

**A SEASON OF CONTINUING ADVENT**  
**Reflections on the Presbytery of the Miami Valley 2015**  
**January 25, 2016**

**Dennis H. Piermont**  
**Executive Presbyter**

For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.

*Jeremiah 29:11*

Life in the Presbytery of the Miami Valley in 2015 seemed, once again, like life here in many other years.

- A quick unofficial count shows eight pastoral changes, five new pastors, three new interim pastors, three new members of presbytery, three losses in our membership, three new PNCs doing their work, and two other PNCs which, as the year closed were in final negotiations with persons for new calls.
- While we continue to struggle with lack of financial support for, and participation in, the presbytery from many congregations, we also continue to be blessed by about ten churches that go “above and beyond” in both their support and participation.
- The aggregate membership in our congregations continues to shrink, although perhaps not as precipitately as in some other presbyteries. But the declining trend is clear. Currently, this appears to be more about attrition through death and transfer than about leaving the denomination over any particular issue. But without question, there are dark clouds on the horizon throughout the PCUSA.

*Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.*<sup>1</sup>

It would seem that the old French adage is true – or is it?

---

<sup>1</sup> “The more things change, the more they stay the same.” Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr, *Les Guêpes*, 1846

All aspects of life have their cycles, and the church is no exception. But the cycles we perceive often distract us from God's continuous moving forward. The changes in the world, even when those changes appears to us to be steps backward, are nevertheless part of God's unfolding of the future – a future of reconciliation for all things through Jesus Christ.

Last December at one of our congregations, I heard a really terrific sermon called *What Do You Want . . . for Christmas?* For me, it explored beautifully the tension between *wants and needs* but not simply in a context about *our* perceptions, but really about *God's knowing*, and that out of this, what we want, what we really want, what is our heart's desire, all intersect and merge in those words from the prophet Micah:

But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah,  
who are one of the little clans of Judah,  
from you shall come forth for me  
one who is to rule in Israel,  
whose origin is from of old,  
from ancient days.  
Therefore he shall give them up until the time  
when she who is in labor has brought forth;  
then the rest of his kindred shall return  
to the people of Israel.  
And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the LORD,  
in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God.  
And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great  
to the ends of the earth;  
and he shall be the one of peace.<sup>2</sup>

That what we want, that what we really want, that what is indeed our heart's desire, is Emmanuel – God with Us.

As we look back over some of the significant aspects of our life together in 2015, it is important to know that we are, in many ways, in a season of continuing advent, and to let this idea shape our reflections and our perceptions, because no matter where we find ourselves in our own cycles, the message is still the same – God is coming.

\* \* \* \* \*

---

<sup>2</sup> *Micah 5:2-5a NRSV*

## Sorrow in the Circle

Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: 'Death has been swallowed up in victory.' 'Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?' The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

*1 Corinthians 15:51-57 NRSV*

It would be impossible for me to consider any part of the life of the Presbytery of the Miami Valley in 2015 independent of the death of Doris Arnett Whitaker.

She was, most assuredly, intertwined with nearly aspect of this community for decades – as a faithful member of a Presbyterian church, as a pastor of several of our congregations, and as our Stated Clerk, a role in which she was consistently sought out by others in our denomination for her wisdom, guidance and faithfulness.

For me, Doris was, by far, my closest colleague, and a treasured friend. It was a privilege for me to work with her as partners in ministry, and an honor to provide comfort, assurance, and care to her family and her congregation amid my own grieving.

Over our overlapping time here it was a joy to watch as Doris moved the position of Stated Clerk beyond others' perception that the Stated Clerk is only, and primarily only, the "keeper of the rules," to an understanding, at the very least, that her work was about facilitating ministry for others, not simply telling "what must be done," but educating all of us as to how our decisions and practices might bring us more fulfillment in our desires to live out Christ's call.

