

This is a Day of New Beginnings
July 4, 2010

This morning you have met my family. On August 31st Elizabeth and I will be celebrating our 25th wedding anniversary. Connie will be entering 8th grade this fall. There are, however, several other members of our family that are not here today.

We have a Cavalier King Charles Spaniel named Chester. Chester has been in the family for a little over 3 years. We purchased Chester from a breeder in Ohio. Chester is the first dog we have owned. He has had complete run of the house up until last weekend. Last Sunday his world was changed.

Ever since owning Chester, Elizabeth has become a dog lover. She frequently looks at rescue sites on the internet to see what dogs are in need of a loving home. Her hope is become someone who adopts older dogs. She wants to give these dogs a few last good years.

For the last year she has tracked two older Cavaliers. They were sisters that have some health issues that need to be adopted together. For over a year they were listed on the Greater Chicago Cavalier Rescue web page, but no takers! Who would they find to take in these deaf, senior dogs?

On Sunday, June 27th, Autumn and Guinness became part of the Huseltine household. Having picked them up in Chicago, Elizabeth brought them home to meet the family. We were worried about how Chester would handle 2 new dogs in his home. Would he be aggressive? So far he has been great with the whole arrangement.

As I thought about our new home situation it occurred to me that this change in our family dynamic is happening the same week that my professional situation changes. Always looking for preaching clues, I began looking to see if there are any parallels between the dogs and the churches. I believe I have found several.

Up until several weeks ago the dogs were living in different homes with different owners. Several weeks ago George Covintree was the pastor at Berkley First UMC whose Sunday services were held at 10:30 am. Beverly Hills UMC held its services at 10:00 am. David Huseltine served as the full

time pastor. Here we are July 4th and many things have changed. What happened with the dogs?

At first there was apprehension. When Chester and the girls were introduced they sniffed at each other, but then they went off exploring. Elizabeth had read that when you bring new dogs into your home it is best to bring them together 1st at a neutral location. If you drove by Beverly Hills UMC last Sunday night around 8:30 pm, you would have seen 3 small dogs roaming around each other and the parking lot.

When United Methodist pastors are introduced to a new congregation, they first meet with the Staff Parish Relations Committee. As a pastor it's much less stressful walking into a room of ten strangers rather than a room with 100. On April 25th I was introduced to the Staff Parish Committee of the Berkley First United Methodist Church.

For two months we have been planning this "new thing" that has been put together. Instead of a full time pastor, Beverly Hills and Berkley First will share a pastor. New worship times had to be established. Conversations took place concerning time allocation as well as financial implications. Then on July 1st the appointment became effective.

When we brought Chester and the girls home there was some uneasiness. Chester didn't quite know what to make of these new animals in his world. Autumn and Guinness seemed a bit puzzled by their new surroundings.

When change happens we too get a bit apprehensive. We get comfortable with the ways things have been. Even when we know it's going to happen and we even play a role in the process, when the "new thing" happens we can find ourselves a bit thrown off.

But we liked our old service times. What does this new guy offer to our church? What does having our pastor half time mean to our expectations of a pastor?

I have noticed a couple times since we have had the girls that when we are giving them some attention, Chester charges in to get his loving. There may be a possibility that as I am giving time and energy to Berkley First some from the Beverly Hills congregation might feel slighted. We should be the

favorite. As a pastor of two congregations and an owner of three dogs I have to figure out how to spread my love and focus around.

Remember I said that Autumn and Guinness were a bit uneasy when they first came into our home? That uncertainty didn't last very long. Soon after arriving both dogs were off exploring the house. What new sights and smells could be discovered in this new place!

When it was announced that Berkley First and Beverly Hills would be sharing a pastor, wasn't there a sense of curiosity? The folks at Berkley First were wondering about this new pastor they were getting. (Be honest, didn't you start thinking about this new pastor you would be getting?)

Rather than seeing this as a negative, creative minds began contemplating how this new arrangement could benefit the church. How can we involve more people in the ministry of the church? With the financial relief this new arrangement gives, how can we make the most out of this opportunity?

A year ago GM and Chrysler were struggling financially. The future looked bleak unless something dramatic was done. One of those dramatic steps was the government stepping in with millions of dollars. Others actions included a restructuring and downsizing of the companies.

One year later, both companies have made large payments back to the government. Both companies announced profits for the first quarter. No, both companies are not fully on solid ground, but they are a lot better off today than 12 months ago.

This shared ministry can be that bridge that both churches need in order to right the ship and make strides towards being single point churches again. An excitement about this "new thing" would go a long way to make this shared ministry work.

Dogs are very adaptable animals. It seems like it takes no time for them to get comfortable with a new living situation. Both Autumn and Guinness have settled in to their new home. Chester does not seem bothered to have two new sisters. In fact for him it's a bonus, when we all leave the house, he no longer is all by himself. Since dogs are pack animals, the more the merrier.

If only we were a little more like dogs! It takes us a whole lot longer to adjust to change. The new worship time will be the biggest adjustment we will have to make for this shared ministry. The availability of the pastor will also change, but that is not as noticeable as the service time. Hopefully we can adjust with little consternation.

Speaking of consternation, there is one other member of the Huseltine household, Elphaba the cat. She was just fine with Chester, but not with the girls - she is hardly seen. Unfortunately the girls have never been around cats. When Guinness sees the cat she howls and runs after her. We hope Elphie will make peace with the new dogs and we will come out of the basement.

There may be some folks that are so put out by this new thing they are staying away from church. I am sorry if this is the case. Only they can decide if they will give it a chance. If they decide to go some where else, no hard feelings, best of luck.

Throughout this message I have used the words “new thing” to describe our ministry arrangement. I have done so intentionally. Our scripture lesson has Isaiah telling the people that God is doing a new thing. This new thing will be good for the people.

I believe God is behind this new thing. God, through the Bishop and the appointive process, has brought about this arrangement. If we believe that, then we use this opportunity to strengthen our church and grow in our numbers and our faith.

The cynics say there are too many United Methodist churches in this area. Rather than sharing pastors or making multi-point charges, some should be closed. If we are all doing the same thing, then I would agree with that stance. But if each church finds its unique mission, a complement to what other churches are doing, then there is a reason for all these churches.

I believe Beverly Hills has found that vision with our emphasis on diversity. The Hungry program is one step as we try to connect with our community. I hope to lead Berkley First in discovering what God wants us to become.

I admit these are critical years for these two churches. I am excited to be a part of this “new thing”. Do I see myself as the savior, one who will turn

around these two congregations? NO- we already have a savior. We just have to believe what that savior taught. If we believe the good news, then we will find new ways of expressing that news to those around us.

Our last hymn will be “This Is a Day of New Beginnings”. Let me read the 3rd and 4th verse.

Then let us with the spirit’s daring,
Step from the past and leave behind
Our disappointment, guilt and grieving,
Seeking new paths, and sure to find.

Christ is alive, and goes before us
To show and share what love can do.
This is a day of new beginnings;
Our God is making all things new.

This is a day of new beginnings. Thanks be to God. Amen