

ODYSSEYS
Reflections on the Presbytery of the Miami Valley 2013
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Dennis H. Piermont
Executive Presbyter

Wanderers

All that is gold does not glitter,
Not all those who wander are lost;
The old that is strong does not wither,
Deep roots are not reached by the frost.

From the ashes a fire shall be woken,
A light from the shadows shall spring;
Renewed shall be blade that was broken,
The crownless again shall be king.¹

Quest literature has been around for centuries; from the ancient Mesopotamian *Epic of Gilgamesh* through Homer's classic *Iliad* even up to the current popular *Hunger Games*, stories of journey and challenge, often in the name of a great cause, find relevance to nearly every generation. For many of us in the church, the stories of C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien gave particular meaning.

As I write my annual report for the year 2013, I am struck by the second line of Tolkien's poem above (which is from the first volume of his *Lord of the Rings* trilogy): **Not all those who wander are lost**. Certainly the Biblical narrative confirms this, because when God's people wander through the wilderness, they are not lost from God.

This does not mean that the wilderness does not hold snares, temptations or other dangers. We know for sure that it does. But we also know that if we are faithful in our wandering, we will never be alone.

I believe we are in a time of wilderness in the church – particularly in the Presbyterian church – and while this presents us with many difficulties and uncertainties, it should come as no surprise. In one way or another, save for those points of brief respite, the people of God have always wandered through the wilderness. It is part of who we must

¹ From *The Fellowship of the Ring*, J.R.R. Tolkien, 1954

be – wanderers and searchers moving through a changing world as we work for God’s transforming reconciliation.

It is no different here in the Presbytery of the Miami Valley. We are in a wilderness searching for how we, as a covenantal people, might determine faithful ways in which we can witness to Jesus Christ’s love as we honor both rich traditions and new inventions in our call as Presbyterians.

This past year has continued to be emblematic of that quest.

Gathering

If we are going to make meaningful progress toward being a presbytery transformed by our promises to each other, it is imperative that when we gather we cannot do so in ways that are only routine or always predictable, neither can we, out of a “zeal” for always seeming to be different, neglect our responsibility to do the work of *being the presbytery*. This is a continuing tension between what some might see as our traditions (which others may see as signs of intransigence) and longing for meaningful and enriching change that keeps us from falling into a trap of confusing “style over substance” just to be different.

Added to this is a critical need for being able to gather in ways that allow us to share the wide range of both experiences and emotions we bring to who we might be together. Too often in presbytery meetings there is little or no room for disagreement without rancor; stories of challenge without defensiveness; or even laughter free from hypersensitivity. Our times in 2013 when we were together as the presbytery, while nowhere perfect or complete, did bring us some clear moments of seeing things a bit differently, of having a glimpse of the “what if?”

We began the year by meeting at Northminster Presbyterian Church in Springfield on a February Saturday morning. The theme for our meeting centered our participation in the life of the presbytery – the how and why – and was illuminated for us by leadership from Chip Hardwick, Director of the denomination’s Office of Theology and Worship. It was from the Leadership Council’s subsequent parsing of both the meeting and comments made there that heightened a growing awareness that the idea of what it means to be a presbytery (as well as its usefulness) is something leadership can no longer take for granted – that there is lots of work to be done.

This became even more painfully evident when we met at United Theological Seminary in May. The effort to explore options to consider ways in which the presbytery could be

funded was met with confusion, misunderstanding, and even a bit of mistrust. Much of the responsibility for this lies squarely on presbytery leadership – the presentation was unclear, overly dependent on numbers, and did not provide for adequate processing and discussion. While it certainly was not our finest hour, some very good fruit was nevertheless ripened. The Leadership Council felt an urgency for making better connections throughout the presbytery – between leadership and congregations as well as congregation to congregation. This resulted in the *Presbytery Mission Initiative*, which has thus far reach nearly two thirds of our congregations. In addition, the feedback from the meeting brought clarity as well to the proposal to rethink presbytery funding, which was adopted in November.

Our September meeting, hosted by Covington Presbyterian Church, was by all accounts remarkable. Rabbi Brad Hirschfield brought a Biblical and theological perspective to the notion of covenant especially as it concerns how to live with each other and minister with each other though we disagree – that there is room for, and perhaps even a healthy outcome with, disagreement in covenant relationships. The richness and energy of the day allowed presbytery leadership to move away from some of those apprehensions that accompany thinking about doing new things that often paralyze our stepping out faithfully in a new wilderness, instead settling for the familiar. Technical glitches in other parts of the meeting brought forth the need to better support sound and video – there are things to learn from both success and failure.

