

LIFTING THE VEIL
Reflections on the Presbytery of the Miami Valley 2014
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Opening and Provoking

Faith in the value and meaning of life, even in the face of despair and death, is the second principle of Christian leadership. This seems so obvious that it is often taken for granted and overlooked.

But for a man with a deep-rooted faith in the value and meaning of life, every experience holds a new promise, every encounter carries a new insight, and every event brings a new message. But the promises, insights, and messages have to be discovered and made visible. A Christian leader is not a leader because he has announced a new idea and tries to convince others of its worth; he is a leader because he faces the world with eyes full of expectation, with the expertise to take away the veil that covers its hidden potential. Christian leadership is called ministry precisely because to express that in the service of others new life can be brought about. It is this service which gives eyes to see the flower breaking through the cracks in the street, ears to hear a word of forgiveness muted by hatred and hostility, and hands to feel new life under the cover of death and destruction.

*– From *The Wounded Healer* by Henri J. M. Nouwen*

And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.

– 2 Corinthians 3:18

Every few years or so, some scholar or archeologist claims a new discovery, always accompanied by much media hoopla: a “new” gospel has been found and “brings to light” (*speculates* is more accurate) details about Jesus’ life and words. Was he married? Was the resurrection really a hoax by his disciples?

We, the public, eat this stuff up. Dan Brown’s bestseller *The Da Vinci Code* not only capitalized beautifully on our appetites but also sadly, convinced millions of people that the story – this elaborate tale of intrigue and duplicity – was true, even the revelation of Jesus’ relationship with Mary Magdalene.

I must here confess that I have this mischievous desire to see another Biblical hoax perpetrated. How I wish that some scholar, along with an archeologist, would “discover” a lost parable of Jesus that would go something like this:

My children, I have told you many stories of what the Kingdom of Heaven is like, but here I wish to shift direction, so listen closely. Unlike the Kingdom of Heaven, the kingdom of earth is like a great city, whose inhabitants know nothing of what lies beyond the walls. They are happy, at least they think they are, because they know of no other life. All of their needs are provided by their ruler, whom they adore and worship and fear, for they have been told that without him there would be no life at all.

The ruler sees himself as a kind man, but he is unaware of his own limitations – one of which is that no matter how much the people prosper under his care, he must prosper more. After all, he is their ruler and is wiser and more powerful than they, and it is out of his wisdom and power that their prosperity emanates.

One day, while out among his subjects, the ruler sees a man clothed in the most beautiful garment he has ever seen. He asks all his advisors and confidantes if any of them has ever seen so beautiful a fabric, and to a person each replies (as none would dare contradict their leader) “No, Master!”

Not surprisingly, this causes a dilemma for the ruler. If no one can prosper more than he, then he must be clothed in a more beautiful fabric. So he summons the greatest weaver in the city and gives him the command to weave the most beautiful fabric possible. The weaver reluctantly accepts the mandate but knows this is impossible – how could beauty or art understood as finite?

After a time the weaver, knowing his master’s power and ego, as well as the complete subservience of his subjects, returns and presents to the ruler his accomplishment – a cloth whose beauty is such that it can only be appreciated by persons of great wisdom. In truth however, he shows the ruler nothing but an empty spindle once used to hold a bolt of cloth. “Please look Master, at the dazzling array of colors and depth in the fabric, and what’s more it has the weight and touch of gossamer – it feels as though you are wearing nothing at all! I tell you Solomon in all his glory never was clothed with such radiance.”

Of course, the ruler saw nothing, because nothing was there to be seen. But to admit so would also be admitting he was not the wisest man in the city because clearly the weaver saw what he described. “So yes, it must be the most beautiful cloth in the world.” reasoned the ruler, and publically gushed in front of his amazed attendants, each of whom, not wanting to risk contradicting this man on whom life itself depended, gushed accordingly in turn.

The ruler ordered the weaver to make him a set of beautiful clothes, and the word spread throughout the entire city that the master would soon be arrayed in beauty. When the task was complete put the ruler with the guidance of the weaver put on the clothes, marveling at their complete lack of weight or burden. “This weaver is a real magician.” He thought to himself and went out to meet his subjects.

Everywhere he went people cried out how beautiful was the fabric; how wonderfully tailored were the clothes. It mattered little if they could really see them because after all he was their ruler and benefactor and the wisest man in the city.

Soon, as the master walked along in great joy, basking in the adulation of his subjects, he came upon a small child who exclaimed, “The master is naked.”

