

“Responding to God’s Call”
Isaiah 49:6

As I said last week, my plan today is to tell you about the journey I’ve been on with the Lord Jesus these past few months. First, how He called me to the new work as Stated Clerk of our denomination, and second, why I’m so confident for you in the weeks and months ahead.

First, the journey I’ve been on. The General Assembly is the national meeting of our church. At the General Assembly meeting in June of 2005, Mike Glodo, the current Stated Clerk, announced that he was going to leave his position when his term expired at the end of 2006. I was very surprised when a number of colleagues and friends approached me about succeeding Mike. My reply to all of them was the same: “You’re crazy, and I’d be crazy to take the position. I have a good situation at First EPC, and I have no interest in leaving.” Later in the summer I was asked to serve on the Stated Clerk Search Committee. I agreed thinking, “This will work perfectly! If I’m on the search committee, I can’t be a candidate for the position.” At our second search committee meeting in October, it was decided that if a member of the committee became a candidate, he’d have to resign from the committee. So much for my “perfect” plan! In November I was formally asked to become a candidate for the position. Cindy and I talked and prayed about it. There were a number of reasons why my reply was an emphatic “NO.” One of my objections was that the Stated Clerk is the “chief administrative officer of the denomination.” I know I have administrative abilities that a lot of pastors don’t have, but I have little interest in doing administrative work. I “did my time” doing administrative work when I was the Executive Pastor for six years at my previous church in Washington, D.C.

A few months went by, and the Search committee began a conversation with Luder Whitlock, a good friend of mine who is the former President of Reformed Theological Seminary. During the time we were talking to Luder, it became clear to all of us that the Stated Clerk position needed to be changed from an administrative position to a position that focuses on executive leadership for our denomination. When Luder said he did not feel called to the position in mid-May, the chairman of the Search committee approached me again, this time asking if I was simply willing to talk to the committee about the position. After Cindy and I talked and prayed about it, we let him know in late May that we’d be willing to do that, simply talk to the committee. We thought that there was no harm in talking. I was quite ambivalent about the position, as I have a good, healthy, and fruitful situation here. I didn’t need to leave or want to leave this church. That all began to change on Tuesday, June 20. On that day I flew into Atlanta and rented a car to drive to Rome, Georgia, to attend the 2006 General Assembly. At sunset, as I was driving through the middle of Atlanta, I casually glanced over to the west to take in the skyline. Unexpectedly, my gaze focused on one building, the Peachtree Hotel. At that instant, a conversation I had had 20 years ago came to mind. In 1986 Rob Norris, the Senior Pastor at Fourth, and I had gone on a tour to check out the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) and the Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC). At the time we were in the PCUSA (the mainline Presbyterian denomination) and had decided to leave that denomination. At the top of the Peachtree while on that trip we talked about what we believed the Lord was calling us to in the next 30-40 years. Rob said, “I just want to preach the Gospel.” When he asked me the same question, I said, “I want to build the church.” He asked, “You mean you want to build churches?” I replied, “I have no interest in bricks and mortar (famous last words). I want to be a part of the church Jesus Christ is building in this country and in the world.” All that, largely forgotten, came back to me in an instant. In the next month I felt I had a

heightened sense of the Lord leading my path, but I couldn't identify any more moments like that experience in Atlanta.

Having realized I had forgotten about that conversation 20 years ago, I wondered if there were other events or encounters I needed to try to remember. What repeatedly came to mind was a portion of Leighton Ford's book, *Transforming Leadership – Jesus' Way of Creating Vision, Shaping Values and Empowering Change*. The section that kept coming to mind was in the chapter on seeking God's vision for your life. Ford argued that the leader must not despise small beginnings. He cited the Parable of the Mustard Seed as an example of how small beginnings, if they're God's small beginnings, can be magnified abundantly. Then Ford wrote that the leader must not settle for less than the greatest dream God gives you. The passage he used to back this up was in the book of Isaiah, where God says, "It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob." That's all I could remember. Many times in July I tried to find the verse in Isaiah, but couldn't. I had misplaced Ford's book, so I couldn't find it there either. On Sunday, July 23, Ed Randall preached. I had helped finalize the order of service and had noticed the unusual title of Ed's message ("Amplificate") and text (Isaiah 49:1-6), but didn't give it any more thought. At the 11:15 service that day I assisted Ed, then went to sit with Cindy as Ed got up to read the Scripture. As I fumbled with my Bible turning to the text, Ed announced he would read only Isaiah 49:6, which says, "God says: 'It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.'" When I heard those words, I stopped and I just slumped over. Cindy saw this and interpreted it as my body physically submitting to what the Lord was calling me to. That's when I knew in my heart and mind and soul that God had called me to this new position.

