

RUNNING WITH JOY
Reflections on the Presbytery of the Miami Valley 2012
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Beginning a New Season

Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.¹

Recently I heard a terrific sermon on this text from Philippians. While its message was wonderfully appropriate for all seasons of life, it was especially meaningful as we move into a new year. The image used to illustrate “straining forward to what lies ahead” was Usain Bolt, the astounding sprinter from Jamaica, who at last summer’s Olympics repeated his remarkable accomplishment of three Olympic victories four years earlier. Nearly all of us have seen this now-iconic photograph. It is an image of determination; it is an image of focus; it is an image of joy.

My annual report to the presbytery last year opened with the following: *I begin this fourth “state of the Presbytery” report with a sense of profound sadness.* This year, I have a sense of joy – joy in how we have moved into a season of hope for our future. A future that despite being unknown, is one we have been assured will be caressed and tempered by God, as we strain forward and press on.

Just over four months ago, on September 11, 2012, five years to the day that you elected me as your executive presbyter, the Presbytery of the Miami Valley took an audacious step in witness and faith, and adopted the Presbytery Covenant.

What began as conversations during a Leadership Council retreat last March, conversations about how fragile our connections with each other have recently proved to be – especially in light of the widening rifts and growing distrust throughout our denomination – eventually were distilled to a seemingly simple question:

¹ Philippians 3:12-14 NRSV

Apart from any legal definition, apart from any ecclesiastical directive, apart from any sense of “we’ve always done it this way” – what do we really understand it means to be a presbytery?

Like the Roman god Janus, it is my goal here not simply to look back and reflect on 2012, but rather to look forward that unknown-but-hope-filled future, doing so within the context of our new covenant. Thus, it is important to begin with that covenant.

THE PRESBYTERY COVENANT

We believe that God calls all people into covenant. In this way, God called the people of Israel to be God’s people saying:

Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.

We are called as disciples into a new covenant given by God’s free grace in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the second person of the Trinity. Our bond together as people of faith was given to us from Christ himself as he told his disciples:

Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches.

Thus, the church as the community of disciples is bound together in covenant and united as the body of Christ. While the call to ministry from the Holy Spirit may be understood in a diversity of form and expression, the church commits itself to connectional relationship as the Apostle Paul reminds us:

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we are all baptized into one body.

In covenant, the presbytery is the community of congregations gathered for particular ministry and shared calling. Ministry occurs among the disciples of the visible church within the covenant instituted by God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Thus, the church is dependent upon God, as well as upon other congregations of disciples, in witnessing to the in-breaking of God’s Kingdom into our world. It is by this act of covenant that the presbytery itself comes into life.

The presbytery equips, prepares, and nurtures congregations in their ministries for God's mission for the transformation of creation and humanity by calling all people to Christ.

The Presbytery of the Miami Valley calls the ruling elders and sessions of its congregations along with all teaching elders to a continually renewing sense of covenant as the embodiment of Christ's church.

This covenant is a reaffirmation of our ordination vows promising *to share in government and discipline, serving in the governing bodies of the church*. By this covenant, we commit together to that which might bring fulfillment to the presbytery's purpose and shared ministry.

We commit to prayer, encouragement, and support for our work of the presbytery

We commit ourselves to regular and active attendance at meetings of the presbytery

We commit our participation in the work of the presbytery councils, committees and commissions

We commit our financial resources to the shared purpose as the presbytery

We commit, as ruling and teaching elders, to the nurture and care of our colleagues in ministry in this presbytery

IN THIS COVENANT WE CONFIRM THE PROMISES WE HAVE MADE, AND WE LIVE IN THE HOPE THAT BY GOD'S GRACE WE WILL CONTINUE TO MAKE AND UPHOLD THESE PROMISES TO EACH OTHER UNITED AS THE CHURCH, THE VISIBLE BODY OF CHRIST IN THE WORLD.²

As we begin consider how our life as a presbytery might take shape as a reflection of covenantal relationships, I wish to share some background into its writing. The "design team" for the covenant was comprised primarily of *younger* Leadership Council members, most of whose experience in this denomination has been during times typified by rancor and legislative gridlock. These men and women represented the panoply of theological discourse, yet all shared a strong and abiding belief that Christ calls us to unity.

² *The Presbytery Covenant*, Presbytery of the Miami Valley, adopted September 11, 2012

I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.³

What is particularly interesting is that despite the relative youth of this team, their approach to the covenant was grounded in our historic traditions of being Presbyterian. There was no egotistical aspiration to be “new,” but rather an open yearning to be faithful to our foundations. Thus the covenant expressly states that it is a “reaffirmation of our ordination vows.” Further, each the *commitments* made about life as a presbytery is rooted those vows.

