

July 19, 2023 | Waynesboro, Virginia | *a newsletter supplement*

A purposeful gathering

Presbyterian Outlook Editor and Publisher Terri McDowell Ott
considers the question, "What does it look like to gather people with intention?"

PRESBYTERIAN OUTLOOK, June 29. Last week I threw a party with a purpose — a gathering of women (none of whom knew each other well) for community building and conversation beyond the superficial.

I was not a chill host. I scheduled an opening welcome and a prepared closing. I arranged the chairs on my back porch in a tight circle to encourage conversation of the whole. I asked each woman to RSVP with a picture of themselves doing something they love, wrote short introductory bios and sent them with the photos, to start building community before we gathered. My guests were to bring a book to give away — a book that was personally meaningful, or beautiful, or inspired a positive change.

The book I gave away inspired the party — Priya Parker's [The Art of Gathering](#). Parker is a trained facilitator in Sustained Dialogue, a process of repairing fractured relationships across racial, ethnic and religious lines. Her expertise led her to study, design, and advise gatherings that were transformative for the people involved and their communities.

Parker cites research revealing that our gatherings with others are often disappointing. We long to belong, to be known and understood, to love and be loved. Our souls yearn for passion and purpose. Yet when we gather, we barely skim the surface of our humanity, fear digging into deeper questions of faith and doubt, and spend a lot of time small talking.

"We spend our lives gathering," Parker writes, "first in our families, then in neighborhoods and playgroups, schools and churches, and then in meetings, weddings, town halls, conferences, reunions, and funerals. And we spend much of that time in uninspiring, underwhelming moments that fail to capture us, change us in any way, or connect us to one another."

As I read, I kept thinking of all the applications Parker's book has for the church. My husband and I have a friend, an academic and an atheist, who regularly attends his local Presbyterian church. When asked why a nonbeliever gathers with this community of faith, he says it's the only place he can find where people talk about things that really matter. *continued*



McDowell Ott.

A purposeful gathering, *continued*.

Of course, this isn't always the case. We can all think of church gatherings that were bereft of purpose. I've gathered for church, and even led services, where I left wondering why I made the effort to go at all; gatherings that lacked imagination, leadership, structure — gatherings that inspired no risk to venture deeper.

People gather in our churches for a host of reasons. Most include some version of what my atheist friend describes: time spent that matters, or to be inspired by what matters, or to feel as if they matter themselves. Superficialities can't feed these hungry people.

Parker insists that the laidback, chill host, is not a good host. Not giving thought to the purpose and structure of your gathering is selfish; a shirking of responsibility that saddles guests with the work of creating their own meaningful experience. When planning gatherings, Parker adds, avoid reducing a human challenge to a logistical one — focusing less on what we do with people than what we do with things (food, flowers, PowerPoint, AV equipment). Her book gives practical advice and strategies for gathering people in ways that can transform a tedious, deadening event into an opportunity for real talk and unforgettable moments of beautiful connection.

As each of my guests shared why they chose the book they brought to give away, I marveled at their candor and the vulnerability shared in such a short amount of time. People leaned into my party experiment, ready to go deeper and connect with others, even though they'd just met. After my closing, one new friend said, "I feel like we just accomplished something." These words were gratifying. I'd worked hard to pull the party together. And the inspiring connections, made with and between my guests, were worth the effort. *(Editor's note: The Rev. Ann Pettit was one of the guests at this gathering.)*

Music Notes for July 9.

We welcome guest accompanist **Charles Simpkins** this week, as Roger and Kimberlea are away celebrating their 35th wedding anniversary. We are grateful for his musical presence in worship.

WORSHIP THIS WEEK:

GENESIS 25: 19-26

GENESIS 25: 27-34

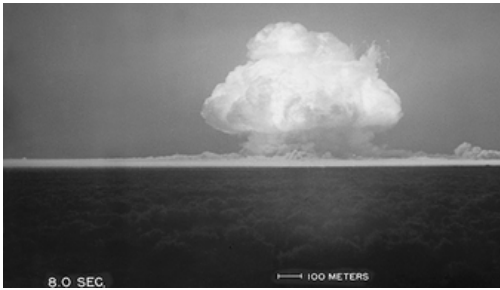
SERMON: A STORY OF GRACE.

OUR WORSHIP CHANNELS

CLICK ON THE LOGOS



This Week in History.



A plutonium device, called "Gadget," is detonated in the desert of New Mexico, creating a mushroom cloud 41,000 feet high, emitting heat three times the temperature of the interior of the sun, and destroying all plant and animal life within a mile.

July 16, 1945



In the Russian town of Ekaterinburg in Siberia, former Czar Nicholas II, his wife Alexandra, and their five children are brutally murdered by Bolsheviks.

July 17, 1909



French impressionist painter Edgar Degas is born in Paris.

July 19, 1834



Apollo 11 astronaut Neil Armstrong leaves the Lunar Module 'Eagle' and becomes the first person to step onto the surface of the moon.

July 20, 1969



Bank robber John Dillinger is killed by FBI agents as he leaves the Biograph Theater in Chicago, IL.

July 22, 1934

Current Line of Succession

- 1 - Vice President
- 2 - Speaker of the House
- 3 - Senate President Pro Tempore
- 4 - Secretary of State
- 5 - Secretary of the Treasury
- 6 - Secretary of Defense
- 7 - Attorney General
- 8 - Secretary of the Interior
- 9 - Secretary of Agriculture
- 10 - Secretary of Commerce
- 11 - Secretary of Labor
- 12 - Secretary of Health and Human Services
- 13 - Secretary of House and Urban Development
- 14 - Secretary of Transportation
- 15 - Secretary of Energy
- 16 - Secretary of Education
- 17 - Secretary of Veterans Affairs
- 18 - Secretary of Homeland Security

President Harry Truman signs an Executive Order determining the line of succession if the president becomes incapacitated or dies in office. Following the vice president, the speaker of the house and president of the Senate are next in succession.. This later became the 25th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

July 18, 1947



Spain cedes the island colony of Guam to the United States .

July 21, 1899