I know many of you are asking, "What on earth is a Stated Clerk, and what does he do?" If you looked at a business model, you might say that my new position will be similar to a Chief Executive Officer (CEO). At the national level, I am going to provide leadership for our denomination. But then you may ask, "In the EPC, does that mean you're like a bishop or, (and this is a real favorite in my house right now) – Are you the Pope of the EPC?" My answer is no, I'm not like a bishop or a Pope. The Presbyterian system is not hierarchical, no officer of the church is considered greater than any other. All elders are considered equal. As Stated Clerk, I will have responsibility and influence that affect the church nationally. But I do not have any special authority because I'm simply an elder of the church working with all the other elders of the church. I have three key responsibilities awaiting me on October 9. First, I need to be the champion for the vision the Lord has for churches in our denomination in the 21st century. Much of what the leadership of this church (First EPC) has done in the last two years, as we've sought and identified and pursued God's vision for us and addressed what it means to be the church of Jesus Christ in a mission field is what needs to happen in churches throughout the EPC. So at that place, First EPC is a major leader in our denomination. My responsibility will be to articulate and promote that vision in our churches. That's going to put me on the road a lot, as I'll be traveling to our churches and presbytery meetings throughout the United States. Second, I will be the "face and voice" of the EPC as we interact with churches in other denominations. A growing number of churches outside the EPC are in denominations with which they are very dissatisfied. The EPC, with our commitment to orthodox biblical and reformed theology and ministry that sees our world, country, and community as a mission field to evangelize with the good news of Jesus Christ, is very attractive to those churches. So I'll be responding to churches in denominations to the right and left of us who are interested in our denomination. Third, I need to re-organize the Office of

the General Assembly. Our current staff structure at the GA office is very “20th century.” We need to be sure our staff at the national level reflects what God’s doing in our presbyteries and churches and is supportive of His work out there. That’s the journey I’ve been on, and the new opportunity that awaits me.

My second point is the reason I have such confidence for you in the future. I’m a strong believer that if the Lord calls you to a new opportunity, He also brings your call at your current work to an end. I saw that happen in late June and early July as well. Two events stand out; I have time to share one (which is the most important one) with you. On Tuesday, July 11, we held our monthly meeting of the Session. It was a good meeting. But as I went to bed that night I felt anxious for some reason. I prayed Philippians 4:6-7: “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all human understanding, will guard your heart and your mind in Jesus Christ.” I tried to go to sleep, but had an awful night. About 4:30 I woke up and I started praying, asking God to show me the problem. I’ve found over the years that often it’s not enough to simply pray when I’m anxious. I need to identify what I’m anxious about and give that to the Lord. Soon I realized what it was. I was afraid for what would happen if God called me to leave First EPC: “How could you possibly survive in my absence? What if the bottom dropped out? What if, what if, what if?” As I was saying all this to myself, Jesus interrupted me and said, “Jeff, you’ve made it known to everyone here these past 12 years that I am the head of my church. As I’m calling you to leave, you need to practice what you preached.” Since early Tuesday morning on July 12, I have enjoyed a great peace, a peace that surpasses all human understanding, and great confidence for you in the months ahead. You have a beautiful building on a highly visible property, you have great leadership in your Session, Deacons, and Trustees, your staff, and on your search committees. But most importantly, supremely, you have a great Lord and Head of this church. He loves you. He loves His church here. He will assert Himself in the coming months to bless and encourage and guide and provide for you, for the work here He gave His very life for!