But what is also significant about the covenant is its form, which is patterned on that of the Mayflower Compact of 1620, which begins with an imperative that the “why” of the whole endeavor rests in the God’s province and providence. Thus, the Presbytery Covenant begins with the “why” – our call from God; then simply and succinctly states the “what” – the presbytery and its purpose; and closes with “how” – the reaffirmation of, and commitment to, our ordination vows.

What is important about this is that it departs from our usual denominational practice which follows the form of “what, how why,” where the “why” is understood as *rationale*. Looking at this must not be seen as merely an exercise in semantics, but rather as a profound shift because while a *rationale* provides a reason or justification for an action, leading with an *imperative* makes action a response to God’s call.

So let us look at our past year together, straining forward to press on to a future as a covenantal community in Christ.

Is There Enough?

With respect to the presbytery’s finances, 2012 was a roller-coaster ride. The year began quite typically with significant money (per capita and mission contributions) from congregations coming in at the year’s onset. It needs to be understood, however, as some of this money was actually *per capita payments unpaid from 2011*, but as the presbytery’s fiscal year coincides with the calendar year, such money correctly became part of 2012’s income. However, beginning March income dropped off significantly so

³ Ephesians 4:1-6 NRSV

much so that by mid-summer, the presbytery's operating deficit required a significant infusion of money from its working capital fund. By mid-fall it appeared that there would be a year-end operating loss, perhaps matching that of the previous year which was about 6.0%.

However, by year's end, the income stream increased as a rate significantly greater than what would normally be projected for the final quarter (which normally rivals that of the first quarter), resulting in a net operating gain of nearly \$30,000.00.

While this is without question very good news, especially when contrasted with 2011 operating loss and the anticipation as late as last October for yet another, there is much to learn and consider as the numbers are analyzed.

While I know that for many, detailed numerical analyses are often dry and meaningless or perhaps even a bit foreboding, I nevertheless feel it is important to look carefully at some things.

- Anticipated income was \$60,053.69 (9.5%) less than budgeted (contrasted with 2011's reduced income of 14.1%). There was an extraordinarily significant reduction in mission giving (\$102,169.99 or 39.0%) which was partially offset by some unbudgeted income, the largest of which was from the sale of real estate (\$23,210.77).
- Of the reduction in *mission giving*, \$42,180.63 was anticipated to be designated for General Assembly and Synod (reflecting percentage allocations of undesignated mission giving). While these "pass-through" funds have no effect on presbytery operations, they nevertheless indicate a disconnection or disengagement from the larger denominational church. *Mission giving* to the presbytery was \$59,989.37 (24.0%) lower than projected – a percentage greater than any of the last five years.
- Total *per capita* income was actually \$11,652.54 over budget projections but this includes unpaid 2011 *per capita* paid in 2012, as well as settlements of outstanding *per capita* for 2011 and 2012 from departing congregations. What is not yet clear is what the overall net of *per capita* income for 2012 attributable for 2012. While as of this writing those numbers are being parsed and analyzed, it can be safely assumed that the "trend" of difficulties with realizing *per capita* income is continuing.

- Total expenses were \$93,910.99 than budgeted, with the removal of “pass-through” items (GA and Synod *per capita* and *mission* allocations) actual presbytery expenses were lower by \$59,456.05 or (13.2%). This is attributable to lower costs for personnel, operations, and committees.

Beyond this budget we might need to learn from this?

There are two central issues here – neither of which is new. There is a *per capita* shortfall, and *mission giving* continues to decline.

Historically, congregations have withheld *per capita* as a “matter of conscience or protest” but such has always been accompanied by an appropriate statement or witness. In the absence of such witness, it there seems likely that our shortfall and the continuing decline in *mission giving* likely relates to our lack of connection to each other – the hope of remedy of which is an aim of our Presbytery Covenant.

While without question, the last few years have been stressful economic times. There are clearly more and more acute economic needs that have grown among and around us, yet as Presbyterians, and as Presbyterian congregations, we continue to be blessed. And this is continues to be true even through these times of economic uncertainty. The truth is, that we can afford for our churches and our presbytery to thrive.

Consider the following, from the *Comparative Statistics 2011* report from the Office of General Assembly (the most recent published data).