Though suspecting the child correct, the ruler walked on walked on.

Nearly all of us, of course, know well the beloved Hans Christian Andersen story, *The Emperor’s New Clothes*, which has been shamelessly pirated here. Although written in the first half of the 19th Century for children, many scholars assume that in his tale Andersen was also making a point about the snobbery, haughtiness, and self-delusion of the denizens of the upper levels of Danish society.

I think there is also a useful message for many of us throughout the “institutionalized” church – particularly for our own institution of Presbyterianism. In many ways, we have become either like the Emperor – suspecting our nakedness, but pressing on hoping that no one will notice, or like the adoring crowds – simply following along because if enough people agree, then something must be true.

The last quarter of 2014 revealed a very serious breach of trust at the highest levels of our denomination. Briefly, several very high level persons, all of whom were well-respected leaders in PCUSA hierarchy, were found to have intentionally diverted funds to be used

for the *1001 New Worshipping Communities* initiative, provided by congregations through mission giving, away from denominational control to an independent non-profit organization, with no legal connection to the PCUSA. While those responsible have claimed that the funds were going to be used as intended (that is, for the *1001* program) there would have been no denominational control and oversight whatsoever. It also appears that some of these diverted funds would have been available for use by new worshipping communities in the nascent *Evangelical Covenant Order of Presbyterians* – which began as a breakaway (schismatic) denomination from the PCUSA in 2012. Thus far, four denominational leaders have been placed on Administrative Leave (suspension with compensation) rather than being dismissed as has been widely recommended by many throughout the church.

Presbyterian Outlook has been providing in-depth coverage of this scandal, while official denominational statements have been, in my opinion, little more than “church-spin.” What’s more, this entire episode has caused many to look much closer at the entire *1001* program where it seems that there is much capriciousness and carelessness with where money goes and who knows about it. For instance, there are dozens of so-called new worshipping communities that were former New Church Developments, for which other significant funds were allocated in years long prior to the beginning of the *1001* initiative. This seems, at the least, like “double-dipping” and at the worst, dishonest. In addition there are dozens of other *1001* “start-ups” that have been accepted for potential funding with notice given to their presbyteries. To me, this seems to undercut completely our understanding of covenantal relationships as Presbyterians.

Denominationally, we have become adept at creating our own Potemkin Villages so that from a distance we seem to be hale and hearty. We continue to want to stress big issues and big ideas too often at the expense of the life in our congregations, and the struggles of that life. This is not to say the church should shy away from prophetic witness of all sorts of issues but that such witness must be made from the unique perspective occupied by the church – that of Biblical and theological observer rather than politician – because by doing so nourishes our spiritual growth in each of our discipleship journeys. I submit that doing this can reconnect each of us to the church beyond the walls of our congregations in ways that can spark a rebirth in the historical richness of Presbyterianism.

About fifty or sixty years ago, the typical Presbyterian had a much better understanding of a congregation’s connection to the larger church because our whole process of education and stewardship was designed to make this possible. I dare say that Presbyterian elders (both Teaching and Ruling) of that time were far more versed in not

only the “legalese” of the Book of Order, but in its theological underpinning and historical content as well. This ethos permeated down to children’s Christian education as well.

Without such understanding and connection Presbyterian is merely a label, not a denomination – because without such understanding and connection we cannot really be Presbyterian. So in this way we are indeed naked. But we press on – hoping no one will notice.

In the Presbytery of the Miami Valley we suffer from some of the same afflictions – our congregations seem more connected to each other out of historical branding and geography than by how they understand themselves as part of an interdependent relationship to one another. A presbytery can be a good place for congregations to demonstrate and witness relationships in Christian community beyond their walls. That we really don’t is our collective fault, *but that we can is our collective responsibility*. It is developing this relational community of Christian churches that I believe lies at the heart of our work.

It is through this lens of how we have been this community that this report is framed.

2014 brought a mixture of was a challenging year for this presbytery. This is not to say in any way that there are no some wonderful things in ministry going on in our midst, but rather that *as a presbytery of congregations connected to each other*, the past year revealed places in which we have not lived out those connections as well as might have wished.

Before this report delves into some of these things, it is important we reflect on a part of our life together that is larger than any part of our *business*.

Remembering and Praising

As I consider everything in the Presbytery of the Miami Valley over 2014, standing above all else is the life and death of Laurie Elder. These words are not meant as a eulogy or tribute to her life – that was so eloquently provided last November by former Moderator Marge Morgan who toiled with Laurie for years both as scientist and laborer in Christ’s vineyard. I cannot add adequately to her words.

