

GENERAL REFLECTIONS  
BY THE GENERAL PRESBYTER  
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Are we prepared to die? Are YOU prepared to die? These are more than just academic questions. Neither are they apologetic gimmicks designed to bring you closer to a saving relationship with our Lord. Bonnie and I spent the last four months of 2009 on a journey with close family friends as the wife and mother of the family finally succumbed to a rare form of brain cancer. So our thoughts at home have very much included the reality and immediacy of death for us all.

But that is not what I am asking this morning. Are we, as Christians, as congregations, and as a presbytery, prepared to die?

On February 11, Methodist President the Rev David Gamble addressed the Church of England's General Synod. Speaking on behalf of the Methodist Church, he said, "We are prepared to go out of existence not because we are declining or failing in mission, but for the sake of mission." The headline, posted online that very hour, read: "Methodist Church 'prepared to go out of existence' for mission." Now that's a Church where I want to serve!

We talk a lot about being "missional." It's a great word. It sounds like, if we just look busy when Jesus returns (or maybe when the world is watching), then we are doing mission. And that has translated, over the last fifty years, into a corollary. If we just keep doing what we have done so well in the past, and maybe do it a little harder, then the glory days will return. How's that working for us? How many of our congregations have returned to the membership, the worship attendance, the Sunday School enrollment, and the number of baptisms that you saw in the 1950's and 60's?

Maybe that's unfair. That was then and this is now. Okay - when we get in all of the data for the 2009 GA statistical reports, how many of you have the same or better membership, worship attendance, Sunday School enrollment, and baptisms when compared to 1999, just ten years ago? How about five years ago? I know. Now I'm meddling. Sorry.

Or am I sorry? Maybe, if I am sorry, it is because we haven't talked more frankly about these realities. I've visited too many congregations and Sessions where timid voices finally admit, "We're not too sure we really want to grow. We're comfortable just the way we are." Some go so far as to admit, "I just want the church to be around long enough for my funeral." Now that's a mission statement to be proud of!

Dr. Paul Hooker is going to speak to us today about how it feels to turn the Titanic. Maybe there are some not quite ready to admit that denominational structures are like a ship on a collision course with an iceberg. But there are plenty of people like the architect of the Titanic, willing to bet their lives on the fact that their denomination (whether it's Presbyterian, or Episcopal, or Baptist, or Methodist) is "unsinkable." Paul is going to talk to us about how to maybe lighten the ecclesiastical load and make the ship more responsive. I have appreciated the

work his task force has put into this project and wish them well as we move to the General Assembly this summer.

But I want to return to the primary question - are we ready to die? Are we, as a denomination, ready to die to ourselves, to our structures, to our favored seats at ecumenical tables, to our cherished projects and programs and endowments, in order that our mission might move forward? I don't know.

Closer to home, is this presbytery prepared to die? Our budget has been shrinking consistently over the last ten years, as has our membership. We have tried different staffing patterns, new programs, regional clusters, guest speakers, and presbytery-wide workshops. How are we doing as we face a serious budget deficit for 2010? Will we just work harder at doing what we have always tried to do and hope that this year we will turn things around?

Or is this the year we begin to look at who we are as a presbytery and ask where we are going or, better yet, where we ought to be going? I'll tell you that the Council intends to look at our budget. They intend to look at our staffing design. They intend to look at how we relate to our congregations, with a more holistic approach and intentional expectations of Sessions. We want to live into our own mission statement in a new way, one in which we take more seriously what it means to "glorify God by serving congregations as they make and equip disciples for Jesus Christ, and by linking congregations of the Presbyterian Church (USA) within the diversity of Christ's larger mission."

That's the good news! Now for the bad news. We are going to ask each of our congregations to join with us in those expectations. We have not served one another well within the larger community of faith when we have not challenged one another to rise, take up our Cross daily, and serve God. We have tolerated mediocrity and indifference. We have not been prepared to die for the sake of mission.

That must end. When presbytery staff visit you in worship or attend a Session meeting, welcome them, talk with them, get to know them. Ask how it is they might be partners with you in mission. When a visitation team tries to schedule a visit, let them in. Let them help by asking questions which might move us forward together. They, too, are there to serve with you, to walk along side of you, to give visible witness to the best of what it means to be a connectional church.

Most of all, as we travel through Lent, may we be honest with ourselves. Are we ready to give up who we are and what we have in order that Christ's Church and the larger mission of the kingdom of God might advance? Where are the obstacles in your own life which prevent you from accepting a larger and more robust call to discipleship? Which step forward will you take this day on that journey and to what must you be willing to die in order that the mission of Christ may move forward in your life and your congregation?

Peace to us all on that journey. For we know to what hill it takes us. But we also know what lies beyond, for those who are faithful.