- For the congregations (which excludes those departed or departing congregations) in the presbytery, *actual aggregate expenses* (not including capital expenditures) totaled \$11,952,928.00.
- For the same adjusted set of congregations, *actual aggregate income* (not including contributions to capital programs or income from outside grants) was \$14,402,822.00. This total *does not include* any unrealized capital gains, contributions to capital projects, or income from outside grants.

Therefore, as the year 2012 began, the *collective net liquid assets* for our congregations had grown grew over the prior year by \$2,449,894.00. This was not an aberration, the prior year showed growth of \$1,370,539.00.

So the money is there. There is enough – enough for our churches and our presbytery to thrive. So the larger issue is, “do we need to find a new way to fund the presbytery?”

- The Leadership Council has begun to explore this question with a goal of proposing a new way of funding, or changes to our current method, for the presbytery’s consideration and approval by our September 2013 meeting.

Stewards of Our Community

2012 also brought significant changes to our presbytery’s “net worth” and even though such a term seems somehow inappropriate as we in the church talk about how all we have really belongs to God, “net worth” is not only useful but also not incorrect, as long as we understand that our relationship to it is as stewards, not as owners.

Staying with the more conventional language of finances, our bottom line (net assets less liabilities) as we ended 2012 was \$1,268,120.97 less than the previous year. At first glance, this appears shocking; however, in May 2012 the Presbytery of the Miami Valley ceded ownership of Kirkmont Center, to Kirkmont Center, Inc., the independent non-profit corporation we established in July 2009, and which has been operating the camp and conference center from that time forward. For the past five years, the property was carried on the presbytery’s books as an asset worth \$1,340,460.00.

Therefore effectively, the presbytery’s bottom line for 2012 increased by \$72,339.03 to \$772,583.37. While this increase of 9.4% is substantial and definitely positive, it should be noted that the actual growth from managed investments is significantly lower, with much of the overall increase attributable to assets related to sales of closed churches and settlements from departing congregating congregations.

Like many other presbyteries and most congregations, our financial management of our assets has been guided by volunteer efforts – the Trustees have made our investment decisions. Properly, these decisions have been made trying to reflect our values as a part of Christ’s church, a directive that should always remain present. And, like many other presbyteries and most congregations, our investments have, in the decades of robust economies, provided good returns. But these economic times have become remarkably less certain, and our economy, while still healthy, particularly when compared to so many other places in the world, bears little resemblance to the burgeoning days of the recent past.

In the words of the 19th century poet James Russell Lowell, “New occasions teach new duties.” For many reasons beyond simply economic uncertainty, it is time for a new paradigm with respect to our investment practices. Investment markets are subject to fluctuations driven by small movements that because of technology have effects of often viral implications. Sound investment strategies, while often still anchored in sound philosophies, are often much more complex to realize. For churches and other non-profit institutions, good financial stewardship more and more requires expert professional help, and the results overwhelmingly bear this out: churches with outside financial advisors consistently manage their assets significantly better than those without such independent expertise.

- The Presbytery Trustees are currently interviewing prospective outside financial consultants, with a goal of engaging the proper professional help this year. Doing so will not mean that our investments will no longer reflect our values. The Trustees will continue to uphold the presbytery’s ethos as they work with a consultant.

Another area of stewardship concern is much more complex – *what is the potential impact on the life of the presbytery from the management of closed church buildings which were often neglected for years?*

This is both a financially and emotionally charged subject, and there is no intent to offer any resolution here. However, it is a subject that must be addressed, not only in this presbytery, but throughout the denomination. I ask your indulgence therefore, of any clumsiness on my part as I elaborate on this, and I ask your understanding that the specificity of what I raise is no way meant as a judgment but rather more as a recitation of pertinent facts.

In September of 2012, after 98 years of faithful ministry, Oakland Presbyterian Church, in Springfield, closed. The year-long process leading to this was a difficult time for everyone involved, but the reality was that the congregation no longer could sustain itself in a large, costly and older building in a neighborhood which continues to reflect the stress of a declining small Midwestern city.

All of the remaining assets of the church, which consisted primarily of the property, along with a small amount of residual funds, accrued to the presbytery in accordance with our ecclesiastical understanding of property as existing in trust for the immediate next council of the denomination. The building is an amalgam of construction – the

sanctuary is over 90 years old with an undercroft fellowship hall built about 35 years later. To this was added a major addition in the late 1950s. It is, not unexpectedly, a building that, over the recent decades of declining membership and resources, has not received the necessary attention save for what one might term as reactive treatment and routine maintenance. Oakland Presbyterian Church is not unique in arriving to this position. The reality is that church buildings the size and age of Oakland abound in their disrepair, as societal and cultural changes have relegated church life to the even-further margins, and older and dwindling memberships no longer have the wherewithal to provide much more than “keeping the doors open.” In addition, changes to so many other things – the cost of simply maintaining wildly energy-inefficient buildings for instance – have only added to the toll.