Her sudden death in early June brought us the once-again reminder of the preciousness our time with each other; echoing the Psalmist's words asking God to "teach us to number our days." This event, just about eight months after the death of our Vice Moderator, Laurie Elder, brings us the twin emotions of grief and joy, and underscores the seeming paradox that our covenant with each other is both fragile and ever-enduring.

**Thanks be to God for the ministry among us of Doris Arnett Whitaker.**

\* \* \* \* \*

## **Change and Opportunity**

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.

*Colossians 3:12 NRSV*

Doris Whitaker's death was the first change in the presbytery's staff team since in more than six years (when Kirkmont Center became an independent entity) and the first personnel change requiring a replacement since I became Executive Presbyter in 2007. While I have no direct, nor properly investigated, confirmation, my sense is that it is indeed very rare for a presbytery staff to remain together for so long a period. The benefits of this have helped us all. As colleagues, the presbytery staff enjoy a wonderful rhythm in how we work together, not only allowing each of us to accomplish our specific charges, but to assist each other in better do all of our work. This has allowed us to more-fully understand our work as ministry – the ministry of helping the presbytery fulfill its mission.

On the recommendation of the Office of General Assembly, as a short-term measure I was first appointed by the Leadership Council as Stated Clerk Pro Tempore, and subsequently elected by the presbytery as Interim Stated Clerk. Very soon a search committee was selected and commissioned, and at the November meeting, Ruling Elder Larry Hollar, well known to most of us, and a former presbytery moderator, was elected and installed as Stated Clerk, commencing December 1<sup>st</sup>.

I am quite sure that I express the sentiments of nearly the entire presbytery in anticipating Larry's work as a continuing witness of ministry and not mere "bean-counting. His faithfulness, gentleness and grace will honor us all. As a personal aside, I wish to add that it is nice to no longer be the "new kid of the block."

It is also very important that all of us give Larry the time and space he needs to make this work is own. Because this change came unexpectedly, there was no planning for any kind of transition, or any kind of "hand-off." Significant time has been expended, first by me over six months and now by Larry, just trying to get the full picture of where things stand. Imagine for a moment what it could be like should someone need to immediately jump in to do your work. Irrespective of credential or qualification, none of us can simply replace another without some kind of plan of orientation. In addition, each of us, and Doris was no exception, brings unique approaches and systems to certain aspects of our work, and without some kind of "Rosetta Stone," translation takes time.

**But there is also a blessing of opportunity here.**

Much of the time in our work, we build our practices and rubrics on those of our predecessor. This always seems to make the most sense – after all, why reinvent the wheel?

But is this always the best way? Perhaps usually so, but clearly not always.

Recent organizational philosophy stresses that companies and institutions should consider continually evaluating their understanding of their mission or purpose, as well as regularly assessing that mission in light of a changing society. This does not mean that our so-called “Prime Directive” (for you fans of *Star Trek*) might necessarily be no longer viable, but rather than by assessing it against society’s changes we might better understand its relevance or its importance.

The structure of the Presbyterian Church, along with those of other main-line denominations, is pretty-much a response to a culture that was central in this country more than fifty years ago. (There have been numerous books written about this; a very good one is *Journey in the Wilderness* by Gilbert Rendle.) This denominational structure brings us to the place we currently reside – a hierarchical model of different levels of councils and accountability.

During my six months as Interim Stated Clerk, it became apparent that many of the ways we record, track, process and understand information related to the work of the office might be looked at through new lenses, which might help us to see more clearly the changes that have occurred in our midst, and what might be available to us as a presbytery to reflect new paradigms and ideas.

It is in this endeavor that I urge all of us to be patient with each other **as we give our new Stated Clerk the grace to lead us in this new future.**

\* \* \* \* \*

### **Money Matters**

Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house, and thus put me to the test, says the LORD of hosts; see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing.

