

## ***Break! State of Our Communion: 2017***

People of God! My people.

Let me begin this morning this way: By reminding us that I am for us, not against us, and that I am so, so grateful for the time we have walked together, and look forward to all the time we walk together.

We're talking about ourselves this morning. About our congregation, what we've been up to, what we ought to be up to, what special challenges we face and what special gifts we have been given. My prayer is that nothing I say surprises us, and yet, even as the words come out of my mouth we hear them in a new way. I hope we're left with pride, with hope, with clear eyes to see what the future might bring for us, and how we might engage that future in such a way that we bring glory to God, embody Christ, and experience the pleasure that comes with knowing we have been faithful, and that is good enough.

Let me start with this:

### ***What happens if...?***

What happens if we lose everything? What happens if the Smoky Row Food Pantry folds, or the inevitable day comes when it grows so large that there is no more room for it in this building, and the material support that we wrap around it, like hands holding a special thing, is no longer something we provide? What happens when Sawmill Interfaith Community Care cracks, and the leadership we provide in gathering our neighbors around the poor, the hungry, the exhausted and harassed is gone? What happens if our

garden is salted, if this or that thing happens in such a way that this group, and that group, and that group find another place to call home.

What happens to us, our sense of self, if all that we do, all that we take pleasure in doing, disappears? And that we are is us, we in this room, gathering together to remind ourselves that God is real, and our concerns and cares and worries are real to God.

What then?

For the healthiest of us, we know that right now is all we've been given, and whatever blessing we are, whatever blessing we're able to be or have been...it may pass away in the same way we pray winter cold does. But I am not talking to each of us individually this morning, I'm talking to all of us. And so I'd remind us of this:

We matter to God no matter what we accomplish for Him. We are special and good not because of what we do for our neighbors, not because of our role in the community around us, not because we have given of ourselves for the good of those around us. God takes pleasure in us simply because we are, simply because we bother--we bother to come together, we bother to stay together, we bother to take the effort to keep meeting together. Our purpose in the world, fundamentally, is not to do, but to be. We exist. And in existing, Smoky Row Brethren Church, the church we together make up...that's enough. It's enough. There was no church here, in this place once, and now there is, and for as long as we gather together as the church we are, then we bring pleasure, hope, and joy to the Lord.

Do you get this? Do you see this? This is fundamental. You're special. We're important. Not because we've achieved anything, not because we've positioned ourselves to be something to someone, but because we've become, we exist. We are God's children, together, and angels rejoice over us, the Spirit dances among us. We are a miracle; not a given, and our presence bears witness to the God who has gathered us together. Everything else, any accomplishment, achievement, thing done for the Lord is bonus.

I say all this because there is a lot of bonus, and I want us to both rejoice in it, but never so deeply depend on it that we can't celebrate simply because we exist.

### ***Bonus! Here***

And there is a lot of bonus. Last year we were driven more deeply into our community than we have ever been before. We saw the expansion of the Community Garden, saw the expansion of the Smoky Row Food Pantry, saw the expansion of the efforts of the Sawmill Interfaith Community Care Gathering. Each of these things in and of themselves would be cause for celebration, and our congregation plays a fundamental, leadership role in each of them. The Food Pantry expanded not only in days of the week its hosted, but in numbers of patrons served and partners brought on board. Help My Neighbor, the 501c3 that Anna and Nondas head, has grown, and its growth has directly impacted the growth of the Food Pantry in turn. Our congregation facilitates, enables, the Sawmill Interfaith Community Care gathering, and we as a congregation partnered in providing meals to children all throughout Worthington Schools during the summer and winter breaks of 2016. Hundreds of children

were fed and families positioned for health in a bunch of different ways, through the connections made directly because of the Sawmill Interfaith Community Care gathering. Our neighborhood is more closely linked, the gaps between people--where needs go unmet and there is silence and loss and trouble and heartache--these were tightened up, and resources were found, directly because Smoky Row intervened this past year to bring churches and non-profits together, nearby. And I could bring us story after story of connection made and hope restored because of your leadership, our leadership, in gathering these people that God has worked through together. They have become our brothers and sisters, our partners, in more than word only, but in deed.

Again; expansion in any one of these efforts would be worth celebrating. Taking them together is exhausting and exhilarating.

But there's things we don't see as much, that I promise we'll hear much more about this coming year. For example, RED Pastoral de Ohio, an organization Rudy helps lead, has made enormous impact in the greater network of Spanish-speaking churches around Columbus, has been as significant as Sawmill Interfaith, although harder for us who, frankly, don't dream in Spanish, to celebrate and engage with.

