

Call to the Church – A Regional Meeting of Presbyterians in Response to Moderator Heath Rada’s invitation to consider together the current state and future prospects for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

Meeting Details – One hundred and seventeen ruling and teaching elders from eight presbyteries gathered at Crestfield Camp and Conference Center, Slippery Rock, PA, at the joint invitation of Crestfield and the Pittsburgh Presbytery. The gathering took place from 10:00 a.m. through 1:00 p.m., concluding around lunch tables. A copy of the agenda is attached. Sheldon Sorge, Executive and General Minister of Pittsburgh Presbytery, presided. The primary meeting components included: 1. Opening Worship led by Dr. Sorge (sermon attached); 2. Video Greeting from Moderator Rada; 3. Two sessions of table conversations about questions circulated by the presider (recorders at each table prepared table narratives that are summarized below); and 4. Table fellowship around lunch served by Crestfield.

General Comments – The meeting was full of energy from start to finish. Many reported appreciation for the opportunity to engage one another around these questions. Some confessed that they are pessimistic that voices from this dialogue will really be heard by people at General Assembly. It is clear that some of those gathered, despite their investment in coming to this event, have given up hope that anyone is listening to them. If this event gives them even a little evidence that their voices are being heard, it was worthwhile.

Attendees were clearly invested deeply in the life of the PCUSA. They want it to flourish, and worry deeply over its future.

The largest overall impression is the breadth of hopes and dreams of those gathered. Nearly every articulated hope was matched by a corresponding complementary (and sometimes contrary) hope. What follows demonstrates some of these conflicting opinions (e.g. on whether we need OGA and PMA). This gathering reinforced that even in our small region with its distinctive values and politics, Presbyterians are truly a broad-spectrum community. This is both our great challenge and our great opportunity in a world in which alignments are increasingly narrowing their range of acceptable diversity.

Specific Responses – Session One

In the first round of table conversations, the general question was, “What should the PCUSA be committed to hang on to, and what should it be ready to let go of?” The conversation began with participants sharing what they most liked about being Presbyterian, and what they found most challenging about being Presbyterian in our place and time. That fed into conversations about what we desire and need most from our denomination, mid-councils, and congregations.

We love our theology! We love our theologically driven polity. We love that we include men and women in ministry, and that we include ruling and teaching elders equally in higher councils. We love that we are always open to new reformation, “reformed and always being reformed.” We love our confessional heritage. We love our ecumenical commitment and progressive prophetic agenda for justice in the world. We love that our church is broadly inclusive, and we love the benefits afforded by our pensions

and investments plans. We love our emphasis on education, that we don't check our brains at the door. We love our inclusivity, our commitment to honor and include people with divergent views.

Things we struggle with: Moral/sexual permissiveness. Our readiness to adopt progressive visions of prophetic ministry. Bondage to our confessions and tradition, to how we have always done things. We struggle with tensions between our tradition and our sense of God's new thing, i.e., with "always being reformed." We struggle with a sense that our governance is dominated by people who know how to manipulate the system, and with a sense that we depend on legislation rather than the movement of the Spirit to effect changes in our life and mission. We grieve that we are losing resources to be able to do our mission, and that we are losing congregations and members at an alarming rate. We have a sense that smaller congregations and grass-roots folk have no place or voice at the denominational decision table. We struggle over a trend to white-wash things that Scripture calls "sin." We struggle over commitments to political correctness that trump theological responsibility. We struggle with both the conservatism and the revisionism that we see clutching our church. We struggle with a sense of mistrust of our leaders and our bureaucracies – do they *really* have our best interests and advance of God's kingdom at their heart?

We celebrate all the good things our denomination has given us: Grants for innovative mission projects. Assistance and advocacy for new worshiping communities. An opportunity to host General Assembly (2012). Conferences to encourage and equip us in fulfilling our mission. The great gifts of our Church Leadership Connection in helping us find new pastoral leaders. Opportunities to engage in and support world mission. Engagement with the substantive relief efforts coordinated by PDA. Presbytery staff that help us when we are going through transition and struggles. Resources such as *Glory to God* and *Feasting on the Word*. Increasing flexibility in our polity, so we can adapt our mission to local contingencies. Assisting us with world mission connections. Curriculum that helps us make disciples for Jesus. Assistance with stewardship education and meeting our financial needs (loans, etc.). Liturgical resources to help us with our services of Christian worship.

Some things we need to hang on to: Our commitment to proclaiming Jesus as Lord. Our call system, including CLC resources. Our commitment to support world mission. Our commitment to rigorous theological education, including Greek and Hebrew. Our connectional relationships. Our commitment to combat racism and sexism. The support systems of our Board of Pensions and Foundation. Presbyteries – we need them! Synod provides vital resources for ministry, especially through grants. Our commitments to international mission partnerships.