*Malachi 3:10 NRSV*

Our financial picture, while stable, nevertheless continues to be troubling. It is stable because our reserves have grown over the years, partially due to purchase agreements and mortgages held by us for properties of former Presbyterian churches, and partially

because we have benefitted from sound and profitable investing. **The presbytery needs to give thanks to God for the wise counsel and creativity of our Trustees.**

But we also need to be very clear about those aspects that are indeed troubling. We have not, for the last three years, supported the work of the presbytery without funds generated by our reserves, and while the net of those reserves have indeed grown over that period, the 2016 budget passed in November, anticipates using more of those reserves than we are likely to see by the increase in their total.

Please know that this was a clear and bold decision by the Leadership Council, and one that was clearly communicated to the presbytery.

**The truth is that our congregations are not sufficiently supporting our work.** There are many stated reasons given: “Our congregation is shrinking and we are concern about our future;” “Congregational stewardship continues to decline;” “The presbytery doesn’t seem to do anything for us;” and so forth. And importantly, all of these statements (and others) are indeed founded in truth. But that is not the whole context, nor the whole story.

While our congregations have indeed been shrinking, the collective net gain in reserve funds for all of our congregations over the last five years has increased by more than 12 million dollars! I am not speaking here of an increase in *market value* of reserves, but rather the actual net between reported income and reported expenses. And during that same five-year period the collective outreach (or mission) giving from our congregations has decreased, both in actual dollars and percentage of income. As far as the notion of the presbytery not doing “anything for us,” it is amazing how seemingly disconnected congregations become connected to the presbytery at the first signs of difficulty. It is a bit like anti-lock brakes – one has no way of measuring the accidents avoided.

But frankly it seems that the reason for this lack of financial support is much more basic, and this appears to be borne out throughout the denomination: there is less and less understanding and “buy-in” of being Presbyterian.

By this I mean that we have moved far closer to seeing ourselves as an historical “brand” than the *movement* that Presbyterianism truly is. We no longer place a value on our connections to each other in a covenantal way – that is, mutual promises with no conditions, no *quid pro quo*. We no longer seem to cherish that our relationships with each other as congregations can serve as a witness to the world of what the early church in Acts must have been like.

**I believe our lack of buy-in is a product of our fear – that we do not have enough, or that we will not have enough, or that that there will not be enough.**

Recently I had dinner with an old friend who now lives outside of Charlotte NC. Reggie Tuggle and I knew each other in New York a while back when we were both quite a bit younger. For more than 35 years, Reggie was the pastor of Memorial Presbyterian Church in Roosevelt NY, a predominately African-American community and one of the poorest on Long Island. For the first decade or so, he commuted from New Haven CT where he was a professor at Yale, because Memorial was a tiny congregation of about forty. When he retired, Memorial was the largest congregation in the presbytery, had more than two dozen outreach ministries (each of which was begun during his time there) and was a model for stewardship in the denomination.

When other pastors asked, “What’s your secret to growing stewardship?” Reggie’s answer was always the same, “I have a five word stewardship sermon. I stand up and say, ‘We are a tithing congregation,’ and I sit back down.”

It took several years and lots of effort for Memorial to make the shift. There was Bible study – begun with a single class led by the pastor, and growing to elder-led Bible classes every day. Reggie was clear that stewardship was Biblical, it was part of faith, and most importantly, it was not fundraising. Within a year or so he broached the idea to the session of becoming a *tithing congregation*. Of course that meant each of the elders *had* to tithe. Now I have no idea if everyone in the congregation did buy-in, nor even if *most* of them did, but I do know that around the time of the millennial, Memorial’s average pledge was about two and a half times *today’s* denominational average! “We are a tithing congregation.”

The average pledge in our presbytery is perhaps eighty-percent of the denominational average. Most of our congregations essentially see stewardship as only about raising money and then, only at one time during the year. I believe Presbyterian congregations must begin to change our contexts of giving out of what is left over, to giving from the top; from giving in fear of our sense of scarcity, to witnessing in faith to God’s abundance. I believe we need to refocus our conversations about money and stewardship so that they are undergirded by Biblical authority. And I believe that this is an undertaking worthy of each and all of our congregations, and in this way we might be the start of a new movement within our denomination.