Our orientation toward a hyper-local engagement has paid off, in that it has positioned us to be intrinsic to the community. If we were torn off, our neighborhood would bleed--not bleed out, because God is bigger than us, but bleed for a long, long time. That isn't our work; that's the Lord's. Plants don't grow their roots by their own strength;

they are given growth by the Lord, and our roots have gone down deep, here; the shade of our branches has grown out wide, and people take rest in it, and we've become intertwined with all that God is growing up around us.

### ***Bonus! Brethren***

In 2016, in our wider Brethren world, our people, Smoky Row people guided Camp Bethany, guided Church Planting in Ohio, we've been serving on the Executive Board of our denomination, we've drafted, planned, and begun to execute an entire restructuring of our denomination, helped guide the ordination of new Brethren pastors, presented for denominational approval a long-overdue update to our Brethren Social Issues position papers--something we'll look at this year, in 2017, together. Rudy has started to create a cluster, a network, of North American, Brethren, Latino congregations, drawing these together for encouragement, support, insight. More than a few of us have taught classes for Ashland Theological Seminary, our denomination's Seminary. Agora continues to grow and discover what it's supposed to be and do further north and further west than we are in Columbus; through our partnerships locally, we were able to help find them a home to meet in at the Redeemer Moravian Church building, through their call two Sundays ago, our building filled up with less Smoke than it had before.

### ***Bonus! A Home***

And every year I think that our building can't possibly be used any more than it is already, and every year I'm chagrined at just how much more God has done with it. We are a home: A home, not only for the Smoky Row Food Panty,

but for Sedona Grace, which continues to grow, too, making sure that the homeless and the hungry can feed the pets that keep them from spiraling into loneliness and fear. Every week people who struggle with substance abuse disorders meet here, and gather safely, and pursue health and healing--two different groups. Capriccio continues to call our space home. And we host a Free Clinic now; every month people are coming through the doors of this building we steward, and leaving it with hope and healing. One of the basic ways the New Testament presents salvation is as healing; and, in that very practical way, people are bumped closer to salvation as they are healed by God's People in these walls. This, like so many other things, isn't our work, but God's, and our partnership with Linworth Road Church is a sign of the way we have engaged whoever will engage us for the work of God's Kingdom. In the next two weeks we'll host a neighborhood Civic Association and an enormous Boy Scout Troop, because they look around, and reach out to us, knowing we'll do what we can to offer ourselves to them. What more are we meant to be?

### ***Bonus! Prophetic Multiculturalism***

And look, we don't have, ourselves, a Spanish-speaking congregation anymore. We don't. And we don't for all sorts of reasons, but like most things, it's largely because of enormous demographic shifts in our immediate area that generally aren't noticed until they pass. These same sociological currents explain the rise of Mandarin-speakers in our Food Pantry, of more English-speaking patrons than ever before. But in our openness to embrace what God is doing in the world around us, we host, now, a Korean-speaking congregation, who have settled in and made their home in our home. Our signs are in three languages, not because it's

easy to get things translated, but because it's necessary to have them be so.

We who steward this property, we who run this address and its goings on, are realizing, as a congregation, our core value of Prophetic Multiculturalism, more than we ever have. And Rudy--through RED Pastoral, through the many contacts and liaisons he makes as our, frankly, go-to Spanish speaker--or, I'll own it, mine--through his growing efforts to be our liaison with Calvary Korean, and the Brethren Latino Network, and his work nurturing our relationship with Palestine Emmanuel Church in Guatemala, is doing more work to support this Core Value than he has in years. And yet, this year we will gather around him as he's ordained, and acknowledge that his work is not nearly as Latino-specific as it once was, and he is far more an Associate Pastor than the Pastor-to-Latinos that we think of him as.

### ***Not For Ourselves:***

We are not for ourselves, you see? You see; I know you do. God has not made us to be a blessing for ourselves, but to be a blessing for everyone who God brings our way. We are more a mission, an embassy for the Kingdom of God, than we have ever been. Our posture has been to pray, and open our hands, and, over time, God's "not yet's" have given way to "now's" and we have been blessed to be a blessing.

### ***Costs:***

But there are costs to this. Our building gets wrecked, man. Just wrecked. And while the past few years have been ones of maintenance catch up, none of us who looks up when we pull into the parking lot can ignore the fact that it's Christ who holds together not only the universe, but our shingles.

