

Pentecost Sunday: A Reflection by Rev. Dr. Alan Lai

Today is Pentecost Sunday! The Christian community worldwide remembers how the coming of the Holy Spirit empowered Jesus' first disciples to leave the cocoon and go out to share God's message of hope. The world has changed because of the disciples' missions and faithful witnesses. Let the Holy Spirit also come to fire us up for missions! May we also leave our cocoon and be ready to meet a different world under the lingering threat of the pandemic. Our world has an urgent need for transformation, from greed to justice.

I write this at the end of my first year working at South Arm United Church. Starting tomorrow, June 1st, I will take my annual holidays of this pastoral year, 2019-2020. When I return on July 2nd, I will begin my second year. By then, I hope we can prepare ourselves for church reopening in September. Surprisingly enough, almost one third of my time serving you in my first year was done remotely: Through emails, Zoom meetings, and YouTube videos! I have already forgotten which day is my day-off. Until a vaccine is available, life will not be the same as before. This pandemic episode will undoubtedly change the ways we do things for the longer haul. It also changes how we see and experience the world.

I would like to comment on the unpredictable nature of life and also of ministry. When the Spirit moves God's people out to serve the world, it is not always met with joy and excitement; often, people are perplexed with many unanswered questions. Not that I suggest what we currently experience is the work of the Holy Spirit! God forbids! It is not. We have no answer as to why it happened. But this situation does allow us to see the world, ourselves, and our mission a bit clearer.

When COVID-19 was first reported, many thought it was just a strong flu; and some may have thought it affected only a country called China. But we are living in an inter-dependent global village where almost all of our lives are interconnected. What happened in another country often has strong impacts to another. Pandemics know no geographical or linguistic boundary. As I have shown you in the YouTube video for Earth Day, Dr. Sallie McFague's wisdom still marvels me as she says, "Everything is related to everything else." This is the world we live in, interconnected, interrelated, inter-dependent. Should this be part of our thoughts for future missions?

This unfortunate situation also shows us what kind of global financial system we have developed, and how much that system treats and rewards different people differently. We think this is 2020; and formerly, the colonial world of inequality and oppression are

things of the past. Not so soon. We may be lucky to live in this part of the world when the government did a fairly good job in helping people in need. That isn't a universal picture for many countries. It is a disheartening thing to see how some political leaders neglect their duties but take the opportunity to abuse their power.

This pandemic comes to us when we are in the midst of discerning our future of the church. One may say, how unfortunate; but on the flip side of the coin one may say, how timely! Not the way we have hoped, but this situation did push us in a direction that can be both scary and experimental. We may agree that going forward in the 21st century requires us to think outside the box. But when it comes to actually doing things 'outside' the box, that can be stagnated with months of debate, meetings, and discussion. In normal circumstances, we wouldn't be closing the church door, cancelling Sunday worship, not having in-person meetings, relying on technologies to keep us connected, and watching YouTube videos as the primary ways to nurture our spiritual life! In no way do I think what we have done so far represents 'outside the box' mission, but at least it pushes us out to be courageous. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, we learn not to lose hope but to dive into uncharted territories. Finding new ways to be church is no longer a slogan, but a necessity!

The Continuing Conversation about the future direction of the church is indeed "continuing." We will face round 2 of this discussion sometime in the future. The church must be intentional about caring for the vulnerable of the society. This unfortunate time can be the right time to articulate a new vision of generosity, mutual understanding, and intentional welcoming. With or without COVID-19, we are God's messengers of hope, peace, and justice. We know it. But how we live it out in times like this, matter. The credibility of the Christian message is on the line. Let the world see Christians as genuine, sincere, and caring. Come, Holy Spirit, come.

Holy God, like a rushing wind your Spirit moved upon the first disciples on the day of Pentecost, and like a purifying fire your Spirit seared their hearts and minds with the message of hope. Send your Spirit upon your church in this time and place, stir up our courage, and rouse us for prophetic witness, that we may join with them to proclaim to the world your mighty deeds of love in Jesus Christ. Amen.