

A NOT-TOO-DISTANT HORIZON
Reflections on the Presbytery of the Miami Valley 2016
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A Different Context for Reflection

My Shepherd will supply my need; Jehovah is His Name;
In pastures fresh He makes me feed beside the living stream.
He brings my wand'ring spirit back when I forsake His ways,
And leads me, for His mercy's sake, in paths of truth and grace.

Isaac Watts 1719

Each year I spend part of the interlude between Christmas and New Year's (a time when the presbytery office is closed, which is in itself a gracious gift to the entire staff), reflecting on the past year to discern what themes might emerge. Beginning with my return to the office, I carve out times each day to write and revise my thoughts on those themes. It is a process which, for me, cannot be quickened and requires finding its own rhythm. It is a time that is rich and good and one that, despite the sometimes painful pangs of "writer's birth," I treasure.

As I began this current opus, the Presbytery's Transition Visioning Team had requested a special meeting with the Leadership Council, scheduled for later in January, to present their findings and suggestions for moving forward in 2017, as we begin the final stages of my transition from being your Executive Presbyter.

I have no idea what will be in their report; and although I can make some pretty educated speculations (as can many others), I find it pretty easy to "not figure this all out." However, I am eagerly awaiting it because I think the TVT has undertaken their charge with energy and enthusiasm, creativity and celebration, and in full faithfulness that God has a plan for the next part of this presbytery's life.

This therefore, is the central context in which I write this reflection. I will attempt to give you an overview of our life together as well as present some thoughts about opportunities for us in this *coming year*. What happens beyond that time, is not, nor cannot be, my concern. As has always been the case for these last nine years, we are in God's hands. So what more could we need?

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Comings and Goings

Open thou mine eyes and I shall see;
Incline my heart and I shall desire;
Order my steps and I shall walk
In the ways of thy commandments.

Lancelot Andrewes (1555–1626)

While all years bring *comings and goings*, in our life together as the Presbytery of the Miami Valley 2016 was particularly full of such times. Within the year's final four months, four churches called new pastors – a confluence of timing which seems quite amazing, given that the time of transitions for each of these congregations were in no way parallel.

Thus the Reverends **Lawrence Bartel** (Oxford), **Brad Dardaganian** (Sugar Creek), **Melissa Tidwell** (Xenia: Westminster), and **Darryll Young** (College Hill) are now laboring among us. Their varied journeys in faith and experiences in ministry bring new perspectives and energy to this presbytery and we thank God that they have joined us in our walk with Jesus Christ.

2016 also saw the completion of three long-time pastorates: the retirements of Rob Fulton, who served in Bellefontaine for 30 years and Wayne Morrison who was Eaton's pastor for 29 years, and the departure of Richard Culp who, after 17 years in Troy, is now serving in Denton Texas. Each served this presbytery faithfully for their entire time of service, assuming significant roles of leadership in various aspects of presbytery life. We all celebrate the time that they served among us.

In what continues to be a difficult reality for both this presbytery and our denomination, two of our congregations, New Jersey Presbyterian Church in Carlisle, and Cedarville United Presbyterian Church, left the PCUSA over matters of theological perspective and conscience. We grieve not simply these departures, but our collective inability to find ways to *remain together by what we believe together* rather than separate because of our differences.

As many of you know, I believe that nearly all of this is a denominationally self-inflicted wound in which all of us, irrespective as to our “sides” on issues, share responsibility, because of our repeated posturing, short-sightedness and failure to properly educate ourselves in both our church history and culture as well as the undergirding theology.

But even though these things are likely to continue, I pray that so does our presbytery’s remarkable approach to this crisis. The Presbytery of the Miami Valley has been a singular leader in the PCUSA by how we work with those congregations who feel they can no longer remain in the denomination. Beginning in late 2011 when four congregations stated their intent to leave, we have not burned any bridges by our actions. Our Administrative Commission for Separations has done its work by two dicta:

- Do no harm to the Church of Jesus Christ
- Model Christ in the undertakings of the tasks at hand.

