

GENERAL (PRESBYTER) COMMENTS
SEPTEMBER 18, 2009

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 (U.S.A.) within the diversity of Christ's larger mission.

This is the tenth anniversary of my installation as your General Presbyter. That, in and of itself, is somewhat remarkable for one who never saw himself as a pastor, let alone a church bureaucrat. I left a career in the sciences to go to seminary, serving congregations in Seattle and Kansas City for 17 years. It could only have been the call of God which took a young man out of an arena in which he was so comfortable and dropped him into Greek School and what would follow!

Then, in what could only be the continuing revelation of God's great sense of humor, I felt called to enter into service of the Presbyterian Church's middle governing body system (which includes presbyteries and synods). While I miss many parts of parish ministry, I must confess that I truly love what I am doing now.

And now, in what will not be the final act, but one of a continuing opening of our lives to the call of God, our son Brian, his wife and our granddaughter have begun their first call in a strange land called Fairhope, Alabama.

But let me return to this meeting ten years ago. That was the meeting in which I was installed. It was also the meeting in which our proceedings were proclaimed by more than one person to be "mind-numbing and soul-sucking." While that declaration was made somewhat in jest, there was some truth in it as well. Why do we gather? What difference does it make? How are the life and ministry of our congregations and their leaders served by our having met?

Part of my calling into middle governing body work was a growing dissatisfaction with what I saw to be an approach to presbytery service which felt less like a ministry and more like a CEO leading a duty-bound board of directors. As I prayed about my response, it seemed that God was not yet finished with me, and thus I found myself first in Illinois and now here. I believe that I have been part of a new generation of presbyters (we're not even sure what to call ourselves these days) who have come out of the parish in order to serve in the governing bodies of the PCUSA.

While we are not the first generation to follow that path, it seems that we have been on the cusp of an "unbuilding" of a denominational structure. We have asked and now been forced to answer the question, "What does it mean to be connectional in what is becoming a post-denominational, post-institutional culture?"

One of the things which attracted me to Eastern Oklahoma Presbytery was the simplicity of your mission statement: glorifying God as we serve congregations (who, themselves, make and equip disciples for Christ) and as we link congregations in a larger, wider mission we know as the PCUSA. We began by redefining the role of presbytery staff persons in that mission - insisting that the most important part of measuring our effectiveness as staff is seen in how we help

congregations and their leaders accomplish their own ministries. We have tried to simplify and recast how our presbytery's committees serve our congregations. Our Synod, likewise, is in the midst of re-envisioning how it can assist its eleven presbyteries accomplish their primary task.

Trying to re-invent the wheel while the car is moving has not been easy, and we have no doubt made some mistakes along the way. However, the commitment of this presbytery and our synod is to continue to seek a vital and relevant role in assisting our member congregations as they seek to be faithful to Christ's call.

Of course, the road keeps changing, while the car is moving, while we are trying to reinvent that wheel. Ordination standards, abortion, property trust clauses, the possible revision of our *Form of Government*, Israel and the Middle East, the Church's role in politics - they all seek to divert our attention from our first true calling. The Gospel message is clear about that primary calling - to make and equip disciples for our Lord Jesus Christ.

We hold seminars for our pastors and church leaders, we offer workshops at presbytery meetings, we make financial commitments to programs like Percept (and now Mission Insight) and Acts 16:5. We have tried to establish safe places for our members and leaders to discuss controversial issues facing the denomination. We have tried to recapture an appropriate prophetic voice on social justice issues.

But there's always the paperwork - Committee on Ministry triennial visits, stewardship visits, encouragements to be part of congregational renewal, Trustees reports, the examination and certification of educators and lay preachers, annual statistical reports, terms of call, voting on amendments to the *Book of Order*. Part of my assessment of EOP after ten years is that we have indeed made this presbytery perhaps a kinder, gentler place. But the lingering question is how we are doing on our primary duty to help congregations make and equip disciples for Jesus Christ. How has the presbytery made our congregations more vital communities of faith or more effective witnesses to the grace of Christ in our world?

In keeping with that primary question, we're going to try something! We're going to try to make the resources of the presbytery even more transparent and accessible for our congregations. Instead of several of our committees trying to accomplish their work in a vacuum, four of our committees are going to work together as we seek to serve our congregations. We want to visit each of our congregations at least every three years. However, when we do, we want to do more than get a few answers to pre-determined questions so that we can write up a report and be done with the matter. We are proposing that when we meet with a Session, it will be more of a conversation and more of a journey together.

Our goal is to meet together two or three times in that year, setting goals, making commitments, bringing new resources to subsequent meetings depending on the needs of the congregation, but also challenging the Session to see some tangible difference by the end of that year. There is no pre-set goal for each congregation, but one thing is sure today - if our congregations are not growing spiritually and are not equipping the saints for service, then we are dying. Worse than that, we exist only to serve ourselves, not Christ and not those whom Christ sends us to serve.

Only when we keep our focus on the proclamation of the Gospel and equipping the saints for service in Christ's name, do we come close to a vision of a healthy presbytery - one in which:

- every congregation is engaged in mission beyond mere survival;
- every congregation is connected - both the resources of the larger Church and to one another, as partners in ministry; and
- leaders are equipped for service in a challenging, rapidly changing world.

Will we succeed? I don't know. Is this the right way to go? I don't know. But one thing is clear today - we must be more flexible and more willing to ask hard questions, missional questions, about why we have been blessed with what we have. Most of us worship in churches left to us by our parents and grandparents. What will we leave for our children and grandchildren? Will it be empty shells, shackled by maintenance costs, wedded to a distant, fading vision of past glory? Or will it be a vibrant community of faith, willing to lay down its own life (and, in some cases, even its own stained glass windows and mahogany pews) so that future generations of disciples can move forward into a new world?

Ten years - and apparently the work has just begun!