Over these last eight years, I have likely preached more stewardship sermons in more congregations than anyone else in this presbytery. **I am happy, and quite unafraid, to preach on this wherever I am asked.**

I also believe it would be a good idea if we could establish an ad hoc **Stewardship Advisory Group** to work with pastors and sessions in order for all of us to become more comfortable with having the necessary, but often difficult, conversations about money and faith. This ad hoc group should be composed of women and men *who have been able to clearly communicate their own stories of giving through their faith, who are unafraid of witnessing about money to others*, and who are willing to mentor pastors and sessions. Please let me know if any of you might be interested in undertaking such a role in ministry.

\* \* \* \* \*

### **Keeping Community**

Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins. Be hospitable to one another without complaining. Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received. Whoever speaks must do so as one speaking the very words of God; whoever serves must do so with the strength that God supplies, so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ. To him belong the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.

*1 Peter 4:8-11 NRSV*

In light of the continued downward trend of financial support for the presbytery, it should come as no surprise that there is also a direct relationship with participation in the life of the presbytery.

Participation can take several forms. The most essential is, of course, being part of our discernment and deliberative process – that is having a congregational presence from pastors and ruling elder commissioners *regularly* at presbytery meetings. There are numerous congregations which almost never have either their pastor or a ruling elder present. If you look to find from where arises the common refrain, “We don’t know what the presbytery does,” the attendance list in presbytery minutes is a very good place to start.

Without question, our lives are full and complicated, and time is precious. And without question, the last thing many of us want is another meeting in our lives. But our participation together in discernment, decision-making, and fellowship, must be understood as more than simply *another meeting* – how we relate with each other as congregations is at the very core of being Presbyterian. Our seeking God’s leading for the church is a collective effort based on the premise that together we might discern more faithfully through the *wisdom* of council – that we often better discern the Holy Spirit as we listen to voices that are different from our own. This is an idea that is indistinguishable from our Presbyterian identity.

Another form of participation moves on from there – directly working with others to make the engine of the presbytery “go,” serving on presbytery committees and commissions. The work of the presbytery – *preparing, equipping and nurturing congregations in their ministries* – also must be done with as wide participation as possible because committees and commissions also look to collectively seek the will of God. Think about the parallels in a healthy congregation. While there is very competent professional staff to oversee and coordinate things, the lifeblood of vitality comes from the women and men who serve on the session, care for the congregation as deacons, sing in the choir, teach the gospel to children, and on and on.

For all of the committees of the Presbytery of the Miami Valley to operate at full strength requires around six dozen people, divided equally between teaching and ruling elders. Yet each year, it becomes rarer and rarer to see those committees fully staffed. And, when you consider that in any single year there might be committee vacancies numbering no more than one-third of those six dozen (and rarely that many), it does not seem that finding people to make these kinds of commitments should be so difficult. But it is. In fact, all the ruling elder members of all the committees, together represent just a bit more than a dozen congregations.

The presbytery committee on Nominations continues to struggle. Part of this is the self-inflicted wound typical church practice – we ask the same people over and over again to serve. While without question these persons have the knowledge, experience, and faith that makes for good leadership, our over-reliance on a largely unchanging pool of talent keeps us from nurturing new leadership.

Consider again the healthy congregation. Members are nurtured to assume roles of service and leadership as a *regular* part of congregational life. This not only allows for new voices and new perspectives, but helps the entire community grow in its faith, because engaged members of congregations truly live as witnesses to the gospel.

So how can the presbytery nurture new leadership?

**It needs to begin with a new mindset for identifying potential leaders.** Our committee on Nominations is asking for help primarily from pastors of churches to look for *those in their congregations possessing gifts to serve beyond the local church*, and submit those names to the committee. This is not “business as usual;” this is not a request to name folks for specific slots; the committee will interview persons and then discern where best they might serve.