In November at Dorothy Love Retirement Community in Sidney, what was learned from the glitches of September was on display. Multi-media presentations were seen and heard at levels of clarity as never before. The meeting highlighted sharing congregational outreach – ministries learned about in the *Presbytery Mission Initiative*. The presbytery adopted a budget and a new way funding ourselves – the stunning video of telling presbytery stories made all of this so much clearer in ways that all our earlier efforts completely missed. We also committed ourselves to another big idea – that of transformation in smaller congregations. The presbytery will be learning more about this beginning in February.

But for many, it was the presbytery *gathered not to do business but to play* that made our time with each other so distinctly different and special. We sponsored a night of stand-up comedy at a comedy club in Dayton, put together and emceed by Dwight McCormick, who for any who might be unaware, is not only the pastor of Northminster Presbyterian Church but a professional comic as well. Over 100 Presbyterians were in attendance. Others on the bill were non-church comedians (with the exception of a brief, funny musical guest stint by Cliff Haddox, pastor of Dayton, Central) who brought into the house lots of non-Presbyterians as well. It was a screamingly funny evening, and one in which, in a small but meaningful way, we could be the Church in world.

Connecting

One of our continuing dilemmas in the church concerns *insiders* and *outsiders*. We all can cite example of the difficulty of really and meaningfully connecting new members to full participation in our congregations – some folks seem to be overwhelmed by attention while others seem to go unnoticed. Our congregations often seem to our membership is as divided into those who “really know what’s going on” and those who “simply seem to show up” but not really be engaged. This causes, not surprisingly, issues of too much work being done by too few people which further exacerbates our difficulties both because leadership seems *cliquish* and very vulnerable to *burnout*. This is a problem for the presbytery as well.

Over the summer, the Leadership Council, began a bold initiative, specifically designed to work through these difficulties. The premise of the *Presbytery Mission Initiative* is really quite simple – if we are going to live together as a vibrant presbytery community, in the full-flower of our covenant, then we need to do a much better job of reaching out to connect and welcome. For the truth is, that many of our congregation along with their members see the presbytery as made up of *insiders* and *outsiders*.

The goal was to visit every session and listen to stories of joy as well as challenge learning about these faith communities and their particular church cultures. Frequently, and not surprisingly, we also learned about difficulties with the presbytery – most often about understanding what the presbytery actually is and actually does. All of this was long overdue.

Far too often the only *official* contact many of these congregations had with the presbytery in recent times concerned rules, regulations and money. The leadership Council decided that must change. There have been thus far some wonderful things learned – stories of faithful and creative ministry in that have never come into our collective purview.

Some of the conversations have been difficult, and at times, even a bit painful. But they have afforded us the opportunities to see the potential of the reconciling work of the Holy Spirit. We have only begun and without question it is going to be a long process, but it is one we must undertake, **and it is one we must continue.**

God is at work in so many places in our presbytery and in so many different ways. As the Church of Jesus Christ, we are called to tell this to the world. This is why we must draw together and tell our stories to each other. It is how each of us can be an evangelist. And it is what Jesus asks of us.

Big Ideas

As mentioned earlier, in 2013, the presbytery adopted two “big ideas.” The first concerned presbytery funding, and the second, the future of small congregations.

While these two undertakings might seem, at first glance, wildly different, they really are closely intertwined, and also move us into uncharted waters where I suspect we will be in for a bit of a rough ride. But I also have no doubt that if we are willing to look at a future that truly allows us together to do our stated work of being the presbytery, we will navigate and sail strong.

One of the axioms of emotional system theory (family systems or Bowen Theory) is that more often than not, we choose to stay with the familiar rather than choosing change that will bring us happiness. While on the surface this seems absurd, more than fifty years of research has shown, over and over, that the underlying issue is our anxiety with negotiating change trumps our desire for healthier circumstances. Because this is true for individuals, it is true for systems, whether the system is a family, a congregation, or a presbytery. The *prospect* of change often brings as much anxiety as change itself.

One of the important things we need to learn to do with this anxiety is respond, not react. In systems theory, *reaction* is involuntary and typically characterized by strong emotions. It is behavior lodged in the lower portions of our brains— where emotional stimuli moves from the thalamus and amygdala resulting in mindless reactivity. This reactivity might well be termed as a “rush to judgment.”

The desired alternative is to move this stimuli instead to the brain’s pre-frontal cortex where its cognitive character will allow for a slower, but more accurate “second thought” – a non-anxious *response*.

