

A Second Look

An Invitation to the Life and Work of Our Community of Faith and Fellowship

A S E C O N D L O O K

S E P T E M B E R 2 0 1 7

Looking for a Great Book? Try the PC(USA) Website -- Really!

Now that nights are growing longer and we turn from our summer frolics, it's time to think about what serious reading we are going to be doing during the coming months. And what do you know? While you're browsing our denomination's website you might stumble across "The Thoughtful Christian", an online bookstore maintained by the Presbyterian Publishing Corporation.

The site sells books and curricula for a host of American Christian denominations and some of them even look like downright fun reads, with titles like *The Gospel According to Bob Dylan* and *Still Christian: Following Jesus Out of Evangelicalism*. There are books for kids, downloadable books and audio books. You can get to the site directly at TheThoughtfulChristian.com.



2 6 1 Y E A R S O F M I N I S T R Y

An Interview with Stephen Phelps, Our Transitional Pastor

Cecilia Blewer conducted this email interview

Q: *What enticed you to come out of retirement to be our transitional pastor? What are you giving up for this?*

I am learning that the decision about what to do with one's time in retirement has unexpected parallels with the decisions of vocation in the prime of young adulthood. In both life situations, many options present themselves, and in both, not much experience with handling the challenges unique to that time of life. The desire to be useful or meaningful drives strong in the soul of age as of youth, but the prospect differs incomparably.

As I fledged my retirement wings in the last couple of years, I was asked to help out here and there, in churches and with non-profit boards. I said "Yes" a lot—which has resulted in a little of a lot of things. That has not proved satisfying. I knew I needed to pare back—else I would never get to the books I want to write.

The request from Leslie Merlin and three Session members to consider serving Second Presbyterian came to me in such an openhearted, thoughtful spirit that I literally could not just say "No." I cherish those



Rev. Stephen Phelps, our transitional pastor, with his wife, Dr. Beth Mount

conversations. Then I reflected long and slow with my wife and some friends. The critical factors in my "Yes" were these: I live nearby, and it seems a deeply human thing to get to know the people and the whole character of the place where one lives. Yet I could only have gotten to "Yes" with a congregation as open minded as I sense you are—eager to apply your intelligence to what matters, to inquire, and to seek justice. Last, I have been writing and communicating through sermons for over thirty years—and so many friends have encouraged me to think that the work is not done.

Now . . . What do I give up in order to do this? Well—the option to decide

what church to attend each Sunday. I will not go to as many meetings of the boards I sit on. More important, I will suspend work on a book for the time being. I believe the hiatus will help, actually. Also, I will push toward the back of the shelf the question of what the rest of this life is for. It is an inevitable question, but it's all right just to regard it, like a fire in the hearth.

Q: *You've been an interim pastor in the past. What would you like to tell us about our present moment in our congregation's history?*

Congregations commonly experience attrition when their pastor is not "permanent." The response is understandable. Some miss the former pastor too much. Some only want to put their oar in the water when they have a sense where the boat is going. For some, the short term of a pastor who will soon be gone again does not fit with the emotional and psychic investment they want and need to make in their church. their oar in the water when they have a sense where the boat is going. For some, the short term of a pastor who will soon be gone again does not fit with the emotional and psychic investment they want and need to make in their church. Of course, most people do not withdraw during a transition—yet it can be helpful to gain a sense for why some do. In my experience, many people can make profound discoveries about themselves and their church during a transition.

.....continued on reverse.....

Second Presbyterian Church

Sanctuary: 6 West 96th Street/Office: 3 West 95th Street

212-749-1700 / www.secondpresbyteriannyc.org

Rev. Stephen H. Phelps, Transitional Pastor

Worship at 10:15 am Sundays

Seeking a better world together

Perhaps this is because all of a human life—unlike the animals’— must involve, consciously or not, learning to letting go. Those who go about learning relinquishment come to know blessing in deep ways. Bitter, cramped souls, by contrast, are forever trying to grab something. The time of transition in a church presents a compact opportunity for practice in the lessons we most need along the way. Clearly, these thoughts do not identify a challenge unique to this congregation. On that question, I have yet to learn.