And, in nearly all incidences, the message of the departing congregation was there same; that their difficulties lay with the denomination not with the presbytery. In fact, they felt embraced and supported by our presbytery even in their disagreements and difficulties. Nowhere was this more evident than at our September presbytery meeting where we took action to dissolve the Cedarville congregation so that they could join the Evangelical Presbyterian Church. Pastor Anne Horton and Charlene Campbell, Clerk of Session, in remarkably brave and emotional words expressed both sadness for the breaking of the presbytery bonds, and thanksgiving for all of us as continuing sisters and brothers in Jesus Christ.

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Life Together

And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

Hebrews 10:24-15 NRSV

One of the themes that keeps coming up when we look at our covenantal life together is how much opportunities to gather for worship, learning, and fellowship – beyond simply “meeting for Presbytery business “ – is both valued and desired.

Over the last few years, we have begun to look for such opportunities to come together. While such events are often difficult to schedule (indeed, the calendars of our individual congregations are often jam-packed) the Leadership Council has looked for ways to bring women and men together for times of specific focus or purpose. While nearly all of our churches also continue to invite the presbytery-at-large to many special events through our communications and publicity system, the presbytery has also begun to “partner” directly with congregations to produce opportunities to come together. Thus far, these have been well received and attended.

For more than a year, the Presbytery and Westminster Presbyterian Church (Dayton) have co-sponsored several widely respected and well-known scholars and leaders leading morning, afternoon and evening events that have been enthusiastically attended not only by folks from our own churches but also from other presbyteries and denominations.

- In November 2015 Dr. Amy-Jill Levine, Professor of New Testament and Jewish Studies at Vanderbilt University spoke on understanding the New Testament from a Jewish perspective.
- In September 2016 Dr. Christine Roy Yoder, Professor of Old Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary taught about Old Testament Wisdom Literature.
- In mid-January 2017 Dr. Kenda Creasy Dean, Professor of Youth Church and Culture led an astoundingly rousing evening with young people and adult church leaders exploring how younger generations approach faith, community and church.
- Next September, Dr. Walter Bruggemann, considered by many as the most influential Old Testament Scholar of the last several decades will be here – stay tuned.

What we continue to learn from these gatherings is that there is a hunger for such things in our midst – not only to learn – but to connect in covenantal community with one another as well. While not every event will appeal to everyone, we nevertheless must continue to gather when and where we can. We must continue to find ways to feed this hunger, because this is how we will nurture our life together.

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A Financial Snapshot

We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia; for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For, as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints— and this, not merely as we expected; they gave themselves first to the Lord and, by the will of God, to us, so that we might urge Titus that, as he had already made a beginning, so he should also complete this generous undertaking among you.

2 Corinthians 8:1-6 NRSV

For 2016, our total expenses were about \$15,000 below budget. This is not necessarily unusual because presbytery expense budget has a bit of built-in contingency, specifically because certain expenses cannot be projected as they vary from year to year depending on congregational life. In addition, there were also some personnel cost savings over projections. While one should never count on it, lower spending is nearly always a good thing.

However, our total income was about \$48,000 below target projections, with the biggest factor being Presbytery Connectional Support. Collectively, our congregations gave about \$51,000 less than target projections, with *eleven giving nothing at all*, and a *thirteen more* whose giving did not rise to even half of what a “fair-share” proportion would be. If those *twenty-four* congregations gave at the even *three-fourths* of the fair-share proportionate rate there would be an additional \$60,000 of income!

While certainly different congregations face different challenges, what does Connectional Support really represent in view of the total financial picture of our congregations?

Because financial statistics from congregations for 2016 will not be fully reported and analyzed for a couple of months, for the purpose of this examinations we will use 2015 statistics. The following information comes directly from data *provided by congregations*:

- Aggregate income for PMV congregations (not including Capital Improvement income) was \$12,178,354.
- Aggregate expenses for PMV congregations (not including Capital Improvement expenses) was \$10,452,787.

- The net gain of income over expenses was \$1,734,567. This is the *sixth consecutive year* with such a gain. The total of these gains over these six years exceeds *eight million dollars*.
- Aggregate income per member in 2015 was \$1,391.00.
- Connectional Support per member was about \$36.00 or 2.5% of aggregate income.

It seems that, even accounting for some of the financial challenges in some of our congregations, there is clearly enough money to fully support the presbytery.

Even considering all of this, there is, however, a difficult conundrum concerning our finances:

The total presbytery reserves, even after the \$33,000.00 net “loss,” actually increased in 2016 by about \$47,000.00!