Some things we may need to let go of: The bureaucracy of our governance system. Our offices at 100 Witherspoon. Our commitment to ways that worked in the fifties. Greek and Hebrew requirements for ministers. National and regional staff who do not have a spiritual sense of call. Redundant programs. Our continuing top-down pattern, in which higher officials tell those beneath them what to do. We may need to let go of Synod. Buildings that we no longer need, but hang on to for sentimental reasons – could they not be sold or retro-fitted for more productive results?

What we need most from our councils: Personal relationships with national and regional staff. Support for pastors with disabilities. Resources, not coercion. National and regional standards for ministry and mission. Education in the riches of our theological and governance traditions.

What has gotten in the way our church thriving as it ought: Weariness of congregations and leaders. Lack of diversity. Satanic opposition. Leaders with personal agendas rather than church mission passions. Being more driven by personal preference than by a sense of God's call. Disregard of smaller rural churches – both their voices and their needs.

Specific Responses – Session Two

Participants self-selected into table groups that focused on particular questions posed by Moderator Rada. Each of these tables gathered their comments and forwarded them to us:

How will we discern which ministries God is calling us to focus upon? This leads to questions about prayer and passion – what are our leaders passionate about, and what are they praying about? How do our understandings and practices of discernment reflect the patterns in the book of Acts? How does our commitment to Jesus as Lord affect our decision-making?

Spiritual Discernment is not one-size-fits-all. In some times and places it looks very different from how it looks in others.

Do we understand “spiritual discernment” more in terms of linear process than of fruitful outcomes?

How does our personal relationship with Jesus affect our discernment of our calling as his ambassadors in this world?

How does “dwelling in the Word” shape our discernment process? How do we negotiate the differing understandings of “spiritual discernment” that are evident among us?

What are the spiritual gifts God has given us, and how do we deploy them to the greater glory of God and God's reign?

How will we address the crises of trust that have emerged in our relationships? Personal contact is critical – we need to get to know each other, up close and personal, at all costs. We need to see people from Louisville regularly at our presbytery events, as well as in our congregations.

A trend toward infrequency of meetings – GA, Synod, and presbytery – contributes to our lack of trust in each other.

Higher council staff are not always courteous and receptive to those who call on them, and not always responsive. We suspect that non-response is rooted in our disagreements with current church policies. How can we in church leadership demonstrate non-anxious embrace of those who rail against us and the church of Jesus?

Transparency, transparency, transparency. Even though we are solidly committed to Robert's Rules, there is often a feeling that the biggest decisions are made behind locked doors, in rooms to which we have no access. How can the rank and file get their voices heard and respected by GA?

We need to let go of a pastoral call system focused more on pedigree than on spiritual anointing.

We need to strengthen our Africa mission partnerships, with GA's help.

We let love rule, and truth be abandoned, to our great peril.

We need to assure equal access to communications technology to all congregations, pastors, and missions.

Let's use bulk buying power to reduce our costs and to strengthen our relationships with each other.

We need to stay strong in advocating for full inclusion at all levels of our church. We need to abandon our historic patterns of sexism and racism at all costs.

We need to remember that our call is to proclaim the Gospel, not social programs. The progressive/liberal agenda does not help us in being Christ's ambassadors.

We need to pool resources, both within our presbyteries and ecumenically, to do the work of the Gospel most effectively in our neighborhoods.

Let's imagine new uses for our buildings – how could they be more fully utilized than they currently are, with possible economic benefit to us? How do our buildings and properties tie us down?

We need to be intentional about drawing in people who are not part of our community. We need to be more diligent in faith formation for all, and leadership training for those called to ordained office.

We need to acknowledge and repair the enduring racism in our church. "White privilege" is real; what are we doing to combat it?

We need to be fully welcoming toward all who might darken our doors. There is a great difference between a community that is "tolerant" and one that is fully "welcoming." We believe we are called to be the latter.

We need to encourage and promote prophetic preaching that addresses real-world needs with the Gospel of our Lord Jesus.

We need to find better ways to finance the church's mission, both nationally and locally.

We need to empower ruling elders to take greater responsibility in leading the life and ministry of our congregations.

We need to prepare our future leaders for “tent-making” ministry, in a time when the cultural props of Christianity no longer support us.

We need to abandon OGA and keep PMA.

We need to keep both OGA and PMA.

We need to abandon both OGA and PMA, and come up with a new model for national leadership.

How can we address together more fully and helpfully our stewardship needs and opportunities? How can we resource congregations and presbyteries better for their stewardship initiatives?

How do we connect better with people of other denominations and faiths in seeking together how to be God’s people on earth?

How can we link more intentionally the work of our seminaries and our presbytery CPM’s?

What would it take for us to be truly evangelism-driven, rather than maintenance-driven?

Conclusion

Obviously, Presbyterians have concerns and commitments that run deep, and that sometimes conflict with one another. We ask that the joys and concerns raised around our tables be faithfully transmitted to those at General Assembly who are considering “The Way Forward” in our life together. God be with us all!