

GENERAL REFLECTIONS
of the General Presbyter
March 2011

I have started and stopped writing this report at least three times since the first of the year. First, there was the tragic shooting of Representative Giffords and the aftermath which brought cries for civility in the public arena. I have to say that this may well be the single most alarming trend in public discourse over the last 10-20 years: the loss of any sense of decency and propriety when it comes to talking or writing about "the other." Since when are public officials shouted down during a public address? Since when is it okay to replace logical arguments for your stated position with vilifications of anyone who chooses to disagree with you? Since when is it okay to knowingly stream false information over the airwaves and internet without any sense of accountability or decency? We need to be on our knees, praying for Rep. Giffords, but also for our country during a time in which threats, fear and intimidation seem to be winning the day.

Well, I'll stop that train of thought, because we move on to the next crisis. Our prayers are certainly needed for our brothers and sisters throughout the Middle East. In particular, Christian voices are being lost in the waves of protest and socio-political revolution which have inundated Egypt, Tunisia, and many of their neighbors. We stand by almost paralyzed by the magnitude of what we are seeing - what is the proper response to social revolution? What is the correct position for the elected leaders of the United States? What should Christians be thinking and doing as we watch from a distance? But again, there is a loss of moral boundaries as journalists have been assaulted and even killed. Revolutions need demons to fight and its always easiest to make anyone other than yourself (and those who agree with you) the demon. There is much work to be done in the Middle East. We need to pray for healing again, for peoples long oppressed and for emerging leaders who need the wisdom of Solomon as they attempt to chart a way forward.

And then THE LETTER! (If you haven't seen it and don't know what I am talking about, go to http://www.cpconline.org/index.php?content=fellowship_pcusa.) Yes, I've read the letter, and I've read almost every response to the letter. And I have to say that the immediate response has been disappointing, pointing me back to my concerns over public discourse. Let me say up front that the letter from "Fellowship PC(USA)" was clearly one of those projects like the camel (as in what happens when a committee tries to design a horse? - you get a camel). I know several of those who signed the original letter and several of those who have signed it since. They are not of one mind and not of one purpose.

I don't think it serves us well to try to dissect the letter (or its signatories) while we each go off into our studies to formulate our individual or group responses. Some of the primary writers have clear and obvious opinions as to the future utility of denominations. Others have some honest questions arising out of the intersection of their person theologies and their congregations' public ministries. I will say that I have more respect for and am more interested in dialogue with those who have maintained some sense of communication about these concerns locally. It is easy to write a "global" letter; the hard work is the local dialogue where we have to work with brothers and sisters in the faith. I appreciate the courage of those doing that hard work. We have nothing to fear from listening to one another.

However, the main point I want to make is that this provides us an opportunity to talk, openly and honestly, about what we are looking for when we talk about the connectional nature of the Church in the 21st century. I think we risk losing that opportunity if we stay in our camps and continue to hurl stones across the divide. I look forward to conversations with Eastern Oklahoma pastors and church leaders this year in which we talk about what our congregations and church leaders are looking for in a renewed denomination. In many ways, our "social revolution" may have us at the gates of even greater change than the people of Egypt. It is our choice whether or not to embrace the opportunity before us, setting aside pride and fear and anger.

Glory be to God!