State tax law also requires that a closed church can only remain on as an exempt property for one year – thus in 2014 the presbytery will be liable for property taxes, and the entire property, which includes several independently listed lots on which there is space for parking, is assessed for tax purposes at 1.3 million dollars – irrespective that its market value might be perhaps one fourth of that.

The building is currently listed for sale, but so are several other similarly sized churches in Springfield. There is some optimism on the part of our real estate professional consultant, but the Trustees rightly expect a long process. And while there is currently enough money in from the residual funds to maintain the building in its current secured and closed condition for this year (barring some unforeseen calamity), all of this reserve will be quickly consumed when the property becomes taxable.

This is not meant to inflame or cause alarm – the Presbytery Trustees are fully competent and equipped to make the right decisions. But it raises a larger issue: what is the congregational responsibility as stewards of the assets and property in relationship to the presbytery and denomination?

If we accept our covenantal language that *the presbytery is the community of congregations gathered for particular ministry and shared calling*, then the care of property entrusted to a particular congregation by that community directly affects the community’s ministry. Thus each particular congregation’s stewardship has a component of responsibility to those others gathered.

The implications of all of this are far reaching and while we need to proceed carefully and even cautiously, we nevertheless need to proceed, because whether or not we wish to believe it, this is an issue that is only going to increase in the foreseeable future; and not simply in this presbytery but throughout our denomination.

We must proceed with thoughtfulness, honesty and sensitivity, but also with the assurance that our faith in, and obedience to, Jesus Christ often calls us to some points in stewardship that are uncomfortable.

- Therefore, I propose that we begin by initiating conversations between representatives from the Committee on Ministry and the Presbytery Trustees, as a first step and see where that leads us.

Life in Connection

More and more congregations in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) are becoming more and more “Congregationalist” in orientation – concerned less with the traditional connections that Presbyterian churches have had with one another, and seemingly more desiring of autonomy, particularly as such might relate to the notion of a council (i.e. governing body) that has some authority over local matters.

Much of this can be understood as an understandable reaction to a constitutional structure that appears overly legalistic and programmatic, and has spawned what seems to be a large, centralized bureaucracy that congregations mostly understand as being about rules and regulations. To the extent that all of this is true is a denominational self-inflicted wound, but one whose cause all of us share in some way.

Other factors in this movement away from being connected as Presbyterians relate to lots of things beyond the church itself. So much of our society and culture is focused on the individual – not philosophically as in Ayn Rand’s *Objectivism*, nor historically, like the rugged individualism that typified the pioneer expansion of the 19th century; but narcissistically, as though every person’s first concern must be “what about me.”

While the institutional church does good work in re-focusing away from the individual self and toward Jesus’ teachings from *The Sermon on the Mount*, secular culture is strong and its vestiges permeate so much of all of our behavior, even in church. Thus it is harder and harder to keep ourselves connected as congregations with other congregations.

As Presbyterians, we believe these connections are important not simply because they reflect how we want to govern ourselves, but because they lie near the heart of our understanding of a Reformed faith – that the church is the community of disciples

bound in covenant and united as the Body of Christ, and that the church commits itself to connectional relationships:

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we are all baptized into one body.⁴

But despite this “Presbyterian core belief,” as each year goes by, there is less and less “buy in.”

The whole notion of “buy in” seems antithetical to church tradition, the very nature of which was related to its historical culture. Being part of church life was something “families were,” and for Presbyterians and other mainline Christians the spiritual journey with Christ was gradual and often seamless – stories of conversion and transformation were not an obvious part of the vernacular. But as the secular culture shifted further and further away from seeing the church as a normative part of life, even if not a central one, the idea of church as something families “did” became less and less prevalent. So much so, that today we see very few congregations with predominately legacy memberships, and by legacy, I am not simply referring to specific families continuing in specific congregations, but to continuing in specific denominations as well.

Therefore it is important that we find ways to reconnect with our Presbyterian distinctiveness – ways that exemplify what such a Reformed tradition might mean for opportunities for Christian formation rather than Christian legalism.

This must be an endeavor on multiple fronts.

