



On Palm Sunday, our District Superintendent, Allan Brooks, announced that I will be appointed to the First United Methodist Church of Carmichaels, PA, (Greene County) in the Washington District, effective July 1, 2016.

That's left me, and my whole family, as well as the church congregation, thinking and planning for a time of transition.

One of the key lessons in this area, for me, came in the late '90s as I prepared to say goodbye to my first charge. My superintendent at the time gave me a small booklet called Running Through The Thistles by Roy M. Oswald.

While focused on a pastor's departure from a congregation, Oswald actually starts with a story from his own childhood. He and two older boys would walk to school (back in the one-room schoolhouse days) barefooted. But there was a short cut through a field that took out a lot of travel. But there was a catch: you had to go through a briar patch if you went that way. Otherwise, it was no savings of time.

Oswald relates that they would usually just simply go around the long way to and from school. However, a few times, when the fish seemed to almost call to them and nothing stood in their way of going fishing once they got home, they would decide to take the shortcut through those thistles. He then explains how they would gather their courage, and then run as fast as they could until they got through those thistles.

The problem, he writes years later, was that once they hurried and got through them, was that they had to then sit down in the field and one by one, painstakingly, remove each and every prickly thistle... and it actually took longer than if they had simply gone around the barbed barrier.

His point in relation to departing pastors is that there are two choices of how a pastor says goodbye to a church and a church bids a pastor farewell. One is to do the hard work of celebrating relationships, reconciliations, and forgiveness; much like Oswald's long way to school.

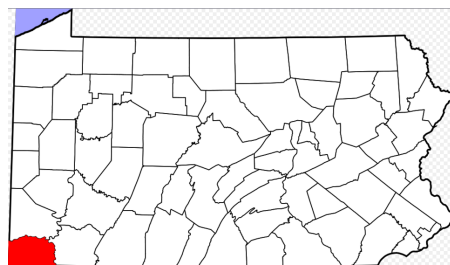
The other is to hurry and just 'get outta there' as fast as you can. That's like running through the thistles. When we try to separate ourselves from the experience so that it 'goes faster', we actually leave a legacy of pain and hurt, distrust and hesitancy. Thus, when we meet the people in the next church or try to welcome the next pastor that comes, we'll start with the same issues and concerns we thought we had left behind. We'll be years trying to pull out the thistles, and those thistles will influence every relationship in the context of church from then on.

So, I choose to take the long way out. I want to celebrate the ministry we've been able to do together and grieve for the ones we've had to say goodbye to during our time together. Already, there are some who have tears in their eyes as we talk about what's yet to come. Others, not so much.

And for the sake of both groups, and for me and my family as well, this is STILL a time to seek reconciliation, forgiveness, healing, and restoration. After all, we've been praying in worship for some five years together asking that God forgive us only as much as we have forgiven others. ("forgive us... as we forgive..."). When we feel offended or hurt, our response is like a requisition asking God to treat us the same way whenever we fail, mess up, and sin. And God has been listening all these years.

So how about it? Let's take the longer, healthier path as I draw closer to my departure in June. Let's make sure that there is nothing left for us to have to deal with years from now. Let's talk together, let's pray together, let's forgive one another, let's celebrate what we were able to do together in ministry... Because this isn't the last time we see each other. Every single one of us is just one missed heartbeat away from eternity. And as ones who believe in Jesus, our plan is to spend all of eternity together with each other in his presence. Let's get any unfinished business taken care of here, now.

The Staff-Parish Relations Committee will be working on celebrations for us as we prepare to leave and for the Stump family when they arrive later on. Meanwhile, because of Annual Conference and the move ahead, my last Sunday in the pulpit will be June 5th. Please plan now on joining us in worship that day.



Greene County, PA

*"I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all..." (Romans 1:8a, NKJV)*

*Pastor Dayton*