

Albany Presbytery - 2008 Triennial Visits Summary Report

During 2008, the Triennial Visit Task Force of nine elders and pastors, itinerating in teams of two, visited 27 churches that spanned the presbytery from Putnam to Hudson and from Rensselaerville to Stephentown. The Task Force visited 3 churches with a membership of 400 or more, 10 churches with membership of 100 to 230 (6 that have 100 - 150 members, 3 that have 150 - 200 members, and 1 that has 250 members), and 13 churches with membership rolls of under 100 members (9 of which number fewer than 60 members). It is striking to note that 19 of the 27 Albany Presbytery churches visited this year currently number fewer than 150 members. (70%) A quick comparison of membership rolls in 2005 shows some membership increases in 2008, notably a doubling of the membership of the West Galway congregation (from 17 to 30). By and large, however, the Task Force continues to report a widespread gradual and steady membership decline and this year reports a concern expressed by one of the larger congregations about having reached a membership plateau.

Survival and Support Issues

Common themes that run through this year's reports are the financial condition of the congregations and congregational survival. Because most of these visits were conducted prior to the national financial crisis, it can be concluded that weakening financial conditions have been a cause for deep concern and anxiety throughout the year. Those congregations that have endowments are finding the value of their funds shrinking and yet are depending on them to a greater degree to pay routine costs such as salaries and building maintenance. When faced with extraordinary expenses, such as roof or furnace replacement, the drain on the endowment is dramatically increased. The per capita, formerly apportionment, was mentioned as an example of the cost of maintaining ministry beyond the local community while meeting the usual expenses.

While the question of survival or "how long can we hold on" was asked, there is also a desire for "financing for growth." In other words, even in the survival mode, there is an eagerness to continue ministry, be involved in mission and share the Gospel.

Mission, congregational care, the provision of services, the use of church buildings by all manner of community agencies and organizations, and determined perseverance remain strengths of even the tiniest congregations. But evangelism is a major weakness. When leaders are asked how they share their faith, they tend to speak about their mission activities. One congregation's leaders coined the phrase "quiet evangelism" to describe how they spread the good news (through deeds rather than with words.)

Re: Member Care

Most churches mention being a "family" in some way. They pray for, care for and keep track of one another. Some are groups of 20 or so who have been together for years, some are part of larger congregations where the deacons and small groups provide care and function like family members. The family aspect is stressed most strongly in smaller congregations in rural settings. Larger congregations provide opportunities for members to work and play together and become bonded to each other. One church that experienced some conflict in the recent past and was recovering from wounds noted "we're not quite family yet." "Family" is an important aspect of how people experience church membership. It is mostly positive, but can be daunting to newcomers who are not yet part of the family.

Some concrete actions include caring for ill members by providing meals and visits in home and hospital. In one church it means moving a member into another member's home to recover from surgery. It means checking on people, empathizing and praying with people experiencing loss, sometimes driving people to medical appointments and shopping. Just about anything a family member might do to help a loved one when needed.

Pastors

Pastors are well regarded and often well loved. Churches with new pastors are happy with them and excited by the new ministry. There are concerns about pastors being overworked in four reports. Two of these are half-time pastorates. Along with concerns about overwork, one church requested help in preparing a favorable evaluation of the pastor's work. Another church is concerned about how they will recruit a new pastor that fits their congregation when their long term pastor retires in a few years. Two churches that are well served by part-time, retired pastors worry that their pastors will leave. A few small churches without pastors seem to be doing well with pulpit supply, helpful moderators and work by lay people.

In reviewing the reports we considered the question of what is the appropriate level of support of small congregations by the presbytery. We have explored various ministry models including merger, fellowship, and shared ministries, but there is an underlying resistance to changing from the one-pastor-one-church model. It is noted, however, that there are some positive steps towards congregations seeking ways to work together. It is a slow process and involved process and requires the use of presbytery's personnel, both paid staff and volunteer. The answer to the question may require guidance from the Personnel Committee and Presbytery as a whole.

As our churches decline in membership and financial resources are drained, smaller congregations will by necessity have to change their perception of how to do ministry in their particular community. The reality is that the day when some churches will have to close is drawing closer in some situations and we will have to meet the challenge of preparing our sisters and brothers for that day.

Web Sites and the Use of Media in Worship

Churches: Greenwich, Lake Luzerne, Rensselaerville, Bay Road, First of Glens Falls, Caldwell, Roesseville, Putnam, Valatie, Esperance, West Charlton, Westminster (Schenectady), State Street, Argyle, West Galway, Ballston Spa, Christ Church of the Hills, Middle Granville and Peniel, Brunswick, Jermain-Memorial, Salem, Schaghticoke, Hudson

Of these twenty-four churches, nine have working websites. This sampling is indicative of the presbytery as only 1/3 of churches have web sites. In particular, Brunswick, Greenwich and Saratoga, are to be commended for the clarity, visual appeal, and organization of their websites. Most of the churches that do not have websites are both smaller and/or are lacking regular pastoral leadership.

