

LIVING INTO THE NEW DESIGN
Reflections of 2008 in the Presbytery of the Miami Valley
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Introduction

“As we begin to shift into the new design, when will we reach the tipping point?” This was the final question of my examination to become Executive Presbyter. I said that I had no idea, but that I was also quite sure that unless we moved into the new design as part of our collective journey in faith, which was the way the presbytery undertook the entire process of such radical change, then we were never going to get there. That meeting was on September 11, 2007. Now, about sixteen months later, we have not only shifted into the new design, but in many ways we are living in it quite comfortably. And while I cannot state with any certainty when we reached the tipping point, we have clearly passed it.

Any success that we may enjoy by our transformation to a *presbyter led presbytery* must be shared together – we have been patient with each other; we have allowed ourselves to make mistakes; we have allowed for new voices to sing forth; and most importantly we have kept ourselves accountable to our faith by allowing for new things to unfold in God’s manner and time.

Over this last year I have spent much time with colleagues from many other presbyteries, and I marvel that even though we face so many of the same issues that afflict and beset so much of this denomination, we in the Presbytery of the Miami Valley often seem to approach all of them with hope and confidence – not out of any naïve thinking that “everything will work out,” but rather that through our faith we are up to the opportunities and challenges before us as we continue to minister to the world in the name of Jesus Christ.

Format

This is not an annual report of the presbytery, but rather a “state of the presbytery” report from my vantage as executive presbyter. There are no lists of events and accomplishments; there are no financial tables; there are no schedules of any kind.

This report is meant to provide perspective and context for what we have undertaken this past year as a presbytery and, at times, what challenges are on our immediate horizon, particularly as these relate to our new way of doing things.

Presbytery Meetings

In February, the presbytery convened at United Theological Seminary in a meeting that was significantly different in form from previous meetings. To begin with, the location of the meeting itself was a departure from our usual practice. There was considerable use of a consent agenda, beyond which there was little action to be taken by the presbytery. Change was also quite apparent in that there was far less discussion of minutiae. And while two items were pulled from the consent agenda, the ensuing process was efficient and orderly. This was clearly not a typical and traditional Presbyterian “business meeting.” The centerpiece of our gathering focused on the Spirit of Generosity. In a process led by the keynote speaker, the Rev. Dr. Tim Shapiro, the presbytery spent considerable time in one-to-one conversations telling stories about our experience with faith and generosity.

As might be expected, there was some confusion about process – particularly as it related to the consent agenda, and there were various comments seemingly lamenting the “small amount of business” conducted. Overall however, the response was positive, particularly as shown by the conversational lingering after lunch by dozens and dozens of persons. What was also significant was the subsequent meeting of the Council the following Thursday morning. There was a quick desire at first to “fix what was wrong,” in reaction to some of the confusion over process, even wondering aloud whether using a consent agenda was really useful at all. But during the discussion the members of the Council gradually shifted away from worrying about fixing things, to finding ways help others better understand new process through more effective communication and education. And also quite significantly, the Council moved away from assuming that this presbytery meeting was going to serve as a template for subsequent gatherings. This shift alone was a clear signal of our intent to be present to change and changing needs.

The following meeting, at Honey Creek Presbyterian Church in New Carlisle, was entirely framed in a context of worship. The meeting was a continuous service of prayer and praise, with the necessary reports and business interspersed throughout. Several worship elements were presented and shared in Spanish, as fitting for the changing and emerging culture within the area and church. The

business itself did not seem particularly intrusive, and often related to these worship elements in which it was bracketed. One of the reasons this could work at all was that the Council also decided that there would be no more “sixty second announcements” or, as some colleagues refer, *infomercials*. While this meeting was quite different in form from the February meeting, that contrast generated little or no comments beyond positive ones.

The September meeting at Kirkmont Center followed a more traditional agenda, but the business portion was quite streamlined, with the presbytery seeming quite comfortable with the process of the consent agenda. This allowed for longer and more thoughtful presentations about the 2009 budget and the 218th General Assembly, as well as more time for meaningful follow-up and interaction. Much of the meeting also celebrated Kirkmont Center and Ed DeLair’s ministry there which was drawing to a close.