May He keep doing so, for a few more years at least. What is nicely painted one month is scuffed the next, and at some point Jayne will have cycled through cleaning the chairs so regularly that she'll have names for each of them. We'll try to intervene before that happens.

### ***Transition:***

What do you do--hypothetically, of course--what do you do, when God seems to invite you into more and deeper engagement with His work in the world without giving you magic buckets of cash to keep things sparkling, shiny, and looking new? You do one of two things, I think: You leave to find a more sparkling place, or you remember that Jesus bled out naked in front of people, and every time we die--even if you come back to life--your body lets go of everything in your gut. What I mean to say is that we may want to become more comfortable with the truth that our building and grounds may not be the shiniest around, but by the mercy of God, they are some of the most powerfully used in our zip code for the good of those who come here, who discover hope and faith and love as they go past the seasonal pond at the end of our driveway.

In this vein, let me talk about our challenges.

### ***Challenges: Vanguard***

I've come to believe that it's small, traditional congregations like ours who are at the vanguard of Christianity in the States. And to be at the vanguard is to be in an unsafe place; it's the place where you learn not from the example of others, but you are the example that others learn from. It calls for faithfulness practiced with certain virtues: You've got

to be nimble, creative, patient in the face of inconvenience. You've got to be able to let a commitment to the common good be more important than a commitment to comfort. To be a church in the vanguard, when all is well, is to be shockingly effective, because you get to do things first, and it's invigorating; when all is not well, it's to be anxious and directionless and to begin to retreat.

I don't want us to be anxious or directionless or to retreat. So let me, with eyes wide open, share what I think is coming this year to us.

But first, some metaphors.

### ***Explanatory Metaphors:***

We already experience the future of small congregations, perhaps congregations at all, in America, which is that we are quickly shifting in our institutional structure from a mainframe model to a network model. Does this make sense at all? What I mean, too fast and unannounced, is this: In a mainframe, the most important thing is the mainframe, the central thing, to which all the nodes connect. Imagine little workstation computers, all tied back into the main central server. The server is what matters most; it goes down, it all goes down. "The center cannot hold." In a distributed network, the nodes and the server have equal importance. You lose one or two nodes, things can hold together. You lose the server, you can hold together, because it's at least partially distributed throughout the network. You lose too much of both, then things get spread to thin,

But this is a metaphor. And metaphors have limits. We aren't a computer system, with a central server and each of us

workstations; we're a family system, built of people who have opinions, gifts, wounds, callings, hobbies, and demands upon our capacity that will only grow.

Our great challenge, for as long as we are in the vanguard, is to figure out how to hold together the institutional infrastructure of our congregation, because it matters. Our building and grounds are critical for our community. This hasn't come about because we're savvy; it's come about because we've invited God to make good out of us.

### ***Emphases:***

I am totally okay with leaning into an institutional structure that is more distributed network than mainframe. It's coming all over; the pinches and troubles that we face because of it are what we ought to expect as a vanguard church. The riddle of this change, though, is how to ensure that our institutional infrastructure is maintained even as this wave of what's coming overtakes us.

A mainframe model emphasizes Sunday Morning things--our worship service and our "Sunday School" stuff--and governance--whatever it is, Deacon Board, Elder Board. These are the servers that everything else a congregation does would be plugged into. (Again; sliding past things; Missions usually is important--90% of what we do would fall in that category, frankly.) But the emphasis is on the centralized thing, particularly on the gathering together during the worship service. Are you all with me. That's the mainframe: The coming together for Sunday worship.

### ***What A Mainframe Accomplishes:***

And that emphasis accomplishes some really, really

important: First of all, it brings in cash. It brings in cash. For all sorts of reasons. Secondly, it reminds people that they are a part of the congregation. What I mean is that participation in the worship service, plugging into that mainframe thing, it enables people to join in solidarity with one another. It creates a sense of “we, together” that doesn’t get lost. Lastly, it keeps people informed about what’s happening with regard to programming, institutional needs, you know--just all the stuff. So that emphasis on the central worship service informs people, gathers them together in a solid way that lasts beyond the service itself, and it brings in cash.

### ***Our Congregational Transition:***

Smoky Row, as the vanguard congregation we are, is shifting away from this mainframe model to a distributed network model. You see what the costs are, right? People have the potential to be less informed, they have the potential to feel less tied to each other as enablers of the institutional, programming efforts of Smoky Row, and they have less in-your-face opportunities to regularly practice the discipline of giving cash toward to our congregational, institutional, maintenance.

