

Practicing Prophetic Imagination in Community

The Prophetic Imagination - An Introduction

Prophetic practice, as evidenced in the Old Testament, consists in the courage, freedom, and daring to see the world differently. That difference is rooted in the old covenant traditions, but is brought to bear upon contemporary issues of power, injustice, and inhumaneness. It is no wonder that such a capacity to “imagine” the world differently refuses dominant ideologies of state, church, and corporation that serve status quo vested interests and seeks always to expose and subvert such mis-truth that deceives and denies. It is for good reason that prophetic imaging is characteristically done in daring metaphor, surprising rhetoric, and scandalous utterance, for to do less is to fall back into conventional distortions of reality.

In prophetic re-description of the world, God—the creator who saves Israel and who is known among us in Jesus of Nazareth—is reckoned as a decisive player in the drama of the world.

Indeed, God as decisive character matters so much that all other players—leaders, states, empires—are repositioned and called to account.

In the ancient world of the Old Testament, prophetic imagination exposed the folly of state aggrandizement (in Israel and elsewhere), religious absolutism (in the claims of Jerusalem), and brutality against the neighbor (effected through the normal workings of the economy). It conjured a better world that extended mercy and justice to the weak and marginalized. In our contemporary world, prophetic imagination can do no less. Its task—neither conservative nor liberal—is to expose and critique the false ideologies of consumer militarism and to propose a better world of neighborly justice and mercy. As in the ancient world, so now in our contemporary world, such practice--rooted in old texts and memories—requires courage, freedom, and daring, nothing less than the work of voicing and enacting the world anew...according to the holiness of God.

Walter Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination*, 2006

Prophetic Imagination and Community of Christ

In Community of Christ we have come to understand the idea of prophetic imagination as our call to be a prophetic people. From the earliest days of our movement we envisioned a day when God’s people would be of one heart and one mind and there would be no poor among them (Doctrine and Covenants 36:2h,i). Being prophetic consists of several steps:

- a. give time and space to be awake to God’s presence and invitation
- b. publically challenge situations and relationships not in harmony with God’s vision for creation,
- c. in relationship with God and one another to see God’s intended future,

- d. to risk co-creating and living into God's future together.

When we enter the stories of scripture we can engage in prophetic imagination by imagining along side the prophets and other writers a time when justice and peace will prevail in situations and relationships that do not reflect Christ's vision of the peaceable kingdom of God on earth (Doctrine and Covenants 163:3). In other words, we too can write the story not heard before for our generation.

Can we develop our capacity to imagine the future with God? Throughout history there have been men and women who despite their current reality were compelled to not only imagine but co-create an alternative future with God. Their faith in God's movement, which was always ahead of their time, compelled them to continue to risk a new future - even when the evidence around them seemed to point to the contrary.

Prophetic Imagination – A Working Definition

In relationship with God and one another we see situations and relationships as they are and as they could be and then courageously live into that future together.

We are called to become a people who find God's future more compelling than the current reality – a reality whose gravitational pull to maintain the status quo is pervasive. So how do we develop our capacity to do this? In LCM we suggest eight possibilities for consideration:

Developing Capacity for Prophetic Imagination:

- a. Encounter God's movement (where God is active), where we encounter God's hope!
- b. Eliminate clutter (i.e. spiritual, psychological, schedule, etc.) and create space for prophetic imagination to emerge.
- c. Deepen conversation about things that matter.
- d. Encounter human suffering in all its forms (i.e. loneliness, poverty, hunger, disease, etc.) by risking new relationships with strangers.
- e. Dwell in the Living Word, hymns, song lyrics, movies, nature, art and other ways to open your imagination.
- f. Utilize scripture to ground oneself in the story of God's unfolding vision of justice and peace. In concert with the Holy Spirit, practice envisioning an alternative future (i.e. through prayer, poems, journaling, or drawing) that eliminates the specific suffering we encounter.
- g. Risk an experiment to alleviate the suffering encountered regardless of conventional wisdom that may suggest the futility of the effort.

a. Encounter God's movement, encounter Hope – Our hope is not found in fleeting optimism but grounded in spiritual formation (i.e. missional practices) in relationship with God and one another. This leads us to a deepening awareness of God's movement and future emerging all around us.

Essential Question: How can the Pastor Leadership Team cultivate an environment that invites and challenges disciples to go deeper in their commitment to daily missional practices and experiences of worship together?

b. Eliminate clutter (i.e. spiritual, psychological, schedule, etc.) and create space for prophetic imagination to emerge – Our lives are filled with constant distractions and some are of our own making! Are we widening the spaces throughout our day to become more fully aware of what is going on around us? How do we reduce extraneous noise and tune in to God's promptings that lead us into new relationships and vision? Is our congregational experience creating space for God's disruptive vision or are we going through the motions each week?

Essential Question: How can the Pastor Leadership Team help the congregation move from an activities-based model of church to one where we slow down and orient our experience around our desire for more meaningful time (i.e. space) with God and one another.

c. Deepen conversation about things that matter – When we risk relationships that move from surface conversation (i.e. weather, sports, safe topics) to meaningful conversation (i.e. life, love, marriage, family, faith, hopes, fears, God, etc.) we create space for the Holy Spirit to draw us into deeper and even sacred community. In these relationships of meaning and purpose we discover new things about ourselves and others. Our relationships become sacramental experiences that give us glimpses into God's future and desire for loving communities that signal the coming reign of God.

