

THE NEW CORNFIELD

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my lambs.” A second time he said to him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Tend my sheep.” He said to him a third time, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, “Do you love me?” And he said to him, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep” (John 21:15-17).

Around the end of the Second World War, the Presbytery of Pittsburgh bought six acres of corn fields along Washington Road in the largely undeveloped Township of Upper St. Clair. It was a missionary project. A young Navy chaplain discharged after the war was recruited to knock on doors and see whether anybody wanted to start a Protestant church among all that corn. On September 22, 1946, 118 people showed up at the Clifton School auditorium for a first worship service. On February 2, 1947—Groundhog Day—172 members were received, a Session was elected, and Westminster Presbyterian Church was officially born.

John Galbreath looked over the valley where his church was to gather, and he asked himself what a church was for. He decided that Jesus would ask, “Where do people hurt here?” Westminster, like the original church that gathered around Jesus, was formed to meet people’s needs. Not just their felt needs—for community, comfort, weddings, funerals, and the like—but also their deepest needs, needs some people don’t even know they have: for purpose, meaning, faith, hope, and love; the need for God.

You can read Westminster’s story in John Galbreath’s memoir, or you can talk with people who have been here for all

or most of the sixty-some years since this church began. The more I learn about our legacy, the more inspiring it becomes.

But today, while we honor the great heritage of this church, we need to ask what the new cornfield looks like. That is, what are the needs of the people we can reach today and in the years to come with God’s reconciling love in Jesus Christ? What are their felt needs, but also what are their deepest needs, the unspoken hungers of their hearts?

Before we talk about particular needs, we should note that the new cornfield is vastly larger than the old one. The original cornfield was six acres and a township. The new cornfield, in a very real sense, is the whole world. The field has grown so big because the world has grown so small in the last 60 years.

Think about it. In 1946 there was no Internet; nobody ever heard of personal computers. There were no cell phones; telephones were clunky things with rotary dials, and it cost more than most people would spend to call “long distance,” a county or two away. There was no 24-hour cable or satellite news, because there were no cables or satellites; there were barely even televisions, and they were in black and white. You couldn’t fly a dozen people down to Haiti for a weeklong mission trip; commercial airplanes weren’t all that common, and they had propellers, and most people couldn’t afford to fly on them anyway. You couldn’t even take a youth group down the interstate on a mission trip because General Eisenhower wasn’t president yet and the interstate highway system didn’t exist.

We all work with technologies that didn’t exist when Westminster was born. Some sitting here today have traveled tens of thousands, even hundreds of thousands, of miles, and have met, or worked with, or competed against people from all over the world. We can talk with someone in Europe, Asia, Latin America, or Africa more easily, and for less cost, than we

could call across the United States a generation ago. What happens in one part of the world today—economic growth or financial panic, epidemic disease, environmental destruction—affects the rest of the world, sometimes with amazing speed and force.

The new cornfield of the 21st century has grown so big because the world has grown so small. I mention all this because the world we live in and the world our children and grandchildren will grow up in is a place of unprecedented global awareness and interdependence—and that has tremendous implications for how we envision our role as a church.

For one thing, young people today are saturated with diversity. The world offers a smorgasbord of religions, ideologies, worldviews, and agendas—so many options, in fact, that some people think the very idea of truth is antiquated. There is no such thing as “absolute truth,” they say. Everything is relative to our cultural and personal points of view. If that’s the case, how can people even hear the words of Jesus, for example, when he says, “I am the way, the truth, and the life”?

Ironically, a culture that claims to respect all religions equally can wind up taking no religion seriously. Every religion makes truth claims about the way the world is, what’s wrong with the human condition, and what can be done to redeem it. But in a climate where the very idea of truth is suspect, and religious commitments are seen as just another personal preference, every religion has to become vastly more sophisticated even to be taken seriously, let alone to persuade people that its truths are worth living for. Just teaching children Bible stories and trusting that they’ll grow up to be faithful Christians isn’t going to cut it in the new cornfield.

That brings us to a second point about the world we live in. Even though a good many people in our culture think of religion as a set of personal preferences not to be taken too

seriously, a great many more people around the world take their religion very seriously, as a fundamental source of meaning and purpose and identity in their lives. That means the potential for conflict over worldviews is enormous, but also, on the other hand, that the world’s religions could be a powerful source of dialogue and goodwill and humanitarian effort in decades to come. All great religions have both exclusive tendencies and universal tendencies. They make some claims that conflict with one another, but they share a sense of common humanity, ethical responsibility, and a vision of redemption available to all people.

Religion is so important, in fact, that the Council on Foreign Relations, the very heart of America’s foreign policy establishment, has developed an ongoing forum on religion and international affairs. I’ve been privileged to participate in that forum, and just a couple weeks ago attended a seminar in New York where people from different faiths and nationalities continued to lift up both the problems and the benefits of religious understanding for issues as big as national security, peace, and war.

