

Summer officially starts on June 20. For most people though Memorial Day marks the beginning of the summer season. I want to challenge you to do three things this summer.

1) Go outside. Somewhere in the past few days I read an article – or maybe it was a blog post - that talked about Shinrin-yoku. It's a Japanese term that means "taking in the forest atmosphere" or "forest bathing." Although in some ways it seems kind of hokey, I think there is something special about being out in the forest or even just being outside, taking a walk, watching a river, or gardening. As I said in my sermon on Trinity Sunday, creation points us to God. It is one of the ways God reaches out to us. West Virginia is blessed with abundant forests, beautiful state parks, and lots of streams and rivers. So let's take advantage of the summer and get outside. Let's enjoy the beauty of God's creation. You might want to try forest bathing or perhaps growing some tomatoes. Whatever you do outdoors can be relaxing as well as healing.

2) Think about how you can support your local school when the new school year begins next fall. Presbyterians have always valued education. Over 20 years ago I heard that one out of four Presbyterians was either involved in education or related to someone who's involved in education. I suspect that's probably still true today. The 2014 General Assembly adopted the "Educate a Child, Transform the World" initiative with a goal of providing quality education to one million children by 2020. There are some projects that focus on the needs overseas. Others focus on problems here in our own country. While those are all worthy of our support, West Virginia has its own challenges. The current budget impasse may mean further cuts in funding for our schools. Even if it doesn't, previous cuts have reduced or eliminated many art and music classes. Maybe there are ways we could provide art and music classes after school or on Saturdays in our churches. Maybe we could encourage our church members to participate in Read Aloud West Virginia – or even do that ourselves. Maybe we could talk to the principal at our local school and see what help they need or where they could use volunteers. Summer gives us the time to begin thinking and praying about this.

3) Read a book. Some of us do this regularly anyway. If that's the case, read something different. If you usually read fiction, try an autobiography. If you prefer non-fiction, try some science fiction or something by John Grisham or perhaps Charles Dickens. Mix it up.

This summer I plan to read *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* by Peter Senge. It's an older book, first published in 1990. I've been meaning to read that for several years, but haven't made the time to do so. I've been intrigued though by how a presbytery – as well as a church - might become a learning organization. Although it's intended for businesses rather than churches, I think it might have something to teach us. If you decide to read that, let me know and we can get together and talk about it.

Summer used to be one of the slow seasons in the life of the church - or at least it was once Vacation Bible School was over. Now I'm not sure there are any slow seasons in the church year. We have to be more intentional and claim the time for ourselves. Summer gives us a great opportunity to do just that.