

Rev. Dr. Sterling Morse
Northeastern Presbyterian Church
Washington, DC
June 5, 2022

NORTHEASTERN PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

CHARGE TO THE CONGREGATION

I find installations to be curiously designated for events like today.

We think of “installation” our minds go to setting up washing machines or inserting a piece of software. The recent heatwave informed me that I needed to install a new air conditioner.

In any case, we tend to associate installation with mechanical/inanimate objects. We don’t think about something having to do with a living human being. Even other professions use words like inauguration or investiture to talk about the start of a new position.

But in the church world we continue to have services of installation. The good news about church installations, though, is that unlike installing your dishwasher or a new computer program, this is a pretty exciting occasion.

Representatives from National Capital Presbytery, the greater Presbyterian Church USA, colleagues in ministry from a variety of contexts, family and friends have joined the celebration virtually. We are making a pretty big deal about this installation of Rev. Dr. Willie J. Keaton, Jr.

And while it is right that we do so, I think it’s so important that we remember that today is not solely about Dr, Keaton.

At the beginning of my first *installed* ministry, the Rev. Dr. James Foster Reese told the story of two men returning from the hunt who encountered a family of bears---a mother and her two cubs. The mother bear moved forward in defense of her cubs. The shorter man said, “Big John, you’re big and strong. Go deal with

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that bear.” To which Big John replied, “There’s some little bears up there, too.” The point is everybody has a role to play.

Today is about Northeastern Presbyterian Church of Washington DC, and the chapter of ministry that God is now calling you into together. And that’s why the words found in Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians are so important this afternoon. Paul writes to the Ephesians 4:11-13 that, “***the gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.***”

You have called Dr. Keaton to be a “pastor and teacher” of this congregation. He has been called to the ministry by God and has been trained and equipped to do the work that is set before him. But he is not called into this ministry alone. Every one of you who is a member of this congregation is being called into this ministry too.

Show me a congregation stunted in its missional growth, and I’ll show you those where the pastor tends to be the only one living into their call to ministry, that my friends is not sustainable. Each of you has a calling, and by being here today, you are saying you are going to listen to that calling so that Dr. Keaton can effectively live into his as a pastor and teacher of this church.

And that’s why this reminder from Paul is so important here. Listen to what he tells the church in Ephesus about their callings: “I therefore...***I beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.***”

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Unless you are willing to live into that calling and work together to make this a place of exceptional ministry, there is no point going forward in this installation.

You have stepped out in faith to call Dr. Keaton. You are saying that you will continue to live into your own calling to ministry, and that you will serve with him. You are taking these installation vows alongside of him.

And so, in that spirit, I want to offer a few reminders. First, a reminder that Rev. Keaton has been called to ministry here. He has not been hired, and he is not your employee. The Holy Spirit has guided him to this ministry, and you have affirmed that call.

I charge you to grant Dr. Keaton the freedom to dream and the permission to lead.

That means unlike an employee, sometimes he is going to say and do things that challenge you, or that push you out of your comfort zones. That's his job. Know that he will never do those things to be unkind or difficult. He will only do them because he truly believes he is doing what God asks of him.

I charge you to create an atmosphere that minimizes stress and unrealistic expectations.

Granted, whenever there is a transitional shift in leadership, there will be occasional collisions. When it happens don't manage it in the cloud of passive-aggressive behavior or through the rumor mill. Confront him personally in Christ and together work compassionately toward resolution.

I charge you to allow him time off for relaxation and restoration.

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Pastors tend to overwork at times. If you want him to keep him running at his best, demand that he practices self-care.

I charge you to honor the commitment to compensate him and be respectful of his family. Encourage him to make his family a priority and to devote the time, energy and effort required to keep them healthy.

Finally, remember that while he is “installed” he is different than other things that get installed. He is not a machine that you load up, flip on, and walk away from while he does all the work. Nor is he a software program or an app that has been installed at the church and which will now solve all your problems.

How you choose to minister with him, and how you live into your own calls to ministry will determine the outcome of your time together.

And so, as you get ready to start this new chapter of ministry together, I have one piece of advice that I hope you’ll take to heart. And that’s this: pray. Pray for Rev. Dr. Keaton and his family. Pray for all who serve your church. Pray for your church itself and the community.

Pray that God would make clear to you your own call to ministry in this place, and that God would give you the ability to live into that calling every day.

God has great things in store for you, Northeastern. Today is just a reminder of that fact. And as you turn the page on that new chapter, I pray that you would continue to write this story with Rev. Dr. Keaton, and with one another. God is trying to do a new thing here. Live into it.