Translated to the local level, this means that the new cornfield involves helping church members understand not only our own faith, but to some extent the faiths of other people—how we are alike, how we are different, and how we can live with one another, even when we disagree on some very important things. People of faith who take their own religion seriously can often contribute more to world peace and a genuine respect for diversity than people who don’t take any faith seriously—but only if we become much more sophisticated in our understanding of ourselves and others.

The new cornfield is vastly bigger than the old one. John Galbreath would understand that. He started out, after all, as a chaplain ministering to Marines on Iwo Jima and elsewhere in World War II. Anyone who has seen young men die on a battlefield knows how important faith is, not only in the lives of

individuals, but for the way we live in this world and relate to other people, until swords are bent into plowshares, and spears into pruning hooks.

The new cornfield is a global context with tremendous implications for how we strengthen and equip one another right here in our own congregation and community. Now let's look at some specific areas that need our attention.

Beginning in our homes, we need to become better at caring for families, for busy parents raising children in a fast-paced, hyper-programmed society, where God has trouble getting a word in edge-wise. Mostly this is the parents' responsibility—to model faith commitment in their own lives, and not let the rush of sports and other activities crowd out the quieter, but vastly more important, value of knowing and loving and serving God. It's the parents' responsibility, but the church has a responsibility too—to strengthen marriage and families, and to help children taste and see that the Lord is good, and learn that nothing matters more in this world than loving God and loving our neighbors as ourselves.

We also need to do a much better job of reaching out to young adults, to those away in college and those starting out in their careers. This is probably the area where the church is failing most miserably at the moment. To be sure, it's an enormous challenge. For all kinds of reasons, young adults are the hardest age group to reach. They have unprecedented freedom, almost unlimited options, and an inclination to question the religious traditions they were brought up in—if they had any serious religious upbringing at all.

If the church is going to reach young adults, we have to become much more sophisticated in how we do that. Often they don't go to church, so the church must go to them. Among other things, that means doing more with the Internet, making resources available online that speak to issues young adults are facing, and offering compelling answers to questions they're

really asking. We can do that, but it's going to take more effort in both content and technology than we're accustomed to spending. The new cornfield will be nothing if it is not technologically savvy.

Another dimension of the new cornfield is the huge crop of baby boomers who are middle-aged and approaching retirement. Increasingly, they have empty nests and sizeable nest eggs, a lifetime of know-how, good health, and two, three, or even four decades of time to spend. What will they do with all that time and talent? Some will just play—golfing or fishing or doing whatever else entertains them—but some will have a heart for service. Some will remember Jesus' words: "From those to whom much has been given, much will be expected." Some are people of faith who have been looking forward to serving God more fully, now that they don't have to work full-time. Others have questions that never did get answered, way back in the Sixties, and they might be open to listening now if the church had something compelling to say. The boomers offer both a challenge and an enormous pool of talent to tap in decades to come.

And then there is the builders generation. I've been impressed again and again by the smart, insightful seniors among us, people with wisdom and humor and faith to share from a lifetime of experience. The older we get, of course, the more warranties expire on various parts, and the more care some of us will need. But caring *for* seniors is only one side of our ministry. Caring *with* them is the other, drawing upon the resources of time and talent and treasure they bring to the church's ministry and mission. One of the most delightful aspects of Westminster is the way nostalgia works around here. It isn't the grumpy kind of nostalgia that fusses about change and complains that nothing good has happened since 1959. No, the nostalgia here recalls the early days, when Westminster Church was a dynamic and growing place, and longs to bring that same vitality to meet the needs of our community and the

world today. Those who remember the old cornfield have some of the brightest visions for the new cornfield.

All of this makes Westminster Church a great place to be. The past is a rich heritage, the future an exciting possibility. But our future will be exciting only if we seek God's guidance, and embrace the Holy Spirit's vision, and give generously from the gifts we've been given to share Christ's work in the world. To that end, we're holding a "New Cornfield Campaign" this spring: to bring our property and equipment up to where they need to be, to grow our endowment for ministry and mission, and to share a tithe for special projects in outreach. You'll be hearing more about all this in the coming weeks, and I hope you will pray for God's guidance and contribute generously to this vital work of the church.

Jesus asked Peter, "Do you love me?" Three times he asked, until Peter was upset and wondered why the Lord didn't take him at his word. The reason is that loving Jesus isn't just about saying the right words. It's about feeding his sheep, tending the lambs, taking care of his flock. "If you love me, take care of my people," Jesus says.

Jesus asks each one of us, "Do you love me?" He will ask again and again, until we prove it by the way we live and the way we give. Next week we'll talk some more about what that means, in the new cornfield of the 21st century.