Those are challenges that we must discern a way through this coming year.

Now: I’m a network guy. I don’t mind this change; it doesn’t scare me, it doesn’t worry me, my only concern is that we weather it well. But it’s pace is increasing, and in this past year we felt the change in a way we hadn’t before. The Parents moved away, right? For all good reasons. And yet: John and Kim functioned as an important node in our network. They gathered people together, they deeply

contributed to what you can think of as our largest, most-important nodes or small, vestigial mainframes--the Worship Service, and our Governance Team. We experienced, in their transition, what's it like to have a node go out in a network.

God, of course, has brought Amy to us--again, a gift that God worked through the partnerships we have in our community. Her mother, you didn't know, is pastor of Fellowship Lutheran Church, who we've gathered on Good Friday with for years, have blessed Brookside with for years, have helped and been helped by. And I don't want to give away my conclusion, but I believe, if we ask for it, God will always give to us what we need to accomplish his hopes for us here and now and in the days to come, and we receive Amy's talent as a gift.

But, and I say this sensitively, having needs met is not the same as building back up our network. Or, put another way, we are not a computer system, but a family system, and in a family there is no one-to-one replacement, so we miss the Parents, and all that God did through them for our sense of community, even as we rejoice in God bringing others to us, right?

### ***Challenges Posed By Our Congregational Transition:***

So Smoky Row, we're creatively, nimbly, patiently, living into a change in how church is done that will overtake all of North America someday, I am sure of it. And yet we have to figure out how to respond well, with wisdom and grace to the challenges that this change is bringing and bringing quickly. There are people who deeply identify with Smoky Row, but who can only gather on Sunday morning once every six weeks, or two months. Because of work, because their kids

are sick, because they are sick, because life is what it is and brings what it brings, because, in some cases, they are in back caring for our congregation's children for weeks in a row. How do we ensure that they are informed, that they feel as if they are a part of our wider, institutional work? How do we give them an opportunity to provide the cash that funds that work? Each of our Life Groups functions as a node in our network, but even then, many of us are at capacity in terms of what we can simply travel to, no matter how much we'd like to. How do we embrace the truth that someone can feel completely committed to us, and yet we only see them once a month. In a mainframe model that makes no sense; in a network model, it's just not that uncommon.

And yet, if we believe that all we have done has been guided by the hand of God, and our Core Value of Kingdom Building Stewardship matters, then we have to discern ways to support those roots that God is growing deep into our community, the shade and relief that we are providing to countless people. Well, you can count anything, right? Multitudes, then.

### ***Our Greatest Challenge:***

Do you see that our greatest challenge isn't how to get cash. Our greatest challenge isn't how to do more. Our greatest challenge isn't how to make sure the building doesn't fall down. Our greatest challenge this coming year is a sociological one. How do you position a church to thrive during its transition from a mainframe model of institutional structure to a network model. More personally, how will we keep Smoky Row being Smoky Row, responsive to God, in step with our Core Values and Mission? It's the same challenge that we always face, that we've faced for the past

almost-decade I've been walking with us. But it's not an easy challenge.

And here's the rub: The Governance Team has ideas. I have ideas. I could list things: Strategies about ways to strengthen the nodes, about how to provide for means by which individuals can give outside of Sunday morning, etc. But it is not only up to me to discern these things. In a network, despite the importance of certain nodes--and I recognize, completely, my importance in keeping Smoky Row aligned with the Lord, and healthy, I recognize that much of the cash that we give to support the way God works through our institutional programming is funneled to me, in large part so that I might oversee it--but: in a network, every single node matters.

Or, this: In a family, every member matters. In a body, every part matters. And we are brothers and sisters together, a body of many parts, Christ on earth for all people until he returns.

### ***Oh So Practically:***

Very practically, in 2017, we'll need more money or have to embrace some significant cuts to our staffing and capacities not long after. What we pray for, what we believe is important, and where we see God leading us will guide the discussions around this reality. Next week we'll talk more about this. Pray that we might have wisdom and providence to discern how best to thrive through this challenge.

In 2017, more people who we love will transition for very good reasons, which we can celebrate even as we grieve the loss of their easy presence. Some will surprise us, or even

themselves, and we won't expect it; some we'll be well aware of long before they go with our blessing. Pray that we might have wisdom and providence to discern how best to thrive through this challenge.