It was two days after being elected as Vice-Moderator that Laurie learned of the recurrence of ovarian cancer – scarcely two years after surgery had provided a “clean bill of health.” This time the extent of the metastases offered no medical hope for a recovery,

providing palliative care as a likely option. However, after aggressive regimens of radiation and chemotherapy brought some improvement in Laurie's mobility, she began to take an active part in Leadership Council meetings, but all the while knowing her prognosis was no more positive than perhaps "buying a bit of time."

So in late July along with six friends, Laurie made a long desired two-week trip to Alaska, cruising the coast and travelling inland by rail. Even with modern transportation, much of this trip is somewhat rigorous, and all the more so because of Laurie's condition. But she trekked on. A common folklore is that irrespective of the time of year, tourists are likely to see the Denali peak (Mt. McKinley) only thirty percent of the time. In fact, T-shirts emblazoned with the phrase "I'm a thirty percenter" across an image the landscape of Denali National Park are a standard souvenir. Laurie became a thirty-percenter.

It was not long after trip when her conditioned worsened. Even so, she participated as best as she could, providing counsel for many things in the presbytery, but by the beginning of September it was clear that time was running short. I had the privilege of being able to be with her nearly every day while she was in hospice – and I witnessed how much her life touched so many others – certainly all of us in the church but just as significantly, her students and colleagues in the medical, scientific, and educational communities. And to each of those she touched, she did so, first and foremost, as a disciple of Jesus Christ.

For our presbytery, there were some inconveniences through all of this – lots of people had to pick up some of her work left undone; some things that a Vice Moderator would normally tend to did not get done at all; our next Moderator will have not had the experience of "learning the ropes;" there were even some musings as to whether or not Laurie should be asked to resign – all inconveniencies to be sure.

But just as Laurie by her life brought so many gifts to so many, at the close of life she gave us all another gift as well – she let us all walk alongside her in the shadow of her death.

Thanks be to God for placing Laurie Elder among us.

Gathering and Connecting

In 2007 the presbytery reduced the number of its stated meetings to four. This was done partially in response to decreasing participation from teaching and ruling elders, often owing to busier and busier schedules, and partially because the new configuration and structure of the presbytery delegated more responsibility to act in behalf of the presbytery

with the Committee on Ministry, thereby decreasing the number of actions that might require full presbytery voting. The upside of this was that the “business” load in a presbytery meeting was lighter, allowing for meetings that might have a more worshipful and reflective orientation. The downside of this was that we now have fewer opportunities to connect with each other in convocation.

2014 however, brought us a few additional opportunities to gather. In July of 2014 there was a special presbytery meeting whose only actual piece of business was to hear reports from our commissioners to last June’s General Assembly. While in other years these reports were presented at the stated September meeting, the Leadership Council decided that calling a special meeting would allow us to gather both for another time, but to design the meeting around a revival service. This evening meeting was very well attended and clearly resoundingly enjoyed by those in attendance, validating perhaps the benefits of being together more often than simply four times a year.

Two additional gatherings were held in conjunction with the Presbytery of Cincinnati, a presbytery that in many ways, save for a somewhat larger urban concentration, is quite similar to ours. Each event was focused around a specific theme – one exploring opportunities for responsive ministry (which then also related to our September presbytery meeting, and one looking at *Glory to God*, the new Presbyterian Hymnal. Each of these also brought in conveners and speakers from outside of either presbytery. While participation might be termed as “light,” what was shared and learned was both edifying and inspirational.

Across the denomination, in ways similar to our presbytery, the trend has been to fewer stated meetings, and often for the same reasons that moved our having done so in 2007. But it is also important to also note that even with the reduced number of meetings, attendance and participation in presbytery gatherings across the denomination, continues to decline. It is clearly the case here.

Lots of reasons continue for this continue to be offered, and while there is likely some veracity in all of them, we should no longer speculate and assume, but rather talk to each other, particularly to those congregations whose presbytery attendance and participation seems habitually low. Without such conversations, for instance between presbytery leadership and sessions, there is no logical reason why this trend will suddenly turn around. This should be part of our work for 2015 – discovering what factors might lie at the root of this trend.

One of our continuing challenges as Presbyterians, is to stay connected. Certainly providing opportunities for gathering, worshiping, discerning, sharing and (yes!) even doing business, are important and essential. But without a fuller participation in the life of the presbytery, how can we model a relational Christian community of churches “beyond the walls” and move closer to fulfilling the potential of being Presbyterian?