Essential Question: How can the PLT model engagement in meaningful relationships and create new opportunities during and outside Sunday morning for deeper relationships to develop?

d. Encounter human suffering in all its forms by risking new relationships with strangers – Mission begins with encounter. We encounter God in many ways including situations and relationships that may at times seem furthest from realizing God's potential and vision. It is in the dark places that we are most drawn to the light of Christ's emerging peace. When we allow ourselves to become vulnerable to human suffering we are changed as the Holy Spirit blesses us with clarity about the present and the possibilities of God's future.

Essential Question: How can the PLT foster experiences where the congregation has opportunity to be in relationship with their neighbors, their stories, and their hopes for an alternative future?

e. Dwell in the living Word, song lyrics, movies, nature, art, and other ways to open your imagination – As we de-clutter and enlarge the space in our hearts and minds there is now room for new insights to emerge. We *dwell* when we spend considerable time immersing ourselves scripture, nature, art, or other ways to open our minds and hearts to new ideas and possibilities. The Holy Spirit works through many avenues to reveal divine purposes and only requires our willingness and openness to see with new eyes.

Essential Question – What are some creative ways the PLT can use scripture, song, movies, nature, and art in worship, small group experiences, and retreats to open the hearts and minds of disciples to new possibilities for the future?

f. Utilize scripture to ground oneself in the unfolding story of God’s justice and peace. In concert with the Holy Spirit, practice envisioning an alternative future (i.e. through prayer, poems, journaling, or drawing) that eliminates the specific suffering we encounter – The prophets of old and modern day prophetic voices challenge us to envision a world different than the present reality. By reading along side the prophets we begin to understand their ability to describe their current reality, grieve at conditions of human suffering, and give voice to God’s alternative future of justice and peace. As we look at similar situations in our day we can practice envisioning an alternative future together – God’s future. We can give voice to that future and invite others to join us in co-creating that future in partnership with God.

Essential Questions – How can we (i.e. PLT with the congregation) use prophetic texts (ancient and modern day) to clearly see and articulate current injustices in our day and practice giving voice to our best understanding of God’s future? How can we then invite others to join us in co-creating the future in partnership with God?

g. Risk an experiment to alleviate the human suffering encountered regardless of conventional wisdom that may suggest the futility of the effort – Faith is the assurance of things hoped for the evidence of things unseen (Hebrews 11:1). When we begin to enact our vision for the future by taking concrete steps to alleviate human suffering, we co-create the future with God. By stepping boldly into situations others may consider hopeless we create pathways for others to follow and join in on God’s emerging future. We exercise faith when we risk new ministries and actions out of a compelling vision not knowing for sure how it will all turn out.

Essential Question – How can the PLT create an environment where disciples feel free and supported to risk new actions in partnership with one another and God?

Prophetic Imagination Exercise

STEP 1 - In groups of 3 to 5 read Isaiah 58 (The Message) aloud twice with an opportunity to reflect for a few minutes after each reading. Consider the following questions as you hear the passage:

What are the barriers the people are facing in becoming God's people?

How is this passage similar to challenges we face today?

What is the essential question that leads us into God's future? (One Answer: ***What would it look like for our community to become again livable for everyone?***)

What is God's invitation to you/us in this passage?

Discuss your reflections to the questions together in your group.

6-9

"This is the kind of fast day I'm after: to break the chains of injustice, get rid of exploitation in the workplace, free the oppressed, cancel debts. What I'm interested in seeing you do is: sharing your food with the hungry, inviting the homeless poor into your homes, putting clothes on the shivering ill-clad, being available to your own families. Do this and the lights will turn on, and your lives will turn around at once. Your righteousness will pave your way. The God of glory will secure your passage. Then when you pray, God will answer. You'll call out for help and I'll say, 'Here I am.'

9-12

"If you get rid of unfair practices, quit blaming victims, quit gossiping about other people's sins, If you are generous with the hungry and start giving yourselves to the down-and-out, your lives will begin to glow in the darkness, your shadowed lives will be bathed in sunlight. I will always show you where to go. I'll give you a full life in the emptiest of places—firm muscles, strong bones. You'll be like a well-watered garden, a gurgling spring that never runs dry. You'll use the old rubble of past lives to build anew, rebuild the foundations from out of your past. You'll be known as those who can fix anything, restore old ruins, rebuild and renovate, make the community livable again.

STEP 2 - With Isaiah 58 fresh in your mind, consider the following real life scenarios and questions as a group:

Scenario 1: A member of the Pine Hills Community of Christ congregation has been struggling with loneliness after the loss of her husband five years ago. They were extremely close and shared a rich and meaningful life together. She struggles to engage in a world where married couples seem to be the norm. She rarely attends the congregation because of all the memories she has there with her husband – it is just too painful. Her loneliness is causing increasing withdrawal. Most members don't know what to do so they simply avoid the situation.

Using Isaiah 58 and seeking to be aware of the Holy Spirit's presence, what might God's alternative future be for this woman? Write your own prophetic text, poem, create a picture, prayer, or whatever form works best for you in envisioning God's future.

What might an experiment look like to risk a different future?

Scenario 2: In the local neighborhood surrounding New Springs Community of Christ church the demographics have been gradually changing over time. Younger families are moving in. They represent a lower socio-economic level than previous families. Youth are using the basketball goal in the church parking lot and a few relationships are forming with some members of the congregation. Lately, due to some vandalism, a number of church members suggest dismantling the basketball goal and gating the parking lot. Local news stories have highlighted the problem of youth roaming the streets due to parents working late into the evenings. Some youth are getting into trouble with police and in some places violence is on the rise.

Using Isaiah 58 and seeking to be aware of the Holy Spirit's presence, what might God's alternative future be for this woman? Write your own prophetic text, poem, create a picture, prayer, or whatever form works best for you in envisioning God's future.

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