

SHOW ME THE WAY

Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. -- GENESIS 12:1-4A

I grew up in a Navy family and we were frequently on the move. My father served in the Navy for 20 years, spanning WW II, Korea, and Vietnam, and after retiring at the ripe old age of 37 he served as a civil servant where the moving continued. When I was 15 I was told by my mother that we were moving again, and we were not to complain because my father was receiving a big promotion and he didn't need to feel guilty about uprooting his family. We had lived in that home for half of my life, so that move was particularly hard on me.

I've kept up the tradition of moving throughout my adult life. After settling down and getting married at the ripe old age of 20 I uprooted my wife and we moved to Lubbock, TX so I could study to be a minister. I thought I had heard God calling me to the ministry. Sadly, the dust storms of West Texas were more than my health could bear, so one month later we moved back to California with my tale tucked tightly between my legs.

After nearly a dozen moves up and down the coast of California interspersed with dropping in and out of college, I finally graduated and thought I had heard God calling me to graduate school, this time in Abilene, Texas. With my wife and infant daughter in tow, and everything we owned snugly fitting in a tiny two door sedan, we moved to Abilene where I would study Marriage and Family Therapy. Three years later, with my degree in hand and a job offer as a social worker in a children's home waiting for me in southern California, we moved again. God's call was clear, and he showed me the way!

In just two years I became totally disillusioned with God, my career, and myself. I found the work too overwhelming, and every day I felt the entire weight of the world on my shoulders. Dealing with children who had been abused forced me to look at my own abuse growing up. Unable to cope, I resigned. Why had God called me to this, I asked? Soon I retreated into a deep and dark depression, and a year later my we moved 2000 miles away, running from my shame and my family.

Sometimes we think all we need is a change of scenery and things will be better. A new job, a new career, a new spouse, and a new home and things will get better. Sometimes moving works, but usually those things that haunted us before have a way of finding us again. In our new home I found work as a drug counselor and family therapist, and I really enjoyed the work. Soon, though, the dark night of the

soul that had engulfed me before found me again in Indiana, and shortly after that my wife of 15 years left me and our children. If it weren't for my young children I would have had no reason to live.

Unable to go any lower, God came to me and helped me to find a new direction. Friends at church reached out to me, and one of the ministers at my church took me under her wing. I began to get out of the house more and became involved in my church. I felt called to the ministry, but I was an unemployed single parent of two and didn't know how I would do it. Sure of God's call, I took the steps needed, trusting that God would show me the way. Twenty years ago I began serving my first church, and that same year I married Laurie.

Abraham was 75 years old when God called him and his wife, Sarah, to leave their land and their family because God has special plans for them. Even though they had no children and Sarah was barren, God promised them that their descendants would be more numerous than the stars in heaven. Their journey to the land that God had promised them was beset by pitfalls and mistakes too numerous to mention. But four thousand years later, the three major religions of this world: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam trace their roots back to this man, Abraham and his wife Sarah. Because of their trust in God, God showed them the way.

This congregation is at a critical junction in our 314 years of history. It is getting harder to attract new members as families have a multitude of choices to make and a limited amount of time and resources. Increasingly people are labeling themselves as spiritual but not religious, and for a variety of reasons have abandoned institutional religion. They prefer a walk in the woods and meditation over organized religion. It would be so easy for us to just hunker down and become depressed, or worse, abandon the church altogether and close our doors.

How would your life be changed if this church ceased to exist? Would the community miss us? Would anyone care if the First Congregational Church of Haddam closed its doors?

Recently our church council asked me to organize two ad hoc committees to explore changes that God might be asking us to make so that we can continue to be a vital congregation. The first committee is exploring the possibility of this church becoming an Open and Affirming congregation. ONA is an official designation in

the United Church of Christ (UCC) affirming the full inclusion of gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transgender persons (LGBT) in the church's life and ministry, as well as people of all races and ages. This committee will explore how we might be a more welcoming church, especially to those who feel as if they have been excluded from the life of the church due to their sexual orientation.

The second group is a visioning committee that is looking at ways that we can better utilize our resources and talents so that we can be more effective in our community. They will be talking to you about the things that we do well, areas we need improvement in, and new directions we may want to explore so that we may be a more vibrant and vital community of faith.

Some fear that the changes facing us are too enormous for us to overcome. But I believe that God is calling us to change in new and creative ways. Will we be faithful like Abraham and Sarah and follow God where we are being called, even if the road we will journey on is new? I do believe that God will show us the way if we are willing to step outside of our comfort zones.