This is going to take time, and during this interval of course, committees will still need to be staffed. So the committee on Nominations will be operating essentially on two tracks, **but the goal**, which can only be achieved with the help of all our congregations, is to **nurture new leaders**.

\* \* \* \* \*

### **The Character of Leadership**

But Jesus called them to him and said, ‘You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.’

Matthew 20:25-28 NRSV

Related to nurturing new leaders is the need to examine what are the hallmarks of the culture and character traits of leadership. Part of our continuing struggle I believe relates to the unspoken assumption that the culture of leadership in the church today is not terribly different from that of a generation ago. While perhaps *emotionally* counter-intuitive, the notion that church leaders today must somehow *lead* differently and that the character traits of leadership are indeed different, the evidence strongly suggests this to be so.

The culture of our world is undeniably radically different from that of perhaps only thirty years ago. Most of us can point out lots of reasons – much of which relates to both the blessing and the curse of an unbridled flow of information, and a seemingly growing propensity to accept all information as having equal value and veracity.

From mid-year of 2015, the Leadership Council has been immersed in studying this with the long-term goal of “leading presbytery leadership” to help to bring about a new paradigm of how together we can better prepare, equip and nurture our congregations not simply for ministry, but also to grow cultures of faithful commitment to building up communities in Christ.

Is this really necessary?

Well, one of the early collective realizations is that even though each of the members of the Leadership Council is faithfully committed to the work of the presbytery, and each

brings intelligence, experience, and wisdom “to the table,” and each clearly is willing to go *above and beyond* in their service, in its entirety, the Leadership Council struggles to understand what it means to lead as a team. Together, we are pretty good *managers*, but together we are not necessarily effective *leaders*.

It is quite likely that all of our presbytery entities struggle in the same way. And given that one of our foundational premises is that we seek God’s leading more faithfully through the wisdom of the *council*, it is critical that we learn how to become the best councils possible.

\* \* \* \* \*

### **Listening for God’s Leading**

They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.

*Acts 2:42-45 NRSV*

After nearly two years of planning and preparation, the Small Church Transformation program in the presbytery began in earnest mid-year. Six of our congregations accepted the invitation to participate in a process over three years that calls them to think about “being church” in ways that seemingly far removed from their understanding of “who they have always been.” These *transformation teams* – made up of congregational leaders along with their pastors – are being steeped in a discipline of discernment, which requires both “coming to terms” with histories as well as opening up to a future of God’s leading. These teams have been listening, studying, praying, and supporting their counterparts from other congregations.

The Reverend Diane Ziegler is the primary facilitator. Diane has done extensive study and formation in this area, having been the pastor at Reily Presbyterian Church for nearly ten years – ten years that witness that size is not necessarily the only determinant when assessing what makes churches vital. In 2016, she will be joined by the Reverend Dr. Robert Wade, who will serve as Transformation Coach to these congregations – a role that has been invented out of an arising need to frame and contextualize what transformation might mean in a particular setting to the whole congregation, in order that they, out of this encouragement, might better support and encourage those leaders who form their actual transformation team. For three months in the middle of last year Bob worked with three small churches without pastors in rural Kansas, helping them to engage in ministries of meaning and vitality.

This entire endeavor is made possible by all of our churches together, as the Presbytery of the Miami Valley. The direct source for the programs funding comes from a part of the income received by those mortgages and purchase agreements from the sale of closed churches. This is a very appropriate use of this income because it means that even for congregations that have ceased operation, there is still some legacy that aligns with the very purpose that should overarch all churches – making disciples of Jesus Christ.

