

①

When doing laundry, I doubt that many of us consider the impact of the soap we use. Most likely we select one based on fragrance or what's on sale, but since about a quarter of our water usage in the average home goes down the drain as we wash, we might want to consider how it impacts our world. One ingredient in some soap helps reduce

the surface tension of oil and water, allowing the stains and water to amalgamate, making stains removable. However, surfactants degenerate the protective mucus layer that coats fish, protecting them from parasites and bacteria. Taking away this mucus layer is like removing a human's immune system, leaving them defenseless.¹

One company in the 1980s began thinking about these issues as they formed a mail-order company specializing in water- and energy-saving products.

They explain that the name for their company was inspired by an ancient Iroquois philosophy which instructs that "in our every deliberation, we must consider the impact of our decisions on the next seven generations." This credo guides us in every product we make, and every action we take. It inspires our belief in a seventh generation to come.

You may have heard of their products, known as Seventh Generation, a name that guides all their decisions. They state that

The health of future generations depends on the action we take today. Our children & their children need us to live up to the promise of our name – and we will, because we truly believe in the seventh generation to come and think about them in every decision we make.²

How many of us think about seven generations beyond us? Sometimes it's difficult to plan for just next week! When we also begin to envision how to plan for our church, we often discover it's difficult to plan for a future we can't see—not just seven generations, but even for just one generation into the future.

That may be what the writer to the church in Colossae had in mind as well, for those worshipers could not see the future of the early forming church. Paul had written to other churches embroiled in conflict, especially the church in Corinth that seemed to have been arguing about everything. The letter to the Colossians, however, doesn't address immediate issues of church conflicts, but the writer did seem

②

aware of the precarious nature of the world around them. As one commentary noted:

The future that church faced was going to be challenging, perhaps even frightening at times. The gospel, along with the churches it spawned, was becoming more visible and viable, and was therefore a formidable threat to other, competing ideologies. Because early Christians were becoming a public and growing enterprise on the way to becoming a public institution, they inevitably would be viewed with suspicion by other religions and philosophies and finally by the empire itself.³

How does one plan for the future when the surrounding culture doesn't appreciate you—or may even ignore you?! I think that's a question we still struggle with today, isn't it? It's hard to make plans for our congregation for the next generation, let alone for seven generations!

The letter to the Colossians offered suggestions for planning for a future they could not see—a letter that speaks to us as well in our church. What might we hear in this ancient letter that encourages us today?

First, the letter begins with a greeting of grace and peace. The Greek word χάρις (charis) translated as *grace* means kindness, gift. The word is used five times in this letter, though in the entirety of the New Testament, we find this tiny word used 148 times. The word is paired in this letter with εἰρήνη (eirene)—peace, freedom from worry. Wouldn't that be nice to have—a gift of kindness and freedom of worry? Imagine if we greeted everyone with kindness and freedom of worry. That's not only good for the church today, but an ingredient in preparing for the future church as well.

Next, the letter informed the readers that they have been praying for them and giving thanks. Imagine how our church could have an impact if we prayed for and gave thanks for everyone we came into contact with! That's good for today and the future.

Third, the writer suggested that we live worthy and fruitful lives that offer good works to the world. These words remind me of what the 16th-century mystic Teresa of Avila said:

3

*Christ has no body but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
Compassion on this world,
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,
Yours are the eyes, you are his body.
Christ has no body now but yours.*

Serving one another and the surrounding community not only helps today's church, but offers hope for the church of the future.

And fourth, the writer suggested that God will provide the strength we need to endure all sorts of struggles by offering the blessing "may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Father."

The letter seems to suggest that preparing a church with an uncertain future we cannot see won't

always be easy. The letter doesn't provide a promise for lots of members or financial stability, but it does offer us a vision for the future. We prepare with kindness, grace, prayers of thanksgiving, good works, and trusting in God to get us through the struggles. Just imagine walking into a place filled with these ingredients. Wouldn't you want to be there?

Imagine with me what these actions might look like. How might you offer these ingredients either here in our church or the community where you live? *(Pause for responses.)*

Those ingredients will last more than a generation—maybe even for seven generations. That's how we prepare for an uncertain future. Let's offer your ideas not only to those who walk through our doors, but to all those we greet each day. That's how we plan for the future we cannot see.

¹ <https://ourenvironment.ac.nz/2019/05/19/the-environmental-impacts-of-laundry-detergent>

² www.seventhgeneration.com/blog/more-than-a-name

³ John M. Buchanan, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship*, Year 3, Vol. 3.