Supporting and Fulfilling

Perhaps the most vexing part of life in this presbytery in 2014 concerned our shift to how we looked to fund the presbytery. What seemed to those who designed the process to be rather straightforward and easily understood nevertheless created some confusion in lots of churches. The net result was that support (Presbytery Connectional Support) from congregations fell significantly short than our projections. Further complicating this was our reporting of this was also beset by technical accounting complications and often was misleading or in some cases, inaccurate.

First of all, it is important to restate what we are trying to do.

The purpose of the presbytery, its *mission statement*, is a simple single sentence which is part of our Presbytery 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.

This is the presbytery’s *work* and therefore it is for this purpose that financial support is necessary. It is to this purpose that *all* money is spent. And it is to this purpose that that congregations contribute to Connectional Support.

This is the *mission of the presbytery* and in this way all giving from congregations is in fact “mission giving” – in exactly the same way that all per member giving in a congregation is giving to that *congregation’s mission*. And just like in a congregation, the costs for personnel, utilities, administration, are all part of making the *mission* happen.

This “single stream” approach to funding was adopted to eliminate the confusion and misconception that somehow presbytery personnel and administrative costs were funded out of per capita and that additional support from congregations, called “mission giving” was money that the presbytery “gave away.” Since 2001, the former presbytery per capita averaged just under 50% of the total administrative costs. In fact, for the first half of that

period, the average was less than 44%. The difference was always covered by so-called “mission giving.” The Leadership Council adopted this “single stream” Connectional Support model precisely because it seemed to be a less ambiguous approach.

So what went wrong in so many cases?

- Clearly the entire process was clouded by the fact that while there is no longer a *presbytery* per capita, per capita funding does still exist for the General Assembly and Synod. While we have no control over that we need to do a better job in how that is communicated.
- Several congregations in the presbytery have not given anything other than per capita to the presbytery for years – precisely because it was mandated. It seems our elimination of this mandate inadvertently sent a message to these congregations that they did not need to support the presbytery by other means, so there have been instances where no Connectional Support was provided whatsoever.
- In a few cases, congregations provided generous Connectional Support to the presbytery but in amounts that were less than totals of our former “two tiered” (per capita plus mission) funding process. Again, better communication could have ameliorated some of this.
- The aforementioned *technical* issues mostly resulted from the accounting software’s inability to properly assign contributions (this has been remedied) and the fact that many checks are sent to the presbytery with incorrect designations as to their distributions. For 2015 we have a couple of measures in place that will both make submissions easier *and* also “watchdog” all contributions in way that will eliminate improper assignments of money. It is critical here to state that *at no time were was any money not properly accounted for, nor was any congregation not properly credited for their overall support.* The issue had been how such was reported, whether because of bookkeeping software or incorrect designation from congregations.

The larger issue, however, remains the need for congregations to see that being Presbyterian means being connected, including financially. This is a continuing issue across the denomination, and likely results in part from a continuing erosion of understanding the “ins and outs” of Presbyterianism

not simply as rules and rubrics but as expressions of our faith in God and our relationship with Jesus Christ and one another.

Part of our conversations about participation in the life of the presbytery, must be concerned with the need for better financial support. Talking about money and giving is stressful, often with good reason because we have had some recent difficult times, but we also need to be careful not to let our fears overshadow our reason and our faith. The church is in the business of light and hope.

Related to this is some good news. For several reasons, our financial position with respect to our liquid reserves and assets is more solid than it has been in nearly a decade. Liquid assets – those funds that are held in traditional investments (i.e., stocks, bonds, etc.) – have grown by 52% over the last three years. While some of this clearly is the effect of an economic rebound, it is important for the presbytery to know that our investments are now being managed by an outside, professional consultant. This level of expertise and guidance has allowed us to be diversified in ways that provide better positioning for changing economic trends. It is equally important to note that these investments are all in what are called “socially conscious” sectors – investments that benefit agencies of the Church of Jesus Christ.

In addition to the “market” growth, we have developed an investment income stream from the mortgages and loans we hold primarily from properties we have sold. The reality of selling church property throughout much of our presbytery is that it is not a strong market at all. There are few buyers for such properties, and under Ohio law, the former church properties return to the tax rolls after a year. So we have been pro-active in working with non-Presbyterian congregations to structure sales in ways that allow them to purchase the property. While this has clearly added responsibilities to our professional staff, it has provided another stream of investment income, and perhaps equally importantly, the fact that these properties continue to be used for the Church of Jesus Christ, helps us understand that as Presbyterians, we are only one part of God’s glorious church.