**While there can be no guarantee as to these congregations' future, after all it is not we who transform ourselves, but God who transforms us, this is an exciting time in the lives of these churches. We need to celebrate their commitments to this arduous journey and we need to support and encourage them with our wisdom, our money and our prayers.**

\* \* \* \* \*

### **The God Who Comes**

Each year, my wife Julia and I, for our morning time of prayer, scripture and reflection, select a different devotional or guide. Last year it was *A Guide to Prayer for Ministers and Other Servants* (published in 1983 by The Upper Room, Rueben P. Job and Norman Sawchuck, editors). Tied to the daily lectionary, in addition to scripture, hymns and prayers, it offers daily reflections from theologians, scholars, and ministers spanning centuries of religious writing and thought. One of the more cited authors was Carlo Carretto. Born in Italy in 1910, Carretto scuttled his plans to be a teacher with the rise of fascism, instead joining Catholic Action, a movement to mobilize laity. After working with Catholic Action for 20 years, in 1954 he joined the Little Brothers of Jesus, a contemplative community in the desert, serving in the model of St. Francis of Assisi and Charles de Foucauld. Nearly thirty years later he wrote *Letters from the Desert*, which became popular for those exploring a contemplative life. From then he wrote more than a dozen books, until his death in 1988.

While he is largely unknown (when compared to Henri Nouwen, his contemporary), Carretto writes from a perspective that is purely Christian, clearly Roman Catholic, yet not particularly aligned with any ecclesiastical or clerical dogma. The following is from *The God Who Comes*, which was written shortly after *Letters from the Desert*. The title sums up well the whole text – throughout all of history, God is always coming; God has come and God is yet to come. Carretto frames this in its meaning for the Church not only as the institution but as the community of disciples of Jesus Christ.

The following passage is from the book's first chapter:

‘ . . . and they heard the sound of the  
Lord God moving about in the garden in  
the cool of the day. (Gen. 3:9)

God is always coming, and we, like Adam, hear His footsteps.

God is always coming because He is life, and life has the unbridled force of creation.

God comes because He is light, and light may not remain hidden.

God comes because He is love, and love needs to give of itself. God has always been coming; Gog is always coming.

This evening, as I gazed at the extraordinary desert sky, I saw the heavenly body farthest from earth and still visible to the naked eye: the nebula of Andromeda. It appeared a pale, lentil-shaped light between the geometric regularity of Cassiopeia and the Pleiades' incomparable diamond. The light of that tiny lentil is not the light of today; it is from a million years ago.

This evening I saw backwards a million years, ten thousand centuries.

The pale light of the nebula, which reached my eye this evening, left there a million years ago at the speed of 187,000 miles per second. From that time, and doubtless from before then, God had been coming to meet me.

But Andromeda is only the nearest galaxy to ours; by now astronomers are used to calculating distances in the tens of thousands of light years which separate us from the many other galaxies lost in space.

It is a long time since God set out to come to me, a time I was not yet born. Neither had the sun nor the moon nor the earth nor my history nor my problems been born.

I am not a scholar, but those who are tell us that the earth beneath our feet came into being two billion years ago. Then it was prepared for man by the different geological eras during which God's creativity was expressed in all its power and gentleness: 'evening came, and morning followed' (Gen. 1:5).

But between one morning and another, one evening and another . . . how much time!

Precambrian: One billion five hundred million years!

Primary: Four hundred million years.

Tertiary: Fifty million years!

And finally, the Quaternary, with the presence of man, which began one million years ago.

Any small errors in calculation must be excused. They should be laid to the weakness of our eyesight rather than to the precision of evolution; creation was not preoccupied with counting, but with loving, and the precision of love is not the same as the precision of mathematics.<sup>3</sup>

We live in a continuing time of Advent – for each of our lives, for the world, and indeed, for all of creation. And this is a continuing coming that is rooted in love. This, Christ’s message for the church, must become the church’s message to the world.

Together, as the Presbytery of the Miami Valley, we have before us, a wonderful opportunity to be part of this witness. Imagine how transforming such a witness might be coming from a *community of congregations*, each itself being a *community of disciples*!

This is who we can become.

It continues to be an honor and privilege to serve with you. May the Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.

---

<sup>3</sup> *The God Who Comes*, Carlo Carretto (trans. Rose Mary Hancock), Copyright 1974, Orbis Books