If we were a business, this would be terrific. But we not a business. We are part of the Church of Jesus Christ – specifically a Presbyterian part – God calls us to be in covenantal relationship with one another. Over the next few pages, I want to explore this idea and its implications for our money.

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Our Covenant and a New Step

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.

Philippians 2:3-4 NRSV

Sadly, a recurring theme over the last several years, not only in this presbytery, but across the denomination, continues to be our growing disconnectedness.

Historically, one of the hallmarks of Presbyterianism has been the idea that *churches connected with each other* are better able *as individual congregations* to do Christ’s work, specifically because of the collective wisdom, support and accountability arising out of those connections – the presbytery.

Today, however, there is more and more evidence that many of us no longer accept that premise.

Presbyterian churches, more and more, act in a “Congregationalist” manner, attempting to make nearly all decisions on their own with little or no counsel beyond their walls. We talk about “polity” and a “Presbyterian way of doing things;” we immerse ourselves in Parliamentary procedure; and we revise and revise our *Book of Order*; but each year we become more and more disconnected as Presbyterians.

I believe that this is not some kind of intentional revolution, but rather a formless “devolution” – more a spontaneous move toward ecclesiastical entropy. I also believe that collectively, we are the cause; that this is yet another denominational self-inflicted wound.

In the fearful “circling the wagons” mentality that many congregations find themselves in, nearly always unintentionally, decisions get refocused inward. For Presbyterian churches, support for, and connection to, other congregations frequently takes the first hit. There is an irony to all of this, because throughout our denominational history, more often the collective body of the presbytery was the positive difference in the fortunes of many churches. There is overwhelming evidence that for generations the more connected a Presbyterian congregation was the more vitality was evident.

So, what changed?

The short answer has been that our nation and our world has moved away from both the Christian church and denominationalism. Statistically, that is indeed true but only in part. Throughout many parts of the world, particularly in the so-called Third World, the Church of Jesus Christ is not only alive and well, but growing exponentially!

Of course, when we consider the clear growing part of this country’s population that is currently described as “nones” (no religious affiliation), our local picture looks bleak and the task for changing it daunting. Add to this the common assumption (likely largely true) that many persons leaving mainline churches are not simply moving to non-denominational congregations but disengaging totally from church life (with exceptions usually made for Christmas Eve and Easter Sunday) then the picture looks even bleaker.

But what might happen if we looked at all of this and instead of focusing on *what used to be*, we turned instead to *opportunities that could be in store*?

How might our seeing where we are placed as being in *a mission field* change our sense of sadness and loss to hope for resurrection and transformation?

There is an old, old story of a shoe salesman who gets sent by his company to faraway places in hope developing new markets for their products. His travels take him into the inner reaches of Brazil, to small rural towns where development lags that of the more cosmopolitan places like Sao Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. After several weeks, he cables the home office:

Am heading back to the states. No potential market for shoes. Too many people here walk around barefoot!

The salesman's mindset is too often ours. We conclude that those who either do not go to church are somehow unreachable because we have been unable to reach them. Our efforts have usually been framed around style – worship and music, informality, coffee, media – all interesting undertakings but nearly always ineffective in really making a noticeable difference in reaching the “un-churched.”

We seem to pay little attention to those places where differences have been made. And surprisingly, “those places” are all over the map with respect to worship and music, formality, and theological orientation. There are churches with pretty high liturgical worship in grand Gothic-style buildings flourishing in their outreach making new Christians; as there are congregations gathering for with pretty non-traditional worship in re-used industrial spaces that similarly thrive.

What both seem to have in common is a sense of authenticity of purpose and practice. It is this desire for authenticity that seems to be at the center of bringing the “nones” into the church, according to most of the current research looking at American religious trends. While style elements might be important when evaluating personal preference, the relationship of purpose and practice is preeminent.

People no longer join congregations because they want relationships or because they want to “belong.” As far as relationships that serve as social friendships, increasingly people already have as many as their time and lifestyle allow. Rather than seeking social relationships for which there is less room in a harried contemporary lifestyle, people now come to congregations because they want a purposeful relationship with others who are seeking a purpose and meaning in response to the questions that they feel in their lives. For many the function of relationships in congregations has now shifted from being only social to being also purposeful.

