

GENERAL REFLECTIONS  
BY THE GENERAL PRESBYTER  
December 1, 2009

In March, we will be privileged to hear from the Rev. Dr. Paul Hooker on the theme of being a missional church. Rev. Hooker is the General Presbyter and Stated Clerk for St. Augustine Presbytery, a member of the General Assembly's Advisory Committee on the Constitution, and a member of the Form of Government Task Force. Paul will unpack for us the genesis of the task force's work and their final report regarding a proposed new Form of Government.

I hope you will find several folks from your congregation who want to join us in Claremore for good theological reflection about the Church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and discussion of our denomination's polity (the theory and practice of governance). For those of you who would like to do more reading before our march reading, you can find resources and the task force's recommendations at [www.pcusa.org/formofgovernment](http://www.pcusa.org/formofgovernment).

What I want to reflect upon for just a moment, as we celebrate Advent and as we complete the presbytery business for the year, is what it means to be "connectional" today. It is a phrase we have used a lot over the last few years, almost always without a clearly shared definition. We refer to the PCUSA as a "connectional" church. Our presbytery's mission statement proudly declares:

Eastern Oklahoma Presbytery exists 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.

But what does it mean to serve and to link? And what does it mean to be "connected" today in a world where individualism and privacy are the goals, only occasionally interrupted when it fulfills one of my individual desires?

Kelly Kannwischer recently posted a message on the Presbyterian Global Fellowship site which begins with these words:

PGF is a tribe within the PC(USA) family. Why do we need a tribe, or what some people inaccurately assume is another renewal organization? The fact is the denomination is shrinking at an alarming rate. Presbyterian Global Fellowship began to explore the core mission of our church, in other words **what binds us together?** *[emphasis added]* Unfortunately, governing bodies seem to be the answer for most.

We boldly believe that we can be bound together by a clear vision for how God is calling us to further his kingdom in the world. Missional churches have a mission statement that puts being sent as its only reason for being. And everything a missional church does - worship, spiritual formation, fellowship - is for the purpose of training and equipping its people to go out. To serve the world. To focus on God's ongoing mission of relief and deliverance in the world.

But having a clear and compelling mission isn't enough to bind us together.

In another, equally compelling article, missional author Alan Roxburgh wrote about the ill-fated 1845 Franklin Expedition to discover the Northwest Passage from England to the Pacific Ocean. Every member of the expedition died before reaching their goal. The problem was not their vision, nor their enthusiasm, but how they equipped themselves for the expedition. Living in the Victorian age, they outfitted the ships with china, silver, an organ, and other finery which they would not have lived without back home. In the end, the space taken up by this "equipment" might better have been used for more coal and food. Their assumptions about the "necessities" did not translate well into their new missional context and one-by-one they froze or starved to death.

One of the resources on the Form of Government Task Force site is a paper written by Paul Hooker, entitled "What Is Missional Ecclesiology." In it, Paul describes the new parameters defining the mission of our denominational and congregational structures:

Missional ecclesiology demands more of the church than deciding which community service projects to undertake or setting congregational priorities for the coming year. Missional ecclesiology is a way of understanding the church. It begins with the *missio Dei* – God's own "self-sending" in Christ by the Spirit to redeem and transform creation. In a missional ecclesiology, the Church is not a building or an institution but a community of witness, called into being and equipped by God, and sent into the world to testify to and participate in Christ's work. The Church does not *have* missions; instead, the mission of God creates the Church. The Church serves God's call to mission through its work in three broadly defined categories: the proclamation of the Word of God, the administration of the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper, and the nurture of the covenant community of disciples. It undertakes this mission without regard for its own agenda or survival.

Our "connectionalism" will not survive our current denominational structure. That is not why we are or should stay connected. However, that is not the same as saying that our understanding of governing bodies cannot be radically revised to address a new ministry context.

I would suggest that we have the framework (and even the vocabulary, if you will) for what it means to be faithful congregations and even faithful governing bodies. Our current *Book of Order* states:

- "Christ calls the Church into being, giving it all that is necessary for its mission to the world, for its building up, and for its service to God." (G-1.0101b)
- "That the several different congregations of believers, taken collectively, constitute one Church of Christ, called emphatically the Church..." (G-1.0400)
- "The Church of Jesus Christ is the provisional demonstration of what God intends for all of humanity....a sign in and for the world of the new reality which God has made available in Jesus Christ." (G-3.0200)
- "There is one Church. As the Bible speaks of the one body which is the Church living under the one Spirit of God known through Christ, it reminds us that we have 'one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all.' (Ephesians 4:5-6)." (G-4.0202)
- "The nature of Presbyterian order is such that it shares power and responsibility. The system of governing bodies, whether they have authority over one or many churches, sustains such mutual relationships within the structures as to express the unity of the church." (G-4.0302)

A visible witness in and for the world of our unity in Christ; submission to one another and to Christ, the Head of the Church; a mutual relationship & shared authority - these are some of the foundations for our understanding of what it means to "be church." These are fairly "missional" statements, reminding us that the Church's calling is to be a witness to Christ, not an institution.

In the "Foundations of Presbyterian Polity" in the proposed new *Form of Government*, we read:

"The Church is the body of Christ. Christ gives to the Church all the gifts necessary to be his body. The Church strives to demonstrate these gifts in its life as a community in the world (1 Cor. 12:27-28):

- "The Church is to be a community of faith, entrusting itself to God alone, even at the risk of losing its life.
- "The Church is to be a community of hope, rejoicing in the sure and certain knowledge that, in Christ, God is making a new creation. This new creation is a new beginning for human life and for all things. The Church lives in the present on the strength of that promised new creation.
- "The Church is to be a community of love, where sin is forgiven, reconciliation is accomplished, and the dividing walls of hostility are torn down.
- "The Church is to be a community of witness, pointing beyond itself through word and work to the good news of God's transforming grace in Christ Jesus its Lord. (F-1.0301)"

The overtures to the 219<sup>th</sup> General Assembly have already begun. Permanent Judicial Commission rulings have been issued, with more on the way. The question of Synods is again on the table. Lines are being drawn for another contentious season. But, is that what God intends for the Church? One thing is clear. We are perfectly equipped for the kind of Church we have right now. The question is, "What kind of equipment (equipping) will we need for tomorrow's Church?" Will we succeed, or freeze in the wilderness along the way?

Eastern Oklahoma Presbytery is already working on a new and hopefully more fruitful model for relating to its congregations - less rigid, more relational; less focused on reports, more focused on resources and conversations. If the PCUSA is to continue (and I firmly believe it will), we must recognize that the world around us has changed - the context for our ministry has changed - and we need to be equipped for that new ministry. These will be unsettling times for some, for those who cannot or will not see a new day. But, for those who seize the challenge, it could be one of the most exciting times in the last 500 years of the Protestant Church! I, for one, look forward to the challenge. And I hope to be able to say, years from now, that Eastern Oklahoma Presbytery was a place in which the expedition succeeded. May God bless us on the journey.