We'll have more children in 2017, which will tax our already taxed Children's Church structure. And, so, things will be noisier. Meals will be needed. Band-aids and Hot Chocolate mix will be bought in bulk. Pray that we might have wisdom and providence to discern how best to thrive through this challenge.

### ***Seeded, Sprouting, Bearing Fruit:***

Those things that in 2016 were still sprouting, having been tended by us, will possibly bear fruit in 2017. Our relationship with Palestine Emmanuel Church will clarify, and we'll live into it and its blessings. Our work with our Partners--Spanish-speaking partners of RED Pastoral and English-speaking ones of Sawmill Interfaith will grow, and have their various needs, and I, myself, will have to do a better job communicating how these groups depend on us, have need of us, and bless our community in part, through our name. Pray that we might have wisdom and providence to discern how best to thrive through this challenge.

I met this week with a group of people who feel as if God is guiding them to plant a Brethren Church in Westerville, Ohio. Who knows what that will bring this year; but it will bring something. On Friday I took the leaders of First Brethren Church, down in Harrison West, near Victorian Village, to lunch. This year may be the year in which they embrace what is a part of every church's life-cycle, which is their own death, so that something new might be born from their

legacy. This year may be the year in which they embrace, with radical courage, a new way of living in the world. Either way, Smoky Row will help them. We're hosting the last Ohio District Conference of the Brethren Church, and ending it, as we look forward to a new stage of life in the Brethren Church, as our denomination begins to embrace what we have already embraced, which is a structure that is far more network than mainframe. And, in that way, we have not simply led them by example, but again, Smoky Row people have led them in fact, but guiding that process. All of these things will be radical opportunities that present with them radical calls for our leadership, and with these calls, radical challenges for our resources. Pray that we might have wisdom and providence to discern how best to thrive through these challenges.

If we turn to God in prayer, and ready ourselves to respond faithfully, hopefully, and lovingly, to what God brings our way, we can respond to the challenges that face us in a way that is a blessing to us, even as it blesses others. With creativity, nimbleness, and patience--creativity, nimbleness, and patience--we can be a good example to those churches that follow behind us in their race to respond faithfully to the changing culture we share.

We have, this past year, done more than we ever have done before, and this is not from us, but from the God who has always sustained us. I could go on and on about these things: Our first Mission Line in our budget in a decade, The Brethren Church's largest donation to World Relief, as far as I know, our small share in the good done by those people and groups who we support financially...just. So much.

We have been bound to this place in the world, this community, and in turned bound others to it, revealing to them the special needs and opportunities to bless the world that our changing suburban landscape provides for us all. We have joined with God's Church, bravely, and have discovered in the fruit of those partnerships for our neighbors that God was simply waiting for us to reach out, so he could bless us more.

You have been so good, and I am so, so proud to be your pastor. I believe in you, in your capacity to trust God, in your capacity to respond to whatever God has for us. Be creative and nimble and patient in this coming year. Seek to be of one mind, and realize that we are at the front of change, a vanguard, and example for not just angels who peer in at us, but other churches, too. And the character we have as we navigate change bears witness to the God who sustains us far more than the actual things we do, the way we organize ourselves, the achievements we have.

### ***Bonus!***

If the bonus fades away, if all we have is us in this room, remembering that God loves us, that is enough. It has to be enough. God has given us, for a season, far more than we could have asked or imagined; our work has been exhilarating, and occasionally exhausting, and yet...these gains, these gifts, these achievements, what are they? If we can't forget them, hold them in our right hand even as our left reaches out in prayer and trust for God to lead us ever deeper into the truth that we are together his beloved children, and safe...then we've gained nothing. We must always press on to Christ no matter what good we

accomplish.

I will always boast in you. No matter what. I want to boast most, always, in our trust that God is for us not against us, and whatever good we've done has come about as a gift, looked for, prayed for, opened and rejoiced in, sure...but from God, not ourselves. Inexplicable...apart from the simple explanation that God has been good for and with us.

Celebrate each other, celebrate God's work with us in 2017. Wednesday or Thursday, Bo told me, casually, that our Church is the best Church; I honestly think she might be right, and you know what? She isn't impressed at all by how much we've done for the Lord, or how much we will do these coming months. I almost opened my mouth to correct her, to explain that no church is perfect, and you know, whatever. Instead I just said "Yeah. We are."

Pray, please, with me and for us all that the challenges this year brings will be easily met, and whatever we bring when we gather together a year from now, it's wrapped in gratitude for God's providence, praise to a God who has not failed those who need us to be Christ to them, nor failed us as we rely on His strength and His Spirit.