(Gil Rendle, *Journey in the Wilderness*, Abington Press, 2010)

If Rendle is right, and there is a lot of other research that upholds his point of view, then mainline denominations, when dealing with the un-churched, have additional challenges, because not only has the focus of seekers changed but also the sequence of their search.

New Christians of the last forty years or so, unlike those of previous generations, encounter the Gospel *first* outside the church, and then *come into the building to have it confirmed*. Most of us had some family or cultural tie to the church, so it was normal for us to come into the church, learn about the Gospel, and then move “beyond the walls.” But consider that it is nearly three generations in this country since the time that going to church was considered truly part of the American mainstream. Over that time, family and cultural ties to church have greatly decreased – sometimes to a point when some folks have no relatives or friends who are practicing Christians.

In light of this, it seems more important that if how we practice our faith in the world is to stand up to the skeptical scrutiny of un-churched generations, then our congregations have a clear sense of purpose. *It is those congregations who exhibit such clarity that are seen as “authentic,” and are successfully making new Christians.*

So how does this relate to our disconnectedness?

I believe many of our congregations have misplaced a sense of purpose. As congregations move toward a more inward focus, the tendency is to see their work as *first* caring for themselves – keeping members happy. While the nurture of the community is always *part* of the church’s mission, it must be *secondary* to Jesus’ command to make disciples, providing a glimpse of life in God’s kingdom to the outside world.

In addition, it is critical that those in our churches, be they members or leaders, develop an ability to articulate the congregation’s purpose, not simply reciting a mission or vision statement.

Last August I attended a “new parents’ orientation” at Bowdoin College in Maine, where my youngest child, Anna, is now midway through her freshmen year. Bowdoin is an historic New England liberal arts college, originally but no longer connected to the Congregational Church. Its statement of purpose can be summed up as “educating students to provide for the common good.” While that is a nice phrase, and one that is clearly about looking beyond the benefit of the individual, it is not an articulation. But in the orientation, from the college president to director of campus security, every speaker could extrapolate on what that statement meant with respect to how it is to be lived out. It moved far beyond simply a slogan.

I believe that if our congregations undertake serious programs of educating ourselves in what it means practically, theologically and historically to be a Presbyterian, a member of a church, an ordained leader of a congregation, then we will develop the tools to define, clarify, and articulate a sense of purpose.

And in doing so, we will also learn how we live out that purpose as Christian practice. This can be truly transformative, especially in how it can be one of two steps making stronger covenantal bonds.

Out of this strength, we can show a vibrant witness to an un-churched world.

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The “Other” Step

Now as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you—so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking. I do not say this as a command, but I am testing the genuineness of your love against the earnestness of others. For you know the generous act our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.

2 Corinthians 8:7-9 NRSV

Congregations undertaking this process to discern and articulate a sense of purpose as a means to connect better with other churches, thereby living out what it means to be Presbyterian, cannot do this in isolation of one another.

Our connections together must be seen the collective work of the presbytery, because all the presbytery truly is, is congregations in covenant with one another. The stronger our bonds, the stronger we will be as a presbytery.

Therefore I think it is critical for the presbytery to have a clear role in not only coordinating congregational connections but in serving as a centralized leader in those efforts.

Earlier in this report I wrote that the idea of our covenantal relationship as a presbytery has implications for our money. **What follows connects-the-dots by proposing a radical idea.**

I will ask our Leadership Council to consider creating a part-time presbytery staff position, commencing perhaps as early as July 2017 (should all the pieces fall into place), with the *responsibility to build and rebuild, strengthen and nurture, congregational connections with each other to re-invigorate our covenantal life together.*

For purposes of a “discussion start,” I propose the following:

- Half-time position
- Filled by either a Teaching or Ruling Elder
- Yearly Cash Salary of \$27,500 plus standard benefits
- Yearly budget for the position, including expenses \$45,000

The yearly cost to the presbytery of \$45,000 about equals the 2016 net gain in presbytery reserves noted earlier in this report.

From my perspective, there are three compelling reasons for doing this now, even though doing this will require some, perhaps uncomfortable, “out-of-the-box” thinking especially in light of our 2017 budget already having been approved at our November 2016 meeting. Whatever complexities might arise for us to do this now can be overcome, and I believe the potential benefits will be more than worth the trouble.

