

“Let’s Transition Together”

“... it is God who changes the seasons.” Daniel 2:21

Faculty and Staff Service Awards Banquet

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This year, 2006-7, will be a huge transition academic year for Mount Vernon Nazarene University. MVNU experienced its last presidential transition in 1989. How many of you were employed by MVNU in 1989?

A comforting scripture verse for us to remember this year is found in Daniel 2:21: “... it is God who changes the seasons ...” For MVNU, For Anne and me, and for each employee of this university.

Dr. Maxine Walker - in a recent email to me regarding her upcoming retirement from Point Loma Nazarene University, stated, “Transition issues: with lots of woes, worries, wonders.” And I relate so much to her words!

The lead article in the current issue of *Chief Executive* states: “New leader. New vision. Old challenges.” The words reference the new CEO of a Fortune 500 company. They could also apply to MVNU during this transition year and to MVNU’s new president.

Let me ask you a very sincere question: Is it possible for us to walk through this transition year *together*? My immediate and convictional response is, yes, yes, yes!!! I believe it is possible by the grace of God and the prayers of His people. Intense challenges remain. But we can transition together.

This year can bring out our best ... or bring out our worst. In the June 2005 issue of the AARP Bulletin, the CEO of the organization quoted Theodore Roosevelt as saying, “the most practical kind of politics is the politics of decency.” Then, the CEO commented: “*Yet decency is not a word that describes our political environment today. Partisanship has reached such an uncivil extreme that it is dividing our political system, threatening its ability to function, and blocking solutions to the serious problems we face.*” He continues, “*It is time for both political parties to pull together, in a new spirit of bi-partisanship, and rediscover their ability to do the peoples work.*”

We understand, as observers of the national political scene, what the author of the article means and describes. And, yet it’s so easy to get “sucked” into responding accordingly. But it need not characterize us.

How can we traverse through this year together in a way that clearly distinguishes us as a community of faith?

For answers to this question, I have been re-reading Dietrich Bonhoeffer's classic book, *Life Together*. Bonhoeffer was martyred by the Nazi's late in the war. His book, *Life Together*, grew directly out of his own experience of the deep meaning of Christian community found in life together in an "underground" seminary established by the confessing church in Germany.

Bonhoeffer was a brilliant theologian, graduating with his doctorate in theology at the age of 21 from the University of Berlin. His doctoral dissertation was a theological study of the communion of saints - the church. He wrote the book, *The Cost of Discipleship* during the same time frame in which he wrote *Life Together*.

Bonhoeffer, In his book, *Life Together*, Bonhoeffer lists seven expressions of ministry by which the Christian community must be judged and characterized.

1. **The Ministry of Holding One's Tongue.** When this is done, Bonhoeffer believes, we will be able to cease from constantly criticizing the other person, judging him and condemning her, putting the individual in his or her particular place.
2. **The Ministry of Meekness.** He who serves must learn to think first of others. Meekness in a Christian community is essential, according to Bonhoeffer.
3. **The Ministry of Listening.** The first service that one owes to others in the fellowship consists of listening to others. Bonhoeffer believes that listening can be a greater service to a people than speaking. He writes of "listening with the ears of God."
4. **The Ministry of Active Helpfulness.** Simple assistance to others within the Christian community in trifling, external matters is the thrust of this Christian ministry. According to Bonhoeffer, "one who worries about the loss of time that such petty, outward acts of helpfulness entail is usually taking the importance of his own career too solemnly."
5. **The Ministry of Bearing Another's Burdens.** Ephesians 4:2 commands us to be humble and gentle, be patient, bearing with one another in love. For Bonhoeffer, bearing means sustaining and supporting and is essential to a Christian community.
6. **The Ministry of Proclaiming the Word of God.** Bonhoeffer does not mean proclaiming the message of Scripture in a formal setting such as in the worship service. He is referring to that unique situation in which one person becomes a witness in *human* words to another with Christian consolation.
7. **The Ministry of Authority.** Leadership for Bonhoeffer is summarized by Jesus' statement in Mark 10:43-44, "Whoever wants to be great among you must first be your servant, and whoever wants to be first, must be your slave." Jesus made authority in the fellowship dependent upon brotherly service.

For Bonhoeffer, the Christian ministry of holding one's tongue, meekness, listening, active helpfulness, bearing, proclaiming and servant leadership is the context within which our primary ministry of leading, teaching or preaching must function.

Throughout the book, *Life Together*, Bonhoeffer returns again and again to his theme that "Christian community means community in and through Christ." "Our community with one another," he states, "consists solely in what Christ has done for both of us."

Because of this biblical affirmation, I ask of us, faculty, and staff, to minister to one another and to the students we serve this year with Christian *hope* and spirit-inspired optimism. Our hope and faith are in Him, not in ourselves, our Board, the search process or the person selected to be the next MVNU president. Our prayer for each other could be Paul's prayer for the Roman Christians:

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in Him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. (Romans 15:13)

Because our hope is in Him, we can radiate *love* and optimism throughout this year as each one of us ministers to each other and to MVNU students.

In Deuteronomy 31, Moses passes the baton of leadership to Joshua. His closing words to the Israelites in Deuteronomy 31:6. "*Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them for the Lord your God goes with you, He will never leave you nor forsake you.*"

Let me paraphrase, for each of us, the closing words of Moses as I prepare to pass the baton of leadership: "Look straight ahead with full confidence in the Lord and in this academic community of faith. Do not fear the unknown before us. Why? It is the Lord God who goes before us - the God of hope who calls us, redeems us, empowers us and leads us - the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and the father of our Lord Jesus Christ. He is the one who calls us this year to be a faithful community. In this transition year, He will not leave us nor forsake us!"

My passionate plea is that we can walk together through this transition year as a community of faith with strength, courage, hope and optimism in the God who leads us and who ministers to us and through us!

We can transition together -- to the glory of God and for the future of Mount Vernon Nazarene University. "It is God - the God of Hope - who changes the seasons," and this is God's time for presidential change at MVNU. Let's transition together. God is with us. Amen.

Think on these words as Dr. David Liles sings to us this song inspired by the Deuteronomy passage.

Dr. Lyles: "I Will Never Leave Thee"