

GENERAL THOUGHTS FROM THE GENERAL PRESBYTER  
March 2008

I've had mixed feelings about the subject for this report. At first, I thought I would report on the mission pledges and the budget for 2008. Overall, the mission pledges are up significantly over last year. However, the decreased pledges in a few places wiped out about 40% of our gains. This has been a pattern for the last nine years and one which we need to address. We have a Mission Funding Task Force in place which will hopefully report at our June meeting, giving us a forum to talk about stewardship, the presbytery's mission budget, and what denominational giving looks like in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It will not be an easy discussion, but it will hopefully be a faithful one as we ask how our budget and program serve the presbytery's goals.

Along with that discussion, we need another discussion. What does it mean to be a connectional church in a day in which we act more and more independently. I'm deliberately staying away from using the word "congregational," because most of our congregations still follow the basic form of "rule by elder." However, as in the days of Israel before the great kings, except for times of great need (like disaster relief), there seems to be little else which would clearly identify us as connected to one another. There is less and less attention by pastors and clerks to "required" reports and area-wide events. Likewise, unless you think I'm only picking on local congregations, there is an independence among presbyteries and synods which draws into question the nature of our connection to and within the wider Church.

And yet, the Spirit has a nasty habit of blowing where it will! For three days in January, speakers from all over the PCUSA gathered in Dallas to talk about how to do mission today. From General Assembly staff to the Presbyterian Global Fellowship to the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, many were there to speak and, more importantly, to listen for the Spirit's movement. In the end, there were notes of despair (reduced funding for PCUSA missionaries worldwide) and of great hope (a new partnership of mission efforts between several PCUSA and PCUSA-related mission agencies).

I did take note of a couple of interesting comments coming out of the mission consultation (as reported in *The Presbyterian Outlook*). One was from Setri Nyomi, General Secretary of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. He noted that we need better communication between geographically distant partners in mission. Our Malawi Partnership knows that we work along side of other mission partners in the Synod of Livingstonia - another presbytery in New York, Preston Hollow church in Dallas, a network of people in Pittsburgh, and the Church of Scotland, just to name a few. Nyomi notes that our message is weakened when we fail to communicate and work together, "How can we present the message of reconciliation which is at the heart of the good news if what is seen is the fragmentation?" We must find ways, as a connected and connectional church, to both encourage local participation in mission and to coordinate our work for the larger purposes we seek to serve.

Hunter Farrell, Director of World Mission for the PCUSA, suggested another risk in our increasingly independent approach to mission. It is the risk that the weakest and least visible among the communities we meet will benefit the least from our efforts. Without a concerted effort to "see the whole," we risk losing sight of those who may need us most.

Scott Sunquist, Associate Professor of World Mission and Evangelism at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary added one more note of caution. He said that mission has always involved suffering, and that Christ, whose ministry shapes our own sense of call, suffered unto death. Noting the trend of short-term mission trips which have in some measured way replaced local support for full-time missionaries, Sunquist observed, "today mission is closer to tourism than martyrdom, it is more domesticated than dangerous." We need to see more of Christ and less of ourselves in our service.

Interesting times, both locally and nationally, as we talk more about what it means to serve our Lord and dedicate ourselves to building up disciples in order to send them out. To what degree do our congregations and governing bodies exist to allow and encourage mission to take place, and to what degree do they exist to domesticate Christ's radical call to service? Tough questions - hopefully some good conversations will follow.

Finally, a word about a subject dear to all of our hearts - judicial process! In February, the General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission (GAPJC) made three landmark rulings, the first major decisions on ordination questions since the 2006 General Assembly. While they will not be the last, they set extremely clear foundations for the decisions which will follow.

First, in the area of "examination standards," the GAPJC ruled that attempts by governing bodies to adopt resolutions which restate or paraphrase portions of the *Book of Order* and/or declare them as essential "are confusing and unnecessary; and are themselves an obstruction to constitutional governance in violation of G-6.0108a." In other words, according to a subsequent Advisory Opinion from the Stated Clerk's office, "Governing bodies may not restate, augment, diminish or define ordination standards." Thus, as our presbytery's Examination Policy states, we may declare areas of examination and provide frameworks within which examinations will take place, but we may not establish in advance any "essentials" by which candidates may be judged. All candidates for ordained office must be examined on a case-by-case basis.

Second, and more important than the first, the GAPJC ruled and clearly pointed to future cases when it said that governing bodies may not waive the G-6.0106b ("fidelity and chastity") standard. As stated in our examination policy, we welcome and encourage dissent with regard to policies and constitutional standards. Persons are free to promote changes in those policies or standards. However, persons are not excused from abiding by those standards, even as they lobby for change. The GAPJC stated:

As finally adopted by the General Assembly, the Authoritative Interpretation does not equate "polity" with "behavior." Nevertheless, the church has required those who aspire to ordained office to conform their actions, though not necessarily their beliefs or opinions, to certain standards, in those contexts in which the church has deemed conformity to be necessary or essential. Section G-6.0106b contains a provision where conformity is required by church officers "to live either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman (W-4.9001), or in chastity in singleness." The church has decided to single out this particular manner of life standard and require churchwide conformity to it for all ordained officers.

I am concerned that we need to discover again what it means to be a connectional church in a new and missional age. I find it intriguing to imagine what mission funding and collaborative mission might look like in the near future. I find the rulings of the GAPJC to be a great help as we determine what the Authoritative Interpretation of 2006 did or did not do. I believe, with these GAPJC rulings, several new General Assembly staff, and the upcoming election of a new Stated Clerk this summer, we are at a turning point in our denomination. We have the opportunity to reclaim the broad center of our Church and refocus our efforts in new and missional approaches which serve to both glorify God and build up the Church of Jesus Christ.

It is now a time for great prayer - for our congregations, our presbytery, and the PCUSA. We need to pray for persons and congregations and presbyteries trying to be faithful to Scripture, the *Book of Order*, and Christ's call to follow Him. We need to pray for our General Assembly and our commissioners from Eastern Oklahoma Presbytery as they meet this June. And we need to pray for a clearer vision of what Christ's Church looks like in our little part of the Kingdom.

To God be the glory,