

GENERAL REFLECTIONS of the General Presbyter June 2011

Just over a year ago I asked if you (and we) were willing to die for what we believe. What does it mean to be relevant and missional today? What does it mean to be in a covenanted relationship, a community of faith, a denominational system? All of these are good and proper questions at all times in the history of the Church, but especially during a time which many are referring to as the next reformation of our Church.

Then, six months ago, in the early stages of debate over the proposed changes in the *Book of Order* and *Book of Confessions*, I referred to the prayer of Jehoshaphat, "Lord, we do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you" (2 Chron 20:12). I think Jehoshaphat's prayer continues as good advice.

Since then, neither our world nor our denomination have become more settled places. But we have begun to talk about it. Pastors clusters met in May to talk about passage of Amendment 10-A. The Belhar Confession did not receive the requisite number of concurring presbyteries to become part of our *Book of Confessions*. Just this week the new Form of Government was ratified by a majority of our presbyteries.

Now alarms are being sounded. Chaos looms over us since no one has their new manuals of operation ready. Meetings may not be "in order." There are requests for non-geographic presbyteries and synods. There are requests for separate Committees on Ministry and Preparation for Ministry, as well as separate Permanent Judicial Commissions so that we can somehow "guarantee" proper interpretation of our constitutional standards, depending on what side of which issue you are on.

Add to that the calls and visits our ministers receive every week demanding clear answers to difficult questions, with the ever present threat of the withdrawal of their dollars if the answers are not in accord with their personal theology. I'm not sure how some of you are getting by!

And yet, many of you are. Some do so by turning their backs on and distancing themselves from whatever it is their congregation doesn't want to hear. That may work for a while, but may fail us when the winds of the Spirit shift - and they will shift.

I suspect that a far healthier way of moving a congregation (and a presbytery) forward through stormy weather is to stay focused on what we are called to be and do. A number of years ago we developed a one-page worksheet, a checklist of sorts for Sessions evaluating the balance in their ministry, which identified marks of a healthy congregation. There are three primary areas of attention: what is the congregation doing to bring in and raise up disciples of Jesus Christ; what is the congregation doing to equip and send those disciples out for service in the name of Jesus Christ; and how is the congregation connected to a larger vision of ministry through the presbytery and the wider community of faith?

But what about the larger Church? What about presbyteries, synods and the General Assembly? What is it we are supposed to be doing? Where is the one-page worksheet we can use to check off the things we do well and note the areas in which we need improvement? I haven't found that worksheet.

In the absence of that one-page worksheet, bold new proposals are bubbling up. But they are not popular! That is because so many are so invested in the system we know and love - or even the one we know and hate, because at least we know how this system functions. So we bicker about quorums and the minutia constitutional provisions. We operate in a system designed to control rather than one designed to give permission. In reality, the system has become our excuse for not doing what we know we're supposed to be doing. We would rather write letters to the editor and call for meetings of colleagues to complain about the system being unresponsive than to actually do something about it. We would rather forecast ecclesiastical armageddon than imagine how the Spirit has empowered us to move out and to move forward.

Conferences and proposals are starting to emerge. There was a "Next" meeting a couple of months ago in Indianapolis. Some of our pastors attended that meeting. There is going to be an August conference in Minneapolis sponsored by the Fellowship-PCUSA. Several from this presbytery, including me, will be attending that conference. There is a presbytery which has abandoned its role as a regulatory agency, declares itself to be a relational body, and hopes to become a missional entity (though they are not yet sure what that means). One presbytery is discussing requests from congregations not in their bounds to join that presbytery. There is a proposal for a "conjunct" presbytery, which could expand its geographic bounds to encompass the entire synod and provide a "regional" body to which disaffected congregations in that synod could apply. Other proposals include non-geographic presbyteries and synods. But the weakness of many of these models is that they would divide congregations theologically and abandon those too small to be in relation across wider geographic areas. Fellowship and community are strained by distance.

What is missing for me, so far, is more of a discussion of our ecclesiastical vision for what it means to be, in the language of the *Book of Order*, "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 to people in Jesus Christ." (G-3.0200)

More importantly, the Church is called:

- "...to tell the good news of salvation by the grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ as the only Savior and Lord..."
- "...to present the claims of Jesus Christ, leading persons to repentance..."
- "...to be Christ's faithful evangelist..."
- "...to undertake this mission even at the risk of losing its life, trusting in God alone...." (G-3.0300-3.0400)

As we move forward, there will be a tendency to withdraw - either to get into the shelter and hope the storms pass by or to pack up the kids and the car and head down the road. I think both of these acts betray our declaration of faith in the Lord of the Church! We are called to confront the world with an alternate of grace and service in Christ's name. We cannot abandon our small churches; we cannot balkanize our denomination; there must be a way in which we can loosen the unnecessary straps of bureaucracy without abandoning the principles of community with brothers and sisters in this area.

I remain hopeful in the ability of the Spirit to move through our weakness and confusion. I remain confident in the power of the Holy Spirit to take our faltering steps and make them strong. And I remain committed to staying in relationship with those who share that vision for ministry. I look forward to more meetings with pastors and church leaders this summer and fall to discuss the ecclesiastical visions which arise. Amen.