What might a non-anxious response to changes in the presbytery look like?

As we examine individually these two new “big ideas” we may be able to begin to describe such a response – how all of us, might work in concert to help the presbytery live into its goal of fully relating to each other as covenantal partners in Christ.

The New Funding Paradigm

Beginning with 2014, congregational funding for the Presbytery of the Miami Valley will be significantly different. No longer will there be separate *per capita* and *mission* income but rather funding from congregations will be understood in a new way, with a new name – *Connectional Presbytery Support*. This is not merely a change in terminology, but a change in understanding that funding of the presbytery supports the total work of the presbytery, seen holistically, rather than as separate functions, tasks and programs.

If this were in fact only a “cosmetic” change, then there would be only minor resulting anxiety. This has not been the case.

I believe that much of the difficulty with considering presbytery funding in this new way relates to misunderstandings, misapprehensions and misconceptions about how the presbytery has been funded in the past – that *per capita* alone underwrote the cost for presbytery operations and *mission giving* supported only “mission causes” – those endeavors beyond the presbytery operations.

Detailed study of approved presbytery budgets for the last thirteen years reveal that, on average, only 43.75% of the costs for presbytery operations was covered by *per capita* funding for the years 2001 – 2007 (with a high of 50.03% in 2006) and 56.89% in the years since. The balance was funded by a combination of *mission giving* and *reserve funds*. While no detailed analysis was made for prior years, cursory examinations of prior approved presbytery budgets show essentially the same trend.

What is perhaps most important about all of this is that *none of this should be particularly disturbing at all*. But it is, primarily because of another misunderstanding, or perhaps even “myth” – that *denominational per capita* fund the operations cost of the PCUSA. The fact is that it is only the operations cost of the Office of General Assembly that is funded through *per capita*. The operations cost of other main arm of the denomination, the Mission Agency, is completely funded through *mission giving*. This includes all the personnel and administrative expense for the offices of Compassion Peace and Justice; Evangelism and Church Growth; Racial, Ethnic and Women’s Ministries; Theology and Worship; Vocation; and World Mission, as well as those for the “all more obvious “operational departments” of Executive Director; Executive Administrator, and Communications and Funds Development.

In many ways, this is no different than what happens in nearly all congregations. Pledges and offerings are given for the *overall work* of the church, including personnel and administrative costs, because personnel and administration are rightly seen as part of the church’s overall *purpose* or *mission*. Everything a congregation does, should be understood as furthering its *purpose* (or its *mission*) including its work beyond its walls.

Unfortunately, the use of the word *mission* to define this work only contributes to our misunderstanding; the better word for this work is *outreach*.

So meaningful conversations about presbytery funding, must relate to the presbytery's *purpose* as well. For the Presbytery of the Miami Valley, we approved in September 2012 a very precise and well-defined statement of that purpose in our covenant:

The presbytery prepares, equips, and nurtures congregations in their ministries for God's mission for the transformation of creation and humanity by calling all people to Christ.²

So if the presbytery's work, like a congregation, must further its purpose (which is to prepare, equip, and nurture congregations) then it is to this purpose that all funding must apply.

Small Church Transformation

About 54 percent of the congregations in the Presbytery of the Miami Valley have fewer than 125 members. About two-thirds of these have part-time pastoral positions or vacant pulpits that are filled on a supply basis. While there is nothing "magical" about this 125 member threshold, it is generally fair to say that congregations of this size face challenges specifically related to their size, most common is the difficulty in being little more than a chaplaincy as opposed to a church – that is, the primary work of many small congregations is taking care of its members rather than undertaking ministry beyond their walls.

This is not surprising, nor unique to this presbytery. In 2012, half of the 10,262 for congregations in the PCUSA had memberships below 89. An important way to process this is that over last fifty years, while the US population has *increased* almost 66%, membership in the PCUSA (including the former denominations prior to reunion) has *decreased* by about 53%. The net effect is that the PCUSA's "market share" of the population is slightly more than one-fourth of what it was in 1963

Not surprisingly this does not bode well for the denomination's future. Without increasing the "market share" (i.e. making new Presbyterians), more and more congregations will close. Some estimates have been as high as twenty-five percent over the next ten years, mostly due to the growing numbers of small congregations across the denomination and the trends that have them paradoxically growing smaller.

² Presbytery Covenant, adopted September 11, 2012, amended September 10, 2013

In November, the presbytery made this statement:

The Presbytery of the Miami Valley commits itself to small church transformation and vitality, directing the Committee on Ministry to develop a strategy, including financial implications, and report back to the presbytery by the February 2014 meeting. We do this because this undertaking lies at the heart of who we profess to be in connection with one another.

