

Jan Koczera is a retired Army chaplain who writes about an experience he encountered in the so-called Green zone in Baghdad, Iraq. The Green Zone, of course, was the area inside Iraq where the US military set up as their central command. It was heavily fortified but they were under constant threat.

Whenever Chaplain Koczera and his assistant would drive around the Green Zone, they would pass by the 215 towers. The 215 towers were a group of apartments about 12-15 stories high that stood brown and stark against the dusty Baghdad skyline. Their balconies were always empty, and no figures were ever seen against the windows. Their only signs of inhabitation were an occasional mat thrown over a railing or a satellite dish clinging to a wall.

There were people there, Iraqi civilians who had lived in the area before the war and were cut off now from the rest of Baghdad in the Green Zone. Most of them worked for the US military as laborers or owned small restaurants or shops in the area. Some went through the checkpoints every day to work in the larger city. There were about 1000 people in these apartments.

Someone in the US military came up with a great idea. These people appeared so isolated and their existence was so cheerless. And there were families there with children. In fact, there were lots of children. What about a playground? The ground was bare, broken concrete, weeds, and an occasional dusty palm tree.

A playground would provide a beautiful community center for the Iraqis and fill the air with laughter of children. The Americans missed the sound of children since they had left their own families to spend the year in Iraq.

So funding applications were made for a grant for community development and dollars were spent, and some companies even donated playground equipment. It was constructed by American contractors and engineers. Only the best equipment and materials were used, to the best safety standards, and it was all anchored in concrete.

It was dedicated with great ceremony by American and Iraqi officials. The officials left that afternoon feeling good about they had accomplished.

The next morning the American officials were thunderstruck. Overnight, the entire playground was destroyed, broken down, carried away, and sold for scrap by the Iraqis. The Americans were furious. Why did the Iraqis show such ungratefulness to the generosity of the Americans? Words were shared among the Americans about how the Iraqis didn't care about anything that the Americans had ever done for them.

So the Americans approached the leadership of the 215 towers and asked them how this could have occurred. Why did they allow this to happen? The Iraqis replied with these words. "We never asked for this playground. Why would we want it? Snipers and rockets and mortars fire into the Green Zone. If our children use it, they will be killed. This is a dangerous place and we must keep our children safe.

In his reflection about this incident in 2008, Chaplain Koczera says that in all the work, in all the thought, and in all the planning, it hadn't even entered anyone's mind to simply ask the Iraqis what they wanted and how they would like the Americans to help their children. What use is a playground in the middle of a battlefield?

I share this story to illustrate a point. The point being that sometimes people in leadership roles in an organization don't have the answers. Sometimes their answers to problems are not the best solutions. Sometimes, many times, the solutions don't lie within those who the organization has blessed as its leaders. Sometimes, many times, the answers to problems facing the organization lie within the body at large.

Two weeks ago, your Session gathered to envision where we see this church one year from now. We engaged in a process where we read several Scriptures together and discussed what we believe these Scriptures have to say to us. We talked about our past, we talked about our present. We talked about where we have personally been most alive within this body of believers. We prayed. We also ate.

We looked at several areas in the church and we asked ourselves, “What do we see in one year?” We envisioned what the facility looks like, we envisioned what our mission looks like, we envisioned what our Christian Education looks like. And then we were asked to form teams of people to work out the details to get us to the places where we believe that God is calling us to go. You can find this list in the newsletter which was emailed out and mailed out last week.

One of the areas which we spent a lot of time on was this question. “What does worship look like in one year at ACPC?” And this is what the Session saw concerning worship. We saw a full band, we saw a choir in which all of these seats are filled, we saw a diversity of people leading the worship service, we saw a full sanctuary with a diversity of ages where finding a seat for Sunday morning worship would be a problem. We saw a worship service where people felt that in worship they were truly experiencing God. That is what your Session says they see in one year in January of 2013.

So now the challenge before us is how to get from where we are now to where we believe God is calling us to go. Your Session and your worship leaders are open to hearing from others in how to get to this place where we are called to go. I say this because I sat in a worship committee meeting on Wednesday night and followed that up with sitting with folks from the choir. We all recognize that we cannot keep doing the things we have always been doing.

And those results are a small number of very dedicated and very talented choir members and a small number of very dedicated band members. There are artists in this congregation and community whose talents are not being used to glorify our worship space.

According to our Book of Order in the Presbyterian Church, in worship believers in Jesus Christ are transformed and renewed. Through the act of worship, we are to be transformed and renewed. Are we doing what we can so that as we leave worship we are transformed and renewed? Is our worship leading to the renewal and transformation of new people?

I am not going to now lead into trying to guilt people into coming to choir practice or band practice on Wednesday night at 7 pm. But I am here to say that maybe the way we have planned worship and maybe the way we have asked for people to volunteer is not working. Maybe our structure for worship leadership which goes back lots and lots of years is a structure which no longer works in a world where people have family commitments in the evenings, where people commute long distances, where technology which allows you to view anything you want whenever you want, and technology which allows someone to stay constantly connected to people important to them.

Maybe we need to look at some new ways to plan and lead worship so that renewal and transformation occurs in a way which we may not be able to see right now.

So what am I asking you to do? In reflecting back to the Scripture which we read, I believe that there are lights to awareness that exist in the body. The ideas may come from odd places. The ideas may be found within odd people.

Some of you will have opinions as you leave worship today. You are people who think as you talk. Others of you need time to think and pray.

So what I ask is that those of you who find vision as you talk, seek out someone that you like to talk to. Think outside the box. If you have a friend who lives in Oregon and your best ideas come from talking to that person on the phone or on Skype, then call that person or Skype them or whatever.

Some of you find your best wisdom when you meet with your kin folks somewhere. Wherever that is. Bring up this conversation with your people and say, this is what I see in worship at ACPC and I am wondering what we can do to move forward where we expand upon our worship leadership and ideas for worship.

Some of you are people who find your greatest wisdom when you are alone or reading a book or in meditation. Some of you will need days and weeks and maybe longer to find answers. Go to those places which feed you with this opportunity in front of you.

And at some point, communicate to someone in a leadership position in this church that you trust. That could be anyone you see up here, it could be someone on Session, it could be me.

I was reading this week about a company whose research and development people came up with a great new invention. It was called digital photography. But this new product did not fit with what they had always done. Digital photography did not help its main product. Therefore, upper management decided to stick with what had worked for this company for the past 100 years and that made the company lots and lots of money. If it ain't broke, don't fix it. That company is the Eastman Kodak Company. They are now in bankruptcy and have laid off about 50,000 people.

I hope it goes without saying that what we all need to be doing as we ask these questions is to ask for God's Holy Spirit to guide us. Ultimately it we are to move forward, the wisdom does not come from us. It comes from God. And if we are open to God's Holy Spirit to guide us, then we will not ultimately fail.

Blessings upon all of us as we seek to listen to what God's Holy Spirit is revealing to us in worship. AMEN.

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-Koczera, Jan, "Playgrounds on the Battlefield," *Presbyterian Outlook*, 2/6/2012

-"What's Wrong with This Picture: Kodak's 30-year Slide into Bankruptcy," <http://knowledge.wharton.upenn.edu/article.cfm?articleid=2935>

-Mark 4: 21-25

-Given: February 5, 2012 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)