First, establishing this position is a *clear sign of our presbytery’s understanding of, and commitment to, the foundational belief that denominationally, we only exist in covenant with each other.* This becomes a “put-your-money-where-your-mouth-is” testament, acknowledging as well, that we have not well-nurtured our connections with one another, and that restoring, rebuilding, and re-energizing our covenantal nature is essential for our continued faithful life together.

Second, this year we are going to be in the midst of a search for a new presbytery leader, and irrespective of whether that leader is transitional or installed, *our taking this step to strengthen the very nature of our life together can only serve to help attract the best and the brightest, as well as those who agree with our perspective that we live together in covenant rather than by ecclesiastical fiat.* Such covenantal view of presbytery is frankly, and sadly, not seen as essential by far too many presbytery leaders throughout the denomination.

Third, I believe that increasing our spending, in light of our increasing “bottom line” (despite the paucity of giving from many of our congregations) can send an interesting signal to all of our congregations – *that our leadership feels that the covenantal relationship is so important that it is worth investing our reserves, which might mean that without a growth in “buy-in” from enough congregations our financial future might*

be in peril. While this is probably a pretty poor business strategy, we cannot simply make our decisions only in that arena. We also exist in the realm of our foundational precepts, which state:

The Church is to be a community of faith, entrusting itself to God alone, even at the risk of losing its life. (*F-1.0301* excerpted)

While I see this “other step” as a *powerful witness to God’s continuing care for us*, I also believe that our undertaking requires us to discern the opportunities God has placed before us and best proceed from there. Thus, how this particular idea moves on, requires that we commit ourselves to trust our expressed understanding that, as Presbyterians, we value the collective wisdom that can arise from a council – be that the council is a committee, session, or presbytery. Be assured that we have strong and faithful leaders among us who have deep abiding love for our covenant together.

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Another Faithful Witness to the Promise of God’s Care

Be strong and bold; have no fear or dread of them, because it is the LORD your God who goes with you; he will not fail you or forsake you.”

Deuteronomy 31:6 NRSV

Like many Presbyterian congregations both here in this presbytery as well as throughout the denomination, Westminster Presbyterian Church in Xenia seemed to have reached a point where the whispers of common wisdom and common perception grew louder, saying “Your best days are behind you.”

For more nearly two centuries, Xenia Ohio was a small city with a solid base of Reformed Christianity. The evidence of the community’s Presbyterian roots was Pittsburgh-Xenia Theological Seminary (United Presbyterian Church of North America), which in 1959 merged with Western Theological Seminary to form what is now our denomination’s Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. Around the turn of the twentieth century there were local congregations representing perhaps as many as ten different Presbyterian or Reformed denominations! Like so many other places, Xenia’s religious and cultural identity changed over time, so that the two remaining Presbyterian congregations have worked hard to even “hold” their ground.

Serving in a community whose changing face was beset annually by more and more challenges, most of them economic; and a community far removed in religious ethos from its historical Presbyterian roots, Westminster, for most of the last decade or so, had struggled to keep membership and attendance at levels that allow for viability. The church, with its large (and costly) building, continued to have a faithful membership, but one which, not surprisingly, had also grown older and smaller – not a combination boding well for long continuance.

Despite the congregation's continued faithful stewardship, their size and their reserves elicited greater and greater concern for sustainability.

Just over two years ago, with the departure of their ten-year tenured pastor, Westminster began a transitional period of discernment: "Can we call a new pastor, or are we now beginning an end-of-life process as a congregation?"

It seemed to our Committee on Ministry that current resources allowed for *at least* a foray into a search process, while still allowing the session to discern a different future should such become imperative. The congregation went through a process of a mission study and a PNC, formed with some very enthusiastic and younger members of the congregation, began its work. It was a very arduous task, because theirs was a call that required an individual to come in with "eyes wide open" to accept the tenuousness of the church's future.

By the late summer, as the PNC, despite still possessing the commitment to see its work through, grew tired and even frustrated, and the session began earnest conversations about closing the church. In most situations, session conversations like this begin the end game. What made this different was the PNC's sense of commitment, even while they fully understood the necessity of considering that they might never come to a successful conclusion.

What happened next was amazing and faithful and a testament to the potentiality of being in covenantal relationship with other churches – the hallmark of being Presbyterian.