In February there will be an informational strategy report given to presbytery. It will outline a two stage program that first, will work with interested congregations to analyze and assess “readiness” for transformation; and second, a three-year undertaking involving education, training, counsel and discernment. This is clearly a “big idea” and one that departs from significantly from other transformation (or redevelopment) efforts in that its initial phase, determining readiness, will be based on information and understanding that reflect much of the cutting-edge work done by well-respected contemporary church theorists, and in ways that will move beyond “survival motives” for congregational participation.

This readiness assessment, while no guarantee of success, will allow the presbytery to use its resources in this program where there might do the most good, something more imperative than ever before, but an idea that is well-supported by evidence of Jesus’ *intentional* ministry.

As of this writing, this idea has drawn little interest since the commitment was made in November, but we can be quite confident that as the presbytery begins to undertake this work, there are going to be some concerns, especially as we consider what all of this might cost. Currently projections are around \$15,000.00 per year for three years *per congregation*. This is not an insignificant sum to be sure, which is one of the reasons for designing this in a way that increases the likelihood of putting resources into congregations where the prospects of success seem good.

Of course, we know that money produces anxiety, so the obvious question is, *where will the money come from?*

This will largely be determined by the Leadership Council which has given its *imprimatur* for the program. This work is understood to lie at the heart of the presbytery’s purpose of *preparing, equipping, and nurturing* congregations, and the funding of it will be seen as a way of connecting our financial resources to our mission.

This will be major work, worthy work, but also work that will ask for commitment in time, talent and treasure.

The Non-anxious Response

These big ideas are big undertakings, requiring commitments on many levels, especially financially. As we move into these efforts – efforts which clearly signify shifts and changes in “how we’ve always done things” – how do we respond non-anxiously?

First, we must be open to the Holy Spirit.

We need to remember that our patience must also allow for the Holy Spirit’s movement in all that we do, and that our timetable in all of this is, in some ways, immaterial. This is not to say that we do not need to be realistic in our assessments of resources and results, but that we need to look that both in light of how we might discern God’s leading, looking for signs of faith’s rejuvenating power.

Second, we need to be patient with our process.

All change presents challenge that seems proportional to its depth: the deeper the change, the more anxiety will be produced in the system. The key, is not to *react* in ways that look for the quick fix (technical) but *respond* in ways that move toward the desired direction or goal (adaptive).

For our new funding paradigm, this might mean taking a long view of two or three years, during which time those congregations who “come on board first” (early adopters) work with those who have yet joined the movement. This means we might need to commit reserve funds to close deficits. While this might be seen by some as an irresponsible practice, it also must be considered in light of the following: full participation and “buy-in” from congregations allow the presbytery to flourish in its mission, and our former way of funding has yielded steadily decreases underscoring a broken process.

The same is essentially true with respect to *Small Church Transformation*. There is ample evidence that congregations are transformed over *years*, not months. In addition, transformation is not necessarily about *numbers* (although important perhaps) but rather *faithfulness*. So we need to refrain from pronouncing a pass/fail judgment because we do not see evidence of external growth in places where there nevertheless might be clear signs of spiritual development. Our patience must therefore extend to our financial commitment to the transformation process as well.

Third, we need to move away from our fear that “there is not enough.”

Without question, we have been through some difficult and troubling economic times, and we feel financially vulnerable. But there is also evidence all around us that despite what we are feeling, things in our region have gotten better. There is new corporate and industrial investment in the Miami Valley; there is new retail development; the housing market has risen dramatically.

None of this denies the real financial hurt and uncertainty that so many of our friends and neighbors suffer. But we also need to acknowledge who we are and what we have, as Presbyterians and Presbyterian congregations.

As Presbyterians we need to consider the following:

1. For 2012, per capita income across the 12 counties of the Presbytery of the Miami Valley (adjusted for concentration of PCUSA church membership) is about \$37,300.00 as compared with the US average of \$42,693.00³
2. Traditional Mainline Protestants (Episcopal, PCUSA, UMC, ELCA, UCC, American Baptist, Disciples) is approximately earn 5.8% more in per capita income, than the national average.⁴
3. PCUSA members earn 16.3% more than the average of Mainline Protestants.⁵
4. Extending these data reveals a “Presbytery per capita income” around \$45,900.00.
5. In 2012, the average *giving per member* in the Presbytery of the Miami Valley was \$1,009.81 (or 2.2% of income); this was more than 16% *lower* than the denominational average of \$1,208.08.