Q: What will you be focusing on as you work with us part-time over the next few months? One of the tasks of an interim pastor is to “learn the system.” The word system refers to the complex lifeways, habits, customs, and unwritten rules of the church as an organization. These can never be comprehended completely by anyone, but I will give it a start — partly to give reflections from a new perspective to the Session and its committees; partly to help the congregation as a whole grow in their spiritual sensing of the future that must come.

As a pastor-theologian, I have always sought to dig up and turn over the orthodoxies of the Protestant tradition. Left unexamined, trodden by centuries of convention, the old words tend to dull creative and just responses to the world as it really is. In a series of sermons, I intend to think through with you the most basic teachings of the

Christian tradition in ways that lift up the communion of our lives, our bodies, and the earth with “the things above.” There is only one thing, after all.

Q. What do you like to do for recreation? Two or three times a week (when it is not winter), I can be found just after dawn cycling twice around the Central Park loop. I’ve been recording my times for a few years. Guess what? Slower each year. For almost 40 years, I have also enjoyed a long fall trek by foot or canoe in the Adirondacks — a few days alone in the deep woods when no one else is passing along the trails. The retreat has for me a spiritual function, a centering on the passage of time.

Q. Tell us a little about your wife... For more than 40 years, Beth — Dr. Beth Mount— has devoted her professional life to the possibilities and capacities of people with developmental disabilities. In her doctoral thesis, she first named and developed the concept “person-centered planning” with the aim of drawing every person and part of the developmental disabilities world—from politicians and bureaucrats to clients, their families, and their support staff— into a vision for communities that support, employ, and enjoy every person in response to their abilities, not their disabilities. She uses art—magical quilts, really—as one of the tools of her beautiful, transformative trade.



Music at Second - Something to Sing About

We will be welcoming our new Minister of Music, Eunjung Ahn, who will begin her service with us on Monday, October 2. Many of you remember meeting her and her family when she came to be our guest musician last Spring.

During September we will hear special music during the interlude between the children’s sermon and the main sermon as the children leave and the adults prepare for the scripture and sermon. There will be no choir or choir practice during September.

The choir is seeking new members. Please speak Susan Gordon-Clark of the Worship & Music Committee if you are interested in learning more.

September 2017 Calendar

*Elaine Song is worship co-ordinator for September
Janet Brown is deacon co-ordinator for Coffee Hour*

Sunday, September 10, 10:15 am, morning worship. Rev. Stephen Phelps preaching; Barbara Winn and Susan Gordon-Clark, guest musicians.

Sunday, September 17, 10:15 am, morning worship. Rev. Stephen Phelps preaching; Kathryn Schneider, guest musician.

Sunday, September 24, 10:15 am, morning worship. Rev. Stephen Phelps preaching; Susanna Nason, guest musician. 11:45 am, meeting of Members Ministering to Each Other, classroom upstairs.

Saturday, September 30: deadline for RSVP to October 3 party for Leslie Merlin. *Look for your invitation by email or mail if you don’t use email.*

Save the Dates.....

Sunday, October 1, 11:00 am World Communion Sunday with the Chinese Church. Luncheon follows. We are responsible for bringing desserts.

Tuesday, October 3, 5:00 - 7:30 at Acqua Restaurant - Party honoring Rev. Leslie Merlin.

Saturday, October 7, 2:00 - Memorial Service for Mimi Lewis, Bram Lewis’s mother.

Back To School At ARS

The Alexander Robertson School has been a hive of activity as teachers and students return to classrooms that our dear Mr. Rinat has been working hard all summer to paint and spiff up. The main worry is making enough space for all our new families! Thirty-four and counting, from every corner of the globe: India, China, Kazakhstan, Finland and Ireland, to name just a few. We anticipate opening with 78 students! We’ve had to hire some classroom assistants to help the teachers with their expanding rolls.

Joan Harrison,
Director of Admissions &
Community Relations, ARS

The facade of the church is getting a cleaning! From September 5-16, Kärcher manufacturer and provider of cleaning equipment and services, is donating its services to us as part of its cultural sponsorship program to restore and preserve historical monuments and buildings and support non-profit organizations. Monuments like the Miller Mausoleum at Green-Wood Cemetery, Mount Rushmore and the Space Needle have been part of the initiative in which Kärcher performs the cleaning. We are very grateful.