Because of all of this, I believe we should adopt a process authorizing the Trustees to draw from this investment income to help fund the work of the presbytery. This is no different from how many congregations, with significant reserves, use those funds for their ministry. For instance, at our current rates of growth, a use of five to six percent of the value of our investments would still allow positive gains each year. This does not mean that congregations “need not give to the presbytery” but that in the short

term, as we work to strengthen our financial support in connection, we alleviate some of the stress that we often feel.

Transforming and Considering

One of the new initiatives undertaken in 2014 was developing a process for small church transformation. A group of very diligent persons from throughout the presbytery met for much of the three quarters of the year to design the process. What made this approach different from other transformation programs elsewhere did not specifically relate to the actual transformation work – there are lots of good examples of approaches that can help a congregation to be open to God’s leading for change – but rather in designing a rigorous process by which interested congregations would be evaluated as to their commitment and “readiness” to transformative work. Over and over we have seen good work undertaken by congregations that talked about wanting to transform, but in truth were not ready and thus made no real effort or commitment. The rate of “success” in transformation programs generally falls between 25% and 30% – it is the intention of our initiative that this rate can be positively changed because the participants will be those who are most ready and committed.

In October, as scheduled, the sessions of about 25 congregations in the presbytery (those meeting several “threshold” criteria to become part of the process) were invited to consider applying. There was no financial commitment for this initial stage, although there was a rigorous amount of work to demonstrate “readiness.” Sadly, more than half of the sessions or pastors never responded at all, even though several of these have asked COM many times, “What can you do to help us grow?” Of the remainder, most declined the invitation (generally stating that they did not have the energy or desire to change) with about four expressed real interest and a willingness to undertake the initial step’s work.

The actual process of actually working with these sessions needed to be postponed until the 2015 Budget issues were sorted as the presbytery’s cost to assist these congregations in the actual transformation process (which will cover about three years) are dependent of the passage of a budget. But the transformation team is confident that everything will begin in earnest soon.

The future of those congregations that either did not respond at all, or declined out of their awareness that they do not want to, or cannot, transform, needs now to be considered and examined by COM. *This is a stewardship issue for the entire presbytery.* As we have learned over the past several years, congregations that close, often do so at significant financial cost to the presbytery primarily due to the expense of maintaining

and protecting closed buildings, and in some cases, because of legal requirements to repair property *prior to even offering them for sale*. Added to this is the reality that Ohio property law allows for only a one-year continuance of property tax exempt status for closed church buildings, after which the presbytery, as owner, is liable.

The future of small congregations, whether they can continue or how they might cease, continues to beset this and other denominations. I believe our attention to this issue is necessary and faithful if we are to relate to other as part of the Presbyterian Church.

Imagining, Dreaming and Designing

At every gathering of presbytery leaders throughout the denomination, conversations inevitably turn the same direction, eliciting the same question, “What kinds of things are you doing in your presbytery to bring it vitality, to better-engage congregations, to save small churches?” There are lots of answers, all pretty good ones, and all pretty useful but at each gathering the din grows stronger.

For a few years, responses from our presbytery’s leaders seemed to make folks take a bit of notice. It seemed that we were really onto something with our so-called new design – that attempted to shift the decision-making concerning how congregations might interact to become the presbytery, away from a council at the top of the organizational, instead placing it with a more amorphous and responsive group which dealt directly with congregations in shared goals for outreach. This allowed the aforementioned “top” council to be more concerned with helping the presbytery determine an overall vision for itself. The successes of this were 1) to expand the mission and outreach of congregations working together (as networks) that often transcended theological differences and local geographies, and 2) to understand the work of the presbytery, not as some sort of a “super congregation” essentially replicating some of the work of a congregation, but rather as an agency to “prepare, equip, and nurture congregations in their ministries for God’s mission.”

These two ideas got a bit of “play” around the denomination – as did others from different presbyteries. But the conversations still go on. We are all looking for “just the right thing” that’ll turn things all around – and once again our congregations will be thriving and our presbytery coffers will be full.

Absent this, we are seeing more and more presbyteries move away from staff-led organized entities because such no longer seems affordable. This past year, the Presbytery

of the Twin Cities took a first major step in that direction by eliminating a staff position of executive or general presbyter – instead vesting that authority with several committees of volunteers and a part-time professional stated clerk. The move was driven by finances – or rather the lack of them. Please also remember that Twin Cities, when it hosted the 219th General Assembly in 2010, seemed to lift itself up as a model of financial and institutional health.