Obviously, stewardship is the primary issue with the financial fortunes of congregations, but it is also fair to say that giving that is *less than a fourth of a Biblical tithe* clearly indicates that scarcity is less of an issue than the perception of scarcity. Such perception also permeates how leadership in the church sees money as well.

To underscore this further please also consider:

³ Index MUNDI 2012

⁴ GOOD Worldwide LLC

⁵ Pew Forum Report

Using the annual statistics reported by the *current* 55 congregations of the Presbytery of the Miami Valley over the years 2010, 2011, and 2012, the annual aggregate totals for ***actual income over actual expense*** (not including capital improvements or expenditures) were **\$1,051,017.00** (2010), **\$1,370,538.00** (2011) and **\$2,892,658.00** (2012).

These totals do not refer to the *appreciated value* of investment portfolios, but rather the *overall income after expenses* of congregations, which of course includes income from investments, and for assets held by congregation (as opposed to those lodged in an outside restricted trust), such income is effectively unrestricted. This means that over the three-year period from 2010-2012 the *net liquid worth* of the 55 congregations in the presbytery grew **\$5,314,214.00**.

Yes, we all face economic challenges, but it seems that indeed, there is enough.

Will these new endeavors yield their hope-for fruit? We cannot know for sure, but as a presbytery, as a covenantal community, we have decided to begin and we need to give ourselves the time and resources to allow their nurture by the Holy Spirit.

The Bridge

At our November presbytery in 2011, I formally addressed all of you as we began a difficult time of seeing colleagues and friends choose to leave our presbytery and denomination. In that message, I said that decades of talking about a “need to build bridges of trust” did not seem, to me, to be the way; that the bridge does not support or uphold trust, like the traffic moving across the Golden Gate, but that trust itself, was the bridge.

Since that time we have made some very good progress in seeing trust as an action to be taken – we trust – rather than something that is somehow earned or bestowed in reward for something done by someone else.

We went through the difficult times of congregational separation and loss remarkably free from the rancor and strife of so many other presbyteries. We adopted a covenant that lays out our promises to each other to be a vibrant and vital presbytery. We have met as a presbytery in an atmosphere of inspiration, creativity and at times, playfulness. We have been reaching out to all our congregations to connect better as the presbytery, rather than as the governor. All of these are signs of our trust.

But I'd like to return to the notion of bridges – partially because having spent thirty-five years in architecture and landscape architecture often affects how I see the world, but mostly because the idea of a bridge, a way to get across rivers and seas to new places (and new ideas) is descriptive and provocative. Perhaps not so much as God causing waters to stop, but like the feet of the Children of Israel, ours too are dry traveling across a bridge.

For thousands of years, the *span* of bridges (the distance between supports) was limited by materials available. Roman stone-arch bridges seldom *spanned* more than 60 feet. Long distances were traversed by combining smaller spans so that until about two centuries ago, most bridges were really little more than elevated routes or highways.

Wooden, and then, steel truss bridges (think of a typical railroad bridge) allowed for longer spans – one newly constructed one spans over 1,300 feet. But because of mathematical limitations of material and proportion, truss bridges are not really useful for very long spans. That job goes to suspension bridges.

“Modern” suspension bridges date back about 150 years or so, and are made possible because of the advent of steel wire cable. Picture the iconic Golden Gate Bridge. Two 740 foot red steel towers, each connected to the shoreline by cables that are drawn taut, but that also show an elegant drape between the towers, with very gently arching roadway below. It is the cables that support the roadway. It is the cables that provide, between the towers, a 4,200 foot wide passage of the waters of the Golden Gate Strait beneath.

But the cable is really little more than very small parts. Each cable is a bundle of 61 strands; each strand is 450 steel wires each about 3/16” of an inch in diameter, tightly bundled together. Thus over 27,500 small wires make up the gigantic cables. What's more, is that the total aggregate of the strength of the cable is far greater than were the cable itself a piece of solid steel!

I think this is a very good image for the Church, which is to be a bridge of reconciliation. It is also a good image for the presbytery – individual men and women together making congregations; congregations together making the presbytery; and the presbytery supporting the roadway, across which moves ministry.

And like the small steel wires bundled into strands bundled into cables, together our strength and our capacity for ministering to the world in the name of Jesus will exceed our wildest imaginings.

It continues to be a privilege to serve you, as it continues to be a privilege to serve *with* you. The grace and peace of Christ is with us all.