table in Georgia for a long conversation with the retiring pastor about the possibility of becoming the next Director of Health Ministries and pastor. I saw the warning signs. When I got off the phone, my wife asked how it went, “Were there any red flags?”

“Ellen, there are nothing but red flags,” I replied. It had everything we are told to avoid: a current pastor without a clear departure plan, a pay cut, negligible lay leadership, isolated from the larger governing body, no contract or assurance I would actually become the pastor; a congregation limping along on a hemorrhaging investment account, a deteriorating building in an urban neighborhood whose only growth potential was in the numbers of those who are uninsured, undocumented, and those dying from drug overdoses and gun violence. The Holy Spirit was standing on the runway frantically waving all the red flags she could find, but, to my curious dismay, she was waving those flags to signal the safe, if violently turbulent, landing here in this church.

So, this is me joining the Holy Spirit on the runway waving a few remaining red flags—warnings—yet offering assurance you can land here and, in the words of Julian of Norwich, “all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.” Not on account of much you can do, but what Christ will do through you, and Christ in the people of this beloved community.

In Colossians 1 the Apostle says this life of discipleship, of pastoral leadership, is, “toil and struggle.” I appreciate the reality check, his honesty, the unfiltered truthfulness of the Apostle regarding the nature of what we call ministry. This truthfulness about the futility of ministry, the suffering, the toil and endless striving that are the marks of this work is not a warning away but a welcoming, because in accepting this reality you gain this greater wisdom: our futility reveals the power of God. What is

hidden to many in the perceived bleakness and pessimism, chasing after the wind, is revealed to us, says the Apostle, as the mystery of the word of God. You perhaps already have discovered, but will surely experience here that this mystery is the hope the Apostle says powerfully inspires him with energy to continue to toil and strive in joy. It is sound and fury signifying *not* nothing, but the Kingdom of Heaven. Christian maturity is looking at the cross and seeing utter helplessness, a warning away to all who would follow such a path, and being filled, miraculously, with desperate hope. This is the way.

The Apostle warns you, Pastor, of his own experience leading this church: “Now I am joyful in my **pain** over you.” Christian maturity. The cross is a warning and it is wisdom. Christ offered his warnings as well: “do not think I came to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace” (Matt. 10: 34). “Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:27). And of course, the Prophets before him: Warnings and Wisdom. So, I will add my own for you, Pastor, about this church.

Warning: Everything is broken and it is dangerous to go near.

Wisdom: Great is the mystery of faith: Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again.

Warning: The plans and programs won’t work.

Wisdom: God will do something way more exciting ... No, not exciting. Often boring, but necessary and very good.

Warning: Justice, Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion are little more than set pieces or wax museum figures if they are only policies and trainings.

Wisdom: Real J.E.D.I. is the Kingdom of God. Nonjudgmental communities with authentic welcome and clear, repeated pronouncements of Jesus Christ and his grace are fertile soil for a Pentecost church. It’s not rocket science, nor is it the other things. It’s the gospel. Celebrate and enjoy the diversity of this congregation but do not try to capture it or idolize it or let it be corrupted by politics or it will slip away.

Warning: “The poor you will have with you ... **always**,” and they can jack up your roof. At a critical mass, they scare away the people who you think could save the church.

Wisdom: Jesus healed all of them of every affliction. But some went away because they had many possessions.

Warning: The congregation that will ask the most of you doesn’t show up on Sunday.

Wisdom: If you start worship at the altar during the prelude with the silent prayer, “Please, dear God, help!” or “Lord, I need you to help me love them

today.” Or “Lord, where are they?” the prayer at the altar during the last hymn will usually be, “Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.”

Warning: Don’t make promises, especially ones you cannot keep.

Wisdom: Speak often, clearly and boldly, of God’s promises which are kept.

Warning: Glen!

Wisdom: He is actually secretly extravagantly generous and will do almost anything you ask of him, just not on time or well.

Warning: Your newest attendees don’t speak English.

Wisdom: Love them in other ways, they bring their friends. I suspect they are part of God’s plan for your time here.

Warning: Just because you build it doesn’t mean they will come. And if they do come it doesn’t mean they will stay.

Wisdom: Keep healing ministries at the center of this church and steel yourself to love the ones he sends you. Jesus’s most consistent vehicle of ministry, of proclamation, was free healing. Churches started the first hospitals. Stick to the script. The community of saints won’t let this end.

Warning: Most of your ideas won’t work.

Wisdom: Ask the nurses. They know what does.

Warning: The bell tower is a danger to the community and a pain in the neck.

Wisdom: Hymns play from it three times a day and shower prostitutes and drug dealers and kids walking home from school with the sounds of church.

Warning: There is so much violence and cruelty on these blocks.

Wisdom: They will let you be their pastor and that will break you and that will save you.

Pastor, Sailors have an important practice called, Watch Standing or Keeping the Watch. At all times, day and night, at sea and on land, sailors rotate the responsibility so someone is always on watch. This allows others to rest, assured there is someone on the bridge, at the helm, walking the line—someone has the watch. A sailor may not leave the watch until properly relieved, when his or her replacement arrives and announces, “I have the watch.” To which the reply is, “You have the watch.”

Pastor, “You have the watch.”

Helplessly Hopeful,

Pastor Drew