

Dear Siblings in Christ

This year, I'm deeply pondering what it means to truly "Follow Jesus" in every aspect of my life. During the inspiring Church Leaders Virtual Training (Jan 20, 2024), District Superintendent Rev. Blake Busick offered a great perspective on how this Conference theme applies to our local church context.

Imagine Trustees who view their sole mission as "maintaining the facilities." Their default response to new ministry proposals would likely be a firm "no." Keeping the building clean and secure becomes their singular focus, leading them to shut the door whenever possible.

However, if "Following Jesus" becomes their guiding vision, a shift occurs. They open their hearts and ears to new ideas, embracing opportunities to "help" and "strengthen" them. They encourage experimentation and welcome collaboration, understanding that the true purpose of the space extends beyond mere upkeep.

Similarly, when the Finance team sees their role solely as budgetary control, they risk rigidity and missed opportunities. Flexibility becomes crucial to support diverse ministries and their needs.

The point is, our perspectives matter. When we frame our roles through the lens of "Following Jesus," we move beyond limitations and embrace creativity, collaboration, and a willingness to serve the larger mission. We become open to possibilities, fostering a community that truly reflects Christ's teachings.

This year, "Following Jesus" isn't just a theme, it's a lens through which I read scripture and craft sermons. Take Jonah, for instance. He used to represent my own stubbornness and self-absorption. The focus was always on my humanness, my sin. But now, I see Jonah as someone who, despite disagreement, follows God. Jonah had a constant "tug-of-war" with God because of his disagreement with God. Even at the end, Jonah remains unconvinced, yet engaged. God keeps speaking, working with him, a testament to God's unwavering presence. Imagine if God waited for complete agreement before acting? We'd all be waiting forever!

Thankfully, our God is "gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from punishment" (Jonah 4:2). God forgives not just the Ninevites, but someone like Jonah too. That, I believe, reflects *God's Image*: working with others despite disagreements. This "Following Jesus" perspective allows me to see the Book of Jonah as a testament to God's incredible capacity to work with anyone. With this vision, the focus is changed from 'me' to 'God'. It's a vision I hold dear, especially in our divided times - national, cultural, even denominational.

Let's keep walking with this vision in all our thoughts, actions, plans and communal lives! Proverbs 29:18 writes: "Where there is no vision, the people perish!" "Following Jesus" will lead us to a place that resembles Christ Jesus more clearly.

"Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, and give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you!" (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18)



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