

Forging a New Identity

When I was 15 years old, my dad left his job as an associate professor of music at the University of Cincinnati and accepted a position as the Chairperson of the Music Department of Indiana State University. That meant moving 3-4 hours away, moving into a new house, entering a new school, and making new friends. I enjoyed my friends, my school, and my music and sports activities in Cincinnati, but honestly, I was ready to move. I had been going to school with the same kids for seven years. The school had a strong clique/caste system. I was in one layer of the social strata, and there was no way I could move up. I was typecast. I had also embarrassed myself a few times, as I'm sure many of us have when growing up, and I felt like nobody had forgotten my mistakes. So, I was ready to move to a new school. I was ready to forge a new identity. I was ready to start over and prove myself to a new group of people. I wanted to meet people who didn't know of my past mistakes, and be given a clean slate to start over.

We are going to try an experiment here in the Presbytery of San Diego. We are going to try to forge a new identity for ourselves. At our last presbytery meeting, we approved a statement that laid out the blueprint for creating our new identity. We said that in the past, we were primarily a governing body. In the present, we are primarily a relational community. In the future, we will be primarily a mission agency. What does all of this mean?

It means that our old identity used to revolve around us being a governing body. The major adjective that described who we were was "governing". The emphasis was on rules and regulations. The emphasis was on policies and procedures. The focus was on overtures and political statements. That has run its course. It may have been very appropriate at one time, but not any more. We no longer have energy, enthusiasm, and passion for our polity. We don't want to spend our precious time arguing the rules with each other. This may have been who we were, but it's not who we want to be. This does not mean that we won't abide by our constitution. We most certainly will. There is an important place for church law. It acts like guardrails on either side of the road to keep us from driving our vehicles off a cliff. But, it doesn't determine what direction we are travelling in or how fast we go. We don't want our polity to have a primary place over our mission, we want our mission to have a primary place over our polity. That was how it was intended to be in the first place. We are not advocating anarchy. We are not promoting lawlessness. We are forging a new identity, in which the rules do not control the mission, but simply keep the mission on track.

We are forging a new identity. We believe that the best way to describe who we are now is to think of ourselves as a relational community. We really come together because of our common relationship with God through Jesus Christ. We come together to see good friends and people we are getting to know from other congregations. We are coming together to forge new relationships to help us accomplish the mission God has given us.

Ministry is inherently relational. This is the way it has always been. Without relationships, ministry won't happen. We don't all agree with each other on every single issue. But, we don't need to. If we get to know each other on a deep level, if we understand one another's hearts, if we can learn to trust each other, and share a common orthodox faith in Christ, then we can move forward on the same team together. We know if we agree on the essentials, we can tolerate differences on the non-essentials. We are a relational community.

As good as it is to be a relational community, it doesn't stop there. We are forging a new identity. We want to become a mission agency. We live in the middle of a mission field. God has a mission and God's mission has a church. As God sent Jesus into the world, and as the Father and the Son sent the Holy Spirit into the world, so God is sending us as God's people into the world. We are on a mission. We are on a quest. We are the Fellowship of the King, and we have been allowed to journey together on an extremely important mission.

Form follows function. So, if we are on a mission, and it is that mission which is forging our new identity, then what are we becoming? What will we look like as we become a mission agency? How will that be different from how we look now? Nobody knows for sure yet. It will probably include some of the exact same elements we have now. And it will probably come to include some brand new elements that we haven't seen yet or even imagined yet. We are caught between the now and the not yet. We are on the road of becoming. It's an exciting time, but also a time that makes us a little anxious, because we don't know exactly what to expect.

This is where faith comes in. God asks us to trust Him. Jesus asks us to trust one another in the Body of Christ. Some of us struggle with that, because we've been hurt in the past. But what's exciting is that we are forging a new identity. We have the opportunity to shape this presbytery and our congregations for a generation to come. That is huge. That is significant. What a privilege for God to allow us to help shape Christ's people.

We are starting some new experiments to help forge this new identity. We are starting monthly missional leadership gatherings. We are inviting churches and pastors to be a part of some pilot missional survey groups. We have affiliated with Presbyterian Global Fellowship (PGF). We are encouraging sessions to affiliate and people to attend the PGF conference in Long Beach in August. We will look at how to re-design our presbytery meetings. And we will look at creating new missional partnerships with our denomination, other denominations, other presbyteries, other mission agencies, etc.

We need you. You can play a very key role in the future of our missional work here, by helping us forge this new identity today. Please give us your ideas, your comments, and your suggestions, so that we can know how God is speaking to you. We are Presbyterians. We live in Imperial and San Diego counties. We have been called to do this. We know we can do this. Our new identity is being forged right here, right now. It is emerging from amongst our community. **We invite you** to be a part of us, as we forge a new identity together.

Clark Cowden