- At the congregational level, we must take the work of educating new Presbyterians seriously, so that the people joining this denomination do so in full knowledge of how such a choice might make a difference in their lives – not because our way is better or more authentic, but because our way offers its own unique approach to one’s journey toward discipleship.
- At every point in denominational life we must strengthen our leadership. We have a near embarrassment of riches as we look at our incredible resource of faithful, intelligent and wise women and men, spanning generations and cultures, and bringing diversity to nearly every aspect of our denomination’s life. But too

⁴ I Corinthians 12:12a NRSV

often we have chosen many for leadership for the wrong reasons – convenience, desperation and reward – rather than out a disciplined discernment of spiritual gifts and the Spirit’s leading.

- We must create ways for churches to connect with one another – whether those connections are from groups or individuals. While there are always going to be the traditional points of Presbyterian connection, i.e. presbytery meetings and other “official” work, it is equally important to recognize the strength of connections made from outside any mandate. This must be central if we are to flourish in a covenantal life as a presbytery. What is difficult for us as a presbytery is “to create the opportunity and space” for things to develop on their own – such is our default penchant for programming everything.
- There are several ideas about connecting with one another currently “percolating” in the presbytery. We have had the first Covenant Conversation, which provided lively discourse and fellowship between teaching and ruling elders, and is likely to spur some follow-up as well. There are also others in the presbytery who over the next short time will likely be hosting other conversations on a wide range of topics. The Leadership Council is promoting “two by two” connections, in which a pair of persons from one congregation might get together with a pair from another – again, not for any official or specific purpose, but as a way of actively living in our covenant. It is important that we all support this in however we can.

Movement Beyond the Walls

The presbytery equips, prepares, and nurtures congregations in their ministries for God’s mission for the transformation of creation and humanity by calling all people to Christ.⁵

As we look at the language of our Presbytery Covenant related to our purpose as a presbytery (our “job description” as it were) we see a clear statement of an active role in the life and work of congregations – equipping, preparing and nurturing *their* ministries – rather than the presbytery itself acting as some sort of larger congregation and replicating efforts and programs occurring in local churches.

⁵ *The Presbytery Covenant*, Presbytery of the Miami Valley, adopted September 11, 2012

One significant area in which this might be lived out is what we have always understood as “mission.” For most of us and for most of our lives, we have defined mission as something the church does *outside its walls* or at least *for those* outside its walls. While there is nothing inherently wrong with such a definition, I really think the better word is “outreach,” because any inside-outside compartmenting the work of the congregation reinforces a notion that the work of Christ’s church as such can be thus divided; while in truth, the church exists solely to provide a place to respond to God’s mission in Jesus Christ, and by doing so, witness to the world.

Most often as well, we see this whole endeavor of *mission* as being concerned primarily with “where the church sends its money,” and frequently we extend this idea to presbyteries – that presbyteries must engage in mission which is really about some form of financial commitment beyond its metaphorical walls, often which are their member congregations. Thus, that part of a presbytery’s work which deals directly with congregational development, support and resourcing is somehow understood not as mission but rather as governance or administration. And if that indeed were true, then the same could be said about so much of the life of a congregation – for instance, that Christian formation somehow is not *really* mission. Such ideas run counter to our understanding of the nature of the whole church and its parts.

If we return to our covenantal language, what then is the best way for the presbytery to *equip, prepare, and nurture congregations in their ministries* with respect to mission or outreach?

Historically, the presbytery has served as a “pass-through” agent for giving to the mission programs of the General Assembly and the Synod. Congregations send funds designated for the GA and Synod directly to the presbytery, which in turns sends them forward as directed. While there is no doubt that this money winds up in places where it does wonderful good, is this practice the best way of equipping, preparing, and nurturing congregations to grow in those parts of their Christian lives that reach out beyond themselves? Does this practice over-emphasize mission as primarily about writing a check?

The reality is that for many, if not most of congregations, denominational mission is really quite impersonal and removed from the spiritual lives its members. There was a time in this denomination where many, if not most, congregations had some clear connection to individual missionaries, as opposed to our current culture that seems to see the mission field as being the province of a centralized authority, i.e. denominational headquarters. Contrast this how so many of those same congregations have built

ongoing relationships with others beyond their walls through local outreach, and in doing so have grown in their own discipleship.

Outreach in the name of Christ is never a one-way street. Like the electrons in a covalent bond, which move from one atom's nuclear orbit to another's, missional movement is in two directions. Through outreach, we bring Christ to others, and through that same outreach, Christ is brought to us.