Brunswick, Argyle, Ballston Spa, and Caldwell are making use of presentation technologies in worship in a regular way. Though Brunswick has been doing this the longest and has become a model for its use, Caldwell, Argyle and Ballston Spa have been growing in their use and comfort with visuals in worship. Ballston Spa and Caldwell were introduced to the use of media by Tim Coombs. Greenwich has used media on occasion and is currently exploring installing a screen. Stephentown has a committee working on implementing media in church and is grateful for Presbytery assistance (a grant, and Tim Coomb's help). Also, Valatie is very interested in adding visuals in their worship life. They have been experimenting with Larry Greenwold, and have included this hope in their mission study. Christ Church of the Hills and Salem are also investigating possibilities in their sanctuary. First, Glens Falls has raised the issue, but the size and "cathedral" architecture warrants smaller flat screens on each of their columns, which would be very costly at this time. The rest of the churches do not even seem to be considering it at all.

Given the accessibility to free web sites by most internet service providers (ISP's), there is no reason a church should be without a web site at this date. It would appear that familiarity with technology is the primary issue and not cost. Presbytery might offer instruction to our churches on how to identify a free web host and perhaps offer guidance on how to build a site.

Regarding the use of media technologies in worship: it is recommended that all churches begin by improving the sound quality in their sanctuary. Given the Reformed tradition's emphasis on the Word proclaimed, it is surprising how many churches have antiquated sound systems in their sanctuaries. Once the sound system is brought up to date, it may lead congregations to consider the use of other presentation technologies in worship.

Christian Education (CE)

Children's Christian education is unavailable in a number of congregations. One new and innovative idea being tested by a small congregation is the Tuesday school, which has begun bearing fruit in several areas of that congregation's life. Over and over again, however, in small congregations across the presbytery, the Task Force heard expressed a desire to connect with "younger families" yet little sense of how God might be leading them to do that.

As might be anticipated, the larger churches (250 to 626 members) show a large percentage of adult, children and youth members involved in CE - from 1/3 to the majority of congregation participating. Four churches fall into this category.

Some are planning for weekday or evening CE for children and adults. Many congregations already offer adult education studies during the week either days or evenings, both in some cases. Men's' groups are meeting in many of the churches. One church mentioned a family retreat with 80 families participating.

Youth programs are working in most of the larger churches, though even the largest mentions that not all youth are well served. Many youth groups meet Sunday evenings. One church told visitors of their youth group asking to study theology. The pastor led the first few meetings then youth assumed leadership; developed their own creeds and statements of faith.

Even among the larger churches, there was mention of concern (in at least one) of declining enrollment in CE and of the challenge of attracting young families.

Across the range of church sizes, children and young people are asked to participate in the worship services by reading scripture, assisting the leaders with symbols of communion, or demonstrating special work from the church school classes.

Eight churches have 105 to 190 members, with participation of about ¼ to well over ½ in Christian Education. Most have Bible study groups, several state children are in worship service for a period of time prior to leaving for classes, one church has children begin church 15 minutes before the time of worship service and return for the last 20 minutes.

In spite of many options in CE for adults and youth, leaders of one church stated they miss the twice yearly CE workshops offered by Presbytery in the past.

SUCCESSFUL PROGRAMS IDENTIFIED IN 2008 TRIENNIAL VISITS

The programs shown below have been identified as being particularly successful in their specific situations. It should not be construed that these are the only successful programs operating in the churches that were visited. Rather, they are ones that address the needs that various sessions have reported. While it is recognized that it is difficult to import programs from one church or community to another without some modifications considering available resources, nevertheless, there might be ideas here that could be adapted to other places.

1. Christian Education with 55 elementary school age students; Sunday Night Adventures for 7th-9th graders; Young Life for 9th through 12th graders; Adult Sunday School with 14 different topics covered. **(Argyle Presbyterian Church)**
2. Attracting young families. **(Ballston Spa Presbyterian Church)**
3. Mission trip to the Gulf Coast; unique stewardship approach, without pledging or passing offering plates. **(Bay Road Presbyterian Church)**
4. Early childhood Christian Education with children participating in worship, including helping to serve communion; mid-week Christian Education for children and adults to focus on going to a level beyond the basics; Friday morning men's group; global mission projects. **(Brunswick Church)**
5. Mission of the Month. **(Caldwell Presbyterian Church)**
6. Vacation Bible School in the evenings. **(Christ Church of the Hills)**
7. Adopt-a-School program in the community. **(First Presbyterian Church of Glens Falls)**
8. Thrift Shop. **(Jermain Memorial of Watervliet)**
9. Transportation of folks in the community to visit family members who are in prison. **(Oakwood)**
10. Disaster assistance programs in U.S. and in Haiti (youth and adults participating). **(Rockwell Falls Presbyterian Church)**
11. Pastor sends out a weekly "e-votional" that is well received; Tuesday night Bible study. **(First United Presbyterian Church of Salem)**
12. Community Action Programs, i.e., AIDS Care, Alzheimer Care, Habitat for Humanity; slogan: "If you have a passion, we have a program." **(Presbyterian-New England Congregational Church of Saratoga Springs)**
13. Youth program with Methodist Church. **(Schaghticoke Presbyterian United Church)**
14. Large community dinners. **(First Presbyterian Church of Valatie)**
15. Resource on moving to unicameral board. **(West Charlton Presbyterian Church)**
16. Resource on church merger. **(formerly Middle Granville and Peniel Presbyterian Churches, now Bethel Peniel Presbyterian Church)**
17. Food pantry that is supported by the church and Federal grants. **(Westminster United of Schenectady)**