Working with the Westminster's detailed financial information – reserve accounts, stewardship trends, expense budgets – COM proposed a "covenantal budget" to the session, in which the presbytery would be an active participant in its annual development and review, that presented an opportunity for a three-year commitment for a designated pastor at two-thirds time (which would be adequate for the current size and needs of the congregation). As part of this budget, Westminster would *increase* its mission giving percentage, including becoming a full participant in Presbytery Connectional Support. As

part of this, the session agreed to suspend all conversations about closing the church for three months – giving the PNC a clear timeline (and deadline).

It is important here to provide a perspective as to the likelihood that the PNC would reach a successful conclusion within the three months.

- The tenuousness of viable and sustainable future for the church hadn't changed. This was clearly acknowledged by making the call for a specific term. This action alone diminished any pool of potential candidates.
- This was really a “transformation” call (what used to be called *church redevelopment*) requiring a person with a heart for outreach, and gifts for reaching to a community unlike the congregation. Such persons are few.
- This was a *two-thirds time* call. While our presbytery's minimum compensation is good, especially when compared to our neighbors, part-time calls are very difficult to fill.

All of this required a clear leap of faith by both the session and the PNC. Each group had to be willing to accept a process that was at best a long shot, requiring effort and expense that might easily be seen as having been in vain.

This was also a clear leap of faith by COM – this is not how “things like this” are ever “supposed to happen” – trusting God to work in a seemingly artificial timeline – COM always strives to be non-anxious and orderly.

The term used here – leap of faith – is not meant in any way to be symbolic or allegorical. The session and PNC of Westminster Presbyterian Church, along with the Committee on Ministry through the entire process had to move out of the comfortable (and sometimes sadly Presbyterian) neighborhood of deliberateness, prudence, and control, and into a wilderness of listening, discerning and trusting, and inviting the Holy Spirit to come alongside.

On January first of this year, a date chosen partially because of its symbolism as a “time of new beginning,” Melissa Alice Tidwell was ordained as a Presbyterian teaching elder and installed as the pastor of Westminster Presbyterian Church. Although new to ordained ministry, Rev. Tidwell has had a vibrant career in the church for many years as a writer and editor, as a publishing director, and a worship creator. The story of her faith journey has positioned her well for the difficult work of helping a congregation reach outside its comfort zone and strive as followers of Jesus to welcome the stranger. I have

no doubt that many of us will quickly come to see Melissa as a wonderful gift to this presbytery.

That this congregation and presbytery took this audacious step trusting (to paraphrase Corrie Ten Boom) *an unknown future to a known God*, may have been the tipping point in Melissa's discernment that she was being called to this work, in this place, and for this time.

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The Setting and Rising Sun

The sure provisions of my God attend me all my days;
O may Thy house be mine abode, and all my work be praise!
There would I find a settled rest (while others go and come),
No more a stranger or a guest, but like a child at home.

Isaac Watts 1719

There are all kinds of predictions as to the future of the Presbyterian Church – many of which are made by persons of considerable scholarship who have spent much time and energy and thought in the process. As many of you know, I frequently look into my crystal ball and have never been shy about telling others what I see. But we also need to keep remembering that despite all intellect and all study and all intentions, we are *first* a people of faith who profess to commit ourselves to God's leading, which irrespective of our egos, is really not predictable at all.

As the preacher in Ecclesiastes tells "for everything there is a season," for me, the coming season of this not-too-distant horizon must be a time for us to move away from our predicting, and move toward God's leading.

- While this presbytery continues to have many challenges, we also have many remarkable strengths.
- While clearly we must commit to work to strengthen our covenant – we also need to thank God for the many, many women and men who continue to live as a testament to that commitment.

- While we must continue to tell the story that a strong life together requires giving time, talent and treasure – we also must celebrate the generosity of those in our midst who continue to do more than what their “fair share” might ask.
- While we are not the large staffed, centralized provider of programs and services that we might see in some other presbyteries – we also continue to be blessed by a terrific and faithful support staff that, with the exception of our new Stated Clerk, has been together for more than a decade.

There is a not-too-distant horizon ahead of us, and beyond is yet another. And we know that as we move toward it, we do not go alone.

Soli Deo Gloria.