This has occurred elsewhere over the last few years – some presbyteries have closed offices and staff completely – instead seeing themselves as organized in only a virtual world. Most day-to-day stuff works well – finding forms and documents for instance, but for the more difficult normal tasks, searching for a pastor for instance, the process is fraught with difficulty and pitfall – detailed reference checks pretty much do not exist – and without such, important information is never shared or considered; which leads to obvious risks. In such presbyteries it is more difficult to provide assistance to smaller congregations in need of counsel or resources. And property issues, which are becoming more and more a part of our shared life and, are also becoming more and more complex, receive no consistent counsel beyond a legalistic process.

None of this is to say that presbyteries can only exist by those structures and manners that have typified our denomination for over the last five decades or so, but rather, if there might be a better model out there for this covenantal relationship called a presbytery, how might we go about figuring it out?

From my vantage point nothing to date seems likely to discover this without relying on lots of *rules of chance, trial and error*, or just plain *coincidence*. This is not because Presbyterians are neither intelligent nor resourceful, indeed the contrary is generally quite the case, but rather because we, as the institutionalized church is, like so many other institutionalized organizations, beholden “to trying to work with what we have.”

We tweak.
We shift.
We rename.
We reassign.
We fix.

We all do this because our socio-political infrastructure is complex and often understood as tenured. Every time there is a shake-up in the denominational structure in Louisville it usually shows up not much more than something like the retitling of General Assembly Mission Council to the Presbyterian Mission Agency – there are some differences to be sure – more streamlined departments at times; and clearer mandates perhaps where

some responsibility might be vested – but the driving force behind doing all of this is usually a response to the dwindling resources (personal and economic) that power this level of the denomination, and sadly the result is often little more effective than rearranging the deck chairs on a sinking ship. (More on that later.) This is how we, the institutionalized church often copes with the changing world, looking for *technical solutions* to problems requiring *adaptive change*.

Here is an interesting, real-life example:

The system by which congregations call new pastors is vested in the Office of Vocation, which in turns operates the Church Leadership Connection – the process that provides for computer matching between candidates and congregations. With a few outlying exceptions, the system does not work – at least not work to anywhere near the usefulness and efficiency it should. The CLC’s computer matching system is entirely based on a numerical preference system, meaning that (in very simplified terms) congregations seeking pastors who are gifted preachers and educators for instance, are matched by the computer with congregations seeking the same. All seems to make good sense until one looks more carefully at it.

Nearly every congregation, if it is honest, wants a gifted preacher – even those that have probably never really experienced having one – and why not? “If we have a good preacher people will come.” (The PCUSA remake of *Field of Dreams*.) Coincidentally, about 90% of candidates see themselves as possessive of wonderful homiletical gifts. If you think about it for a moment this should not be a surprise at all. These are women and men desiring to find positions as pastors of churches – and they can easily see what churches say they want! So the computer spits out matches of about ten of these criteria, numerically weighted to the most matches. Thus a PNC will receive sometimes three or four hundred names at a time – about sixty percent of which show up on all the matches.

The narrative portions of the process – whereby congregations answer questions about their understanding of God’s call to them and candidates answers similar question about their perceptions of call and place – have no bearing whatsoever on the computer process of matching, unless a very rudimentary word search is included in the match (by the executive presbyter) – words and phrases meant to ferret out seemingly obvious mismatches (i.e., “full inclusion” or “authority of scripture”). This is not how discernment works.

Three years ago, a proposal to create an alternative system as a limited experiment was made to the Office of Vocation. It was based on the field of cyber-metrics and personality decision making, coming from the basic notion that successful pastoral relationships

(indeed, all relationships) have as their components, shared visions and values, and compatible styles of working to attaining these things, as well as an understanding at the outset of a relationship of how each part approached disappointment and challenge. None of this was new technology – it was only new for the church. The ironic part of this is that so much of the real significant work in this has been done through *eHarmony*, the online dating service whose founder Dr. Neil Clark Warren is a clinical psychologist who earned his M.Div. from Princeton Theological Seminary, his Ph.D. from University of Chicago and was for many years the Dean of the Graduate School of Psychology at Fuller Theological Seminary.

The proposal was met with no real positive response because its proposers clearly stated from the outset that doing this would require a completely new computer platform and approach – the only hint interest at all was to see if some kind of “button” or component could be added to the existing system. And the request for about \$100,000.00 to develop a pilot program (to run alongside for evaluation) was not surprisingly met with responses of “we cannot afford to do this.”