None of this is intended in any way to somehow devalue financial commitments to mission but rather open our thinking to finding the best way to allow all of our outreach – financial and relational – to help our congregations live out their ministries and grow in discipleship.

- I propose that this presbytery undertake this in a new way, one directly focused on *equipping, preparing and nurturing congregations for outreach*, by selecting a group of teaching and ruling elders with hearts for, and experiences with, all forms of mission, to serve as a pro-active resource, coach and mentor to congregations throughout the presbytery. This *outreach advisory team* would become an integral part of our presbytery life connecting word and work, and resources and relationships, throughout our local communities and the world.

Running to Meet the Future

One year ago I wrote at the close of my annual report that we needed to have a better sense of clarity as to “what is our business” – that so many of the assumptions that we have carried for years as to “what indeed was a presbytery” must be reexamined in light of so many changes to our society and culture. This issue remains, and frankly, it will, and it should, always do so. For I also believe that we are called by God to always be on the move, never to rest in our self-satisfaction that somehow “we have arrived,” until God's full reconciliation is at hand.

But we have been doing the work of that reexamination, and it seems that there is great energy and passion from many among us to continue.

So there is joy.
And there is hope.

Our embrace of being in covenant with each other brings opportunities to explore ideas with each other, drawing from experience and knowledge. And from this we may develop an ethos that seeks to grow *collective wisdom from the gathered faithful*. And this is not new. This is what the early church was like.

The future, and clearly our future as a presbytery, is unknown.

But that should be of no concern, because our faith's story is always about moving into an unknown future. And we have been given great resources to shape tomorrow in faithful discernment to God's leading.

In his short story *The Toynee Convector*, Ray Bradbury tells of Craig Bennett Stiles, architect and time traveler, who, at the end of the 20th century, made his one and only journey across time, 100 years into the future. Bradbury sets the story in that future and writes:

For on a single night, one hundred years ago, Craig Bennett Stiles, freshly returned from time, had reported by telstar around the world to billions of viewers and told them their future.

"We made it!" he said. "We did it! The future is ours. We rebuilt the cities, freshened the small towns, cleaned the lakes and rivers, washed the air, saved the dolphins, increased the whales, stopped the wars, tossed the solar stations across space to light up the world, colonized the moon, moved on to Mars, then Alpha Centauri. We cured cancer and stopped death. We did it – Oh Lord, much thanks – we did it. Oh future's bright and beauteous spires arise!"

He showed them pictures, he brought them samples, he gave them tapes and LP records, films and sound cassettes of his wondrous roundabout flight. The world went mad with joy. It ran to meet and make that future, fling up the cities of promise, save all and share with the beasts of land and sea.⁶

So here is Stiles, now an old man, in his first interview after that 100 years, shocking his young interviewer as he says simply:

"I lied. I never went anywhere, I stayed but made it seem I went. There is no time machine – only something that looks like one." I was born and raised in a time, in the sixties, seventies, eighties, when people stopped believing in themselves. I saw that disbelief, the reason that no longer gave itself reasons to survive, and was moved, depressed and then angered by it.

⁶ Ray Bradbury, *The Toynee Convector*, 1984

“Everywhere I saw and heard doubt. Everywhere I learned destruction. Not only the four horsemen of the Apocalypse rode the horizon to fling themselves on our cities but a fifth horseman, worse than all the rest, rode with them: Despair, wrapped in the dark shrouds of defeat, crying only repetitions of past disasters, presents failures, future cowardices.

“Well, now. Said the old man, filling another glass with wine for the young reporter, “Aren’t I something? I made the machines, build the miniature cities, lakes, ponds, seas. Erected vast architecture against crystal-water skies, talked to dolphins, played with whales, faked tapes, mythologized films. Oh, it took years, years of sweating work and secret preparation before I announced my departure and came back with the good news!

“You see the point, don’t you son? Life has always been lying to ourselves! As boys, young men, old men. As girls, maidens, women, to gently lie and prove the lie true. To weave dreams and put brains and ideas and flesh and the truly real beneath the dreams. Everything, finally is a promise. What seems a lie is a ramshackle need, wishing to be born.”⁷

We do not need a time machine or some grand scheme to convince the world of the *Good News*. We only need to live by it, and live in it. And that will be enough because it will be our witness to the world.

The world went mad with joy. It ran to meet and make that future, fling up the cities of promise, save all and share with the beasts of land and sea.⁸

Let us run with Christ to meet and make our future.
Let us run with joy.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.