

# Fuller Seminary president calls Presbyterians to live faithfully as exiles

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Carmen Fowler LaBerge

DETROIT, Mich. — Dr. Mark Labberton, Presbyterian minister and president of Fuller Theological Seminary, set forth a vision of church living today as God’s people in an exilic reality. He used the Old Testament book of Daniel, which he described as being “held prisoner not by the lion’s den but by the felt-board,” to help the church see what a faithful witness in exile looks like.

He said that too many people view the faithful life as lived in the promised land. Acknowledging that the ultimate promise of God that His people will live with Him in the promise of heaven, the reality of life on earth is as much about living in exile. Daniel helps us understand what it looks like to establish ourselves as a peculiar people who live faithfully “no matter whose house we’re living in.”



Dr. Mark Labberton

With wit and wisdom, Labberton continued his Bible lesson. Daniel 2, he said, begs the question, “When the oppressor has a spiritual crisis are God’s people willing to,” (referencing Jeremiah 29), “seek the shalom of the city?”

Ultimately, Labberton said, Daniel 3 is about “the mesmerizing rhythms.”

“Idolatry always works best in mesmerizing rhythms,” and, Labberton contends, “mesmerizing rhythms are a common human captivity.”

## The greater danger is not the fire

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were not captivated by the mesmerizing rhythm of worshipping the image of an idol set up in Babylon. They knew that the fire was not the greater danger. Evidenced by their response to Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 3: 16, “we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter.”

The perspective of faith in the faithfulness of God to redeem them either from the fire or from a life captivity through the fire set them utterly free. “They were free to live faithfully in exile,” Labberton said.

The freedom of the exilic life, he said, is “unhooked life in the midst of mesmerizing rhythms” of the idolatry of our day.

The professor instructed his audience about the purpose of exile as a tool of discipline by God. Israel’s exile was not the fault of the Babylonians no more than the Church’s post-Christendom exile is the fault of non-believing people today. “We get to exile,” Labberton contended, “because we are participants in a

world where God's people have failed."

Our current context is not that of the promised land but "we are minority in a setting where we worship a peculiar God and do peculiar things," Labberton encouraged.

Turning his attention to the issues confronting the PCUSA and noting the departure of many friends and colleagues to other expressions of the Presbyterian family of denominations, Labberton said, "I'm not going to ECO because I don't see any seam that separates us in any way." Continuing he said, "We are part of the same social reality."

The question Labberton would have Presbyterians and all Christians ask is how can I live as a peculiar person in Christ "whatever house I happen to dwell in?"

All of the things that separate us "are real," Labberton acknowledged, but then added, "but what's more real is living unhooked from the mesmerizing rhythms of our" preferred partisan idolatry.

"The greater danger is the idolatry, not the fire," he repeated.

## Idolaters Anonymous

He then confessed that "my idolatry is not the idolatry of statues, is the idolatry of wanting reality my way — the way I want reality to be and then whining when it's not." Continuing, Labberton said, "What I want to be is to be set free from that idolatry and bow down to the Lord of all reality."

The professor/pastor then asked, "Are we hungry to be faithful to only one God? ... Do we want to live in freedom, following an enemy loving God?"

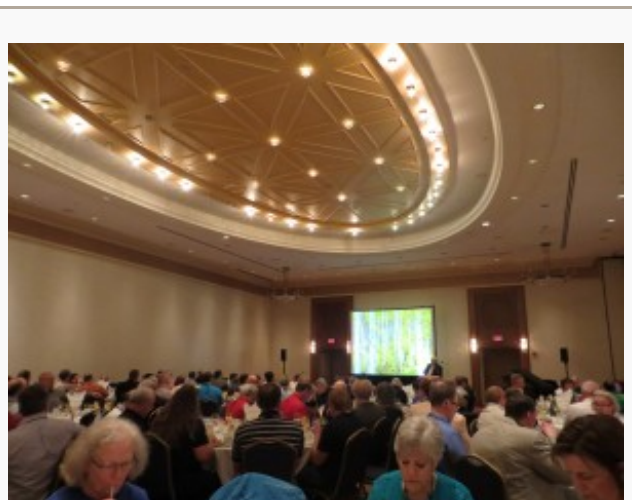
Admitting that doing so "does not solve the problems of dislocation," Labberton challenged the PFR/FOP audience to embrace the reality of "dislocation as the place where God's people are meant to be." He contends that we are not called to leave but to live a faithful, dislocated life in the exilic reality of our generation.

Labberton is the president of Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California, the author of several books and an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church (USA).

Presbyterians for Renewal and the Fellowship of Presbyterians have recently announced the merger of their two organizations. Paul Detterman has been serving as the executive director of both PFR and FOP for the past year. The president of PFR is Bill Teng and the president of the FOP is Jim Singleton. They will hold a national gathering in Dallas in August, in partnership with ECO: A Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians.



Paul Detterman leads the gathering in worship.



The FOP/PFR breakfast held Wednesday morning.