Without question, \$100,000.00 is a significant sum, and clearly this denomination has fewer and fewer financial resources each year, but here’s the irony: mismatched or faulty calls in ministry frequently cost significantly more than this *per incidence* in severance, settlement charges and legal expenses, not to mention the frequent economic “hit” suffered by congregations because of lower stewardship in times of conflict. In many ways we cannot afford **not** to do it.

Please know that the women and men in the Office of Vocation who oversee the Church Leadership Connection are committed to the health and betterment of this denomination. But they are working in a structure, irrespective of how often it has been tweaked, that still uses technology designed more than two decades ago, that is just a bit more advanced than punch card sorting which, while technically computing, has none of the roots of artificial intelligence we currently find even in our portable phones. So even the Task Force called to bring changes to the system (a group in which I participated) looked for ways to make the status quo better, without really every questioning the validity of the status quo. The Task Force sought ways to make the current call system more efficient; when what was needed was a rethinking of the issue – what is the best way to *usefully* bring congregations and pastors together, particularly in a post-Christian, post-Denominational world – something that was not even on the horizon thirty years ago.

All of this underscored our propensity for searching for technical solutions to problems requiring adaptive change. All the technical fixes perhaps might buy us some time but are still framed by a problem that in its approach to a solution has been obsolete for decades.

I believe it is the same for presbyteries.

We are moving closer and closer to a time when the *majority* of our presbyteries cannot economically be sustained in their current configurations. If we simply continue on our traditional technical approach, the future will likely bring a complete weakening of the fabric that holds Presbyterian churches in covenant and makes us Presbyterian – that is churches in real connection with one another; so that the wisdom, energy and resources of the larger congregations can benefit those that are smaller; so that we may remain diverse in age, and ethnicity, and gender and theological diversity. Without a strong fabric or web, more and more of our congregations will ask “why be connected to others at all? We will see more and more independent formerly-Presbyterian congregations. Imagine for one brief moment what such a movement would do to legal process concerning property. Whatever shared resources were once accountable would be rapidly dissipated in litigation. Hardly, I imagine, anything akin to the wishes of those saints who bestowed these gifts on the church.

I believe the time is right for beginning a process to envision a different presbytery. But we cannot proceed as if we are “fixing” anything. Our process must be anchored in adaptive thinking.

So how might we approach an *adaptive solution* to the problem of presbyteries?

I believe the critical first step is to **provide a neutral field** – free from past and future assumptions, providing the space and time to imagine, dream, consider, and reconsider. This is a luxury seldom offered in the institutionalized church, but one that I also believe is essential to if the church is going to thrive in the coming years. Notice please that I refer to our Presbyterian domain of the *institutionalized* church (which is only part of the Church of Jesus Christ) which, for the time being, has been placed under our care.

It is critical not to underestimate the importance of such a neutral field. Adaptive thinking requires that before any imagining, dreaming or designing commences, the problem itself must be identified. This is often the first casualty of design process – the assumption that we (the designers) know what the problem at hand really is. Small story from my past life:

For generations kid’s slides in playgrounds were all essentially the same design, requiring that a child ascend a steeply inclined step-ladder up to a topmost point sometimes as high as ten feet above the ground, at which point the child, while holding onto high rails, would then reposition to a sitting pose and push off the high rails and grab the lower handrails and

through the miracle of gravity enjoy a one second “whoosh” and ending up in a sitting position at the base of the slide. Sometimes some of us who might be characterized as “the less coordinated” never made the transfer at the top from standing to sitting and tumbled directly to the ground. No “whoosh” only a thud and often accompanied by a broken wrist, or ankle or worse a concussion.

The powers that be (no doubt advised by their attorneys) seeking to remedy these accidents came up with a simple and direct solution: provide a softer landing place. Out of that came an entire new industry – playground and athletic safety surfacing. The results seemed encouraging – there were fewer broken limbs, fewer concussions, per fall. But the number of falls didn’t change.

In the mid-1960s a bright, brash and self-promoting landscape architect named Paul Friedberg, the father of two young boys, posed the question, “How can we keep the slide but eliminate the fall?” The result was a climbing pyramid with slides built in to one or two of its sides. Children climbed to the top of a structure that provided a generously-spaced area from which they could reposition themselves to begin the slide. And there was no possibility, none whatsoever, of a vertical drop. The end of the fall.

