

## General Presbyter Report - January 2008

As Marjorie and Russ Roth prepare for pastoral ministry in the PCUSA, what kind of church are they preparing to serve? How shall they best prepare? What skills do they need?

In the last few months several new conversations have begun among leaders of our Presbytery. We have understood for some time that the world is changing, that the church must as well... we have been working hard on transformation, redevelopment. But now there is a new sense of urgency and possibility. We have reached the tipping point, and know now that we can no longer maintain the status quo. To be honest, some of us are fed up with the status quo anyway! The Holy Spirit is creating a hunger within us that we can't ignore.

At our next Presbytery meeting the Triennial Visit Task Force will release a report on what they have gleaned from this past year's visits. It will point to new energy and enthusiasm in many of our congregations, but will have some significant cautionary notes as well.

The Budget & Finance Committee has done a 5 year projection that shows how completely untenable our current level of staffing will be in the future, and the Personnel Committee has begun a period of planning and discernment so that we can design a long term strategy for staffing that will move us into the future with clarity and purpose. We don't want to make decisions about staff positions simply as knee jerk reactions to a shrinking budget.

In the last 18 months the Committee on Ministry has created a strategy group which has been working with several congregations in a pilot program. With the Church Health and Transformation Task Force they have been thinking hard about creating strategies to help churches that are struggling, support churches that seem to be doing well for now, and challenge churches that are strong to become teaching churches for their neighbors.

The Council is working hard and praying deeply about the future as well, seeking God's guidance as they formulate a vision for where Albany Presbytery is called to be 5 years from now... 10 years from now... and developing the strategy to get us from here to there.

How does this translate to the congregational level? At the last Presbytery meeting Tim referred briefly to an article written by Anthony Robinson which gets to the heart of some of the issues that our presbytery, our denomination, and most main line denominations have been struggling with... in his article Robinson offers ways to change the conversation that we're having with one another. Here are a few of his key points:

**First – it's not about us!** While there are few congregations that cannot stand some improvement, much of what is being faced and experienced by many mainline Protestant churches is not about us. It is about the end of an era, a sea change in the religious ecology of North America and the role of congregations in our society. American Christendom is over.

While this may not be news to most church leaders, it remains news for many in our congregations. We who are pastors and elders need to do a better job of helping our congregations understand what is meant by "Christendom" and what that era meant in terms of church role, Christian formation, mission, and the role of pastors. The end of Christendom means that congregations must learn from scratch how to do adult Christian formation.

Congregations like ours in the PCUSA which are too highly rational or intellectual need to rediscover spirituality. We need to reencounter both mystery and a living God.

**Second – I said it's not about us... and yet, of course it Is About us**

It is a psychological and spiritual truism that we do not control what life brings to us, but we do have some control over how we respond to what life brings. Christendom was a known world, and for mainline Protestants it was our world. We have lost a good deal. People in our congregations, especially those over 55, are grieving.

As we engage in that first conversation about what's changed, and as we do our grief work, however, we are also seeking to discern what God is up to in our new time and to respond with as much wit and courage as we can manage. As we do, we may notice that we not only grieve some aspects of Christendom's demise, we are also liberated by that death. We are free to embrace the liberating reality of being Christians, of following Jesus in a life more challenging and adventurous than Christendom imagined.

**Third** – The civic faith operative in many of our congregations is not adequate for this time. Just renewing that will not get us headed in the right direction. Something deeper, something more, is needed—a **new heart**.

Robinson describes at least four key vessels to this new heart. One is that evangelism starts at home and with us. Before we endeavor to share the good news about what God has done and is doing in Jesus with others, we need to hear it ourselves, in our congregations. The CHaT Committee has introduced a new resource – Unbinding the Gospel. Tim talked about it in November. I commend it to you.

A second vessel of the new heart is the message about God. In many of our mainline congregations we talk a lot about a loving, welcoming, inclusive God. That's great. but whether God is loving or judging may not be the question. The question, the real one, is whether or not God is living, powerful, vital, and capable of changing, healing, and delivering us.

The third vessel of a new heart is Scripture. How do we reconnect with the scripture? Often in our society the Bible is treated as decorative or as “great literature” rather than the truth about who God is and who we are.

I don't know how we can foster the kind of hunger for biblical literacy that we need in our churches... but we need to figure this out together. It's harder and harder to preach and teach in our churches – to have a real encounter with the text when most adult members don't know the stories of our faith.

Finally, to create the fourth vessel of our new heart, theology needs to be deprofessionalized. For a century or more, theology has been limited to professionals, with the consequence that many in mainline Protestant churches are clueless about the core convictions of Christianity and what difference they might make. When lives are transformed by the mercies of God, energy is produced—energy that translates into new forms, mission, and vitality.

So, along with a new hunger for scripture study we need to foster new ways to talk about and live theology in our every day lives.

#### **Fourth – Who Will Lead Them?**

During the era of Christendom, pastors tended to have three roles: chaplain, scholar, and part of the authority structure of the town or community. Note that neither “leader” nor “congregational leader” is on the list. Today, however, pastors must be leaders. That is, you must be capable of helping your congregations identify and make progress on their own most pressing problems and deepest challenges. Moreover, pastors must be teachers of the faith and ministry mentors. Both of these roles mean that the ministry is not done primarily by the pastors (as in Christendom) but by the people of the church, the members of the congregation.

It means that we need to change the culture of this presbytery. COM has to step up and ensure that our pastors are mentoring and supporting one another. Seminaries are still training pastors primarily to be chaplains and scholars. Mentors, coaches, peer groups need to become the norm not the exception. It's not just the pastors who are struggling or new or the churches trying to survive or enmeshed in conflict who need help, all of us need help.

One of the best gifts we have is our connectional system... and we misuse it, neglect it and malign it. Friends, we've seen the Presbytery, and the presbytery is us. How do we create the kind of networks and support systems that allow us to show the people in the pews how valuable it is to be connected with each other?

As various committees work and plan, as the Council articulates a vision, as the Presbytery staff bring you training, resources and support... I ask you to make this a multi-level conversation. What are you experiencing? What are your hopes? What is your vision for where God is calling your congregation to be in 10 years, and how do we get there together?

At the next Presbytery meeting in April I'll continue... but for now I leave you with some questions to ponder.

Why are we here?

What is the purpose of this Presbytery?

What is the purpose of your congregation?