This story is important for us because it shows how important it is to discover the right question. Adaptive process works when the problem is understood not assumed. The neutral playing field allows for that.

A neutral field in an endeavor to envision a presbytery that might be better suited to a denomination that has been both reshaped by politics and practice requires that there be a team of persons be recruited and selected because of particular unique perspectives and creativity and not because of any kind of “reward” system (i.e., “John has been a faithful member of presbytery for 20 years), nor out of any sense of trying to fulfill a desire to achieve any sense of egalitarian process. This is **not** to invalidate any notion of representation, whether ethnically or theologically, but rather that the egalitarian process, for its own sake, results in either bland, safe consensus or decisions made to satisfy the desires of the constituency with the most power.

As Presbyterians, I suspect that we would be most comfortable with a commission model, because we are familiar with it (and generally trust its process for working) and because the charge is both specific and accountable. The other aspect of the commission is that it

is appointed but elected. Such a commission might have a dozen or so members – certainly large by most of our standards, but the task is great and will require much effort and time.

The next aspect of the adaptive process is to **build the new vision out of need and context**, not out of assumption or tradition, but in conformance with and understanding of current Presbyterian polity and its historical and theological underpinnings. The latter is critical because without such foundation, any new envisioning will likely suffer over time as the denomination evolves.

Building a vision out of need and context also requires a very thorough understanding of both that need and context. For instance, presbyteries generally have committees on ministry (at one time the committee’s specific responsibilities were mandated; the current constitution only requires a “general” responsibility essentially overseeing and facilitating relationships between pastors, congregations, and the presbytery) but I am quite sure that few people in any presbytery really have an intimate knowledge of all of the facets of COM’s work. The same is probably just as true with respect to other committees and staff. Without spending appropriate time to understanding what are the current dynamics of how the various entities of the presbytery work, it is much more likely that any “re-imagining” process will fall into the trap of the “assumption shortcut.” This part of the work will require time and effort and is one of the reasons that a large work team is needed.

What an adaptive process can do is imagine and design a presbytery from the ground up – like beginning with a blank canvas. This is radically different than a redesign, because the very notion of a redesign tries to use what currently works and improve upon it. This last comment is not meant in any way to criticize our 2006-2007 work which resulted in the (then) “new design” of the presbytery – which was both creative and appropriate to that time’s context and culture – but rather to understand that that process was built upon many assumptions and even sacred cows of that time’s context and culture. But so much of that has shifted greatly, and even in non-linear or predictable ways so that the context and culture in which the church now finds itself seem almost disconnected from earlier times.

Earlier I stated that my sense is that many of the presbyteries across the denomination are becoming less and less sustainable in their current modes of operation. How long this will take is dependent of many “local” conditions, and I think that predictions here not only have little positive use, but in fact, would likely only serve to foster negativity. However, **I believe that we have a wonderful opportunity now to look at who and how we might be together as a presbytery, not simply because we may**

become unsustainable, but because currently we are sustainable, and any process we undertake to envision a new future will not be driven by fear or haste.

I am recommending that the Leadership Council, over the next few months, consider how to begin this process – not design the process nor imagine its outcome. The important and critical initial work is to conceive of the charge for the commission or team – a charge that must be pretty much like those in the Bible to “go into the wilderness,” not to determine where, or even when, the journey will end.

Over much of the last seven years or so, I have spent much time working and studying with other colleagues trying to understand the changes across this denomination and the church at large. This “continuing education” makes me confident that this is a good time to look at these things – and in a way that undergirded by our faith in God and relationships with each other as the Presbytery of the Miami Valley. As your executive presbyter, I see my role in all of this only as resource and guide because I have “no dog” in this fight. I cannot be part this presbytery’s long term plans; I am now in the third year of my second five-year term. There will be no third term; a ten-year tenure for an Executive Presbyter is long enough.

Challenging and Anticipating

If we are to do all of these things I believe we must commit ourselves to each other as colleagues and partners in Christ *as the Presbytery of the Miami Valley* – in our gatherings, in our stewardship, in our ministries. We must become those Christian leaders described by Henri Nouwen – *with eyes full of expectation and with the expertise to take away the veil covers its hidden potential*. **We must become the strongest presbytery we can be at this time in our current configuration.** It will be only from such a position of strength that we will be able to imagine, discern and design a new future that will respect our heritage as Presbyterians, make us stronger and more faithful disciples of Jesus Christ, and bring honor and praise to God. This is our challenge and this is our ministry.

It continues to be my privilege and honor to serve among you.