But there was no greater indicator of just how much things have changed than our meeting in November. As preparation for the presbytery’s voting on constitutional changes next February, we spent significant time in groups talking about how *we might honor Jesus Christ* as we consider these changes. What was particularly wonderful was that this approach was designed to allow each of us share what was felt in our own senses of faith and call, rather than attempting to win converts over to “our side.” None of this was meant to find a consensual voice but rather to recognize that even through our disagreements we can find ways to honor Christ. One of the specific intentions of this meeting was to connect it to what we will undertake in February. But beyond that, it was also a commencement of a season of prayer, inviting every one of us to prepare our hearts to receive God’s grace in the hope that our decisions will become rooted in matters of conscience rather than opinion. There was, of course, necessary business to be conducted, and that was done with our trademark decency and order. But the sense of the meeting was overwhelmingly spiritual and graceful and grace-filled. And the response from the presbytery was wonderful.

Congregations

There are natural lifecycles to congregations. And the truth is, irrespective of our wishing and longing, there are congregations in the Presbytery of the Miami Valley that are coming to the end of their lifecycles. While this is always difficult to absorb, often we make it much more so out of our insistence that keeping church

doors open, is always good, and always necessary, and always to be aspired at all costs.

Part of this is rooted in a culture that equates loss with failure, in nearly everything except for life itself. We would all think it bizarre to consider a person's death as an indication of a less than successful life, yet we often hold on to a notion that closing a church means that we were unsuccessful in ministry. In fidelity to scripture, that there is indeed a season for everything, we need to celebrate all phases of those seasons. For congregations in the final stages of active ministry, we need to develop a ministry of farewell that rejoices in the way God has worked in a particular time and particular place, and allows that rejoicing to bring clarity to God's assurance that through the changes of an unforeseen future, we will not be left alone.

In this connection we must begin to understand that if one were to look into this unknown future, it is quite possible, and perhaps even likely, that we will see a presbytery in which many congregations, historically tied to how we currently perceive ourselves as a governing body, will no longer exist in ways we understand at present. But should this be the case, it will not be because of any failure of ministry, or effort, or commitment, but rather because God's work in a particular context has needed to be transformed, and we, by being part of that transformation, have honored God and remained true to our calling in faith as Christians. The loss of these historic ties does not necessarily mean that we will be smaller, or less effective, or even less relevant, just that there will be change. Part of the understanding of change is the realization that there will be new opportunities. And clearly these new opportunities not only form part of a new mission field in which we currently find ourselves but a mission field that will grow in dimension and direction.

So while it is probably no surprise that many of our congregations, particularly some of those that are extraordinarily small, are facing critical points in their existence, especially as related to dwindling resources of all kinds, size alone is not necessarily the key determinant in future survival. There are several churches in the presbytery, with fewer than seventy-five persons on the rolls whose Sunday worship attendance actually exceed their membership, and where there is vital and flourishing outreach occurring. In these congregations the primary stress is financial and we are discovering ways for the remediation of that stress by sharing program and personnel, and creating partnerships in mission and ministry with other congregations both in and out of the presbytery.

Several of our congregations are growing as well, and these congregations represent differing sizes, styles, and theological viewpoints. What they all have in common though is being places where not only ministry is obviously present, but places in which individuals can feel personally connected to their passions for ministry, and places in which strangers feel welcomed in Christ's collective.

Churches in which these attributes are evident develop a kind of "built-in renewal." We often feel that congregational renewal is synonymous with "young people," but if we assume that this the only way for renewal to occur, what does it say to those congregations in this presbytery which are very "grey" – places representative of the aging of our denomination? Yet in these congregations there is often renewal, from new older members seeking a place of vital worship and ministry. More typically of course, renewal does indeed relate to young people, and those congregations whose renewal does seem to reflect new groups of children and families center part of their efforts to *specifically develop ministry* among these persons by committing both energy and resources.

Over this last year, three medium sized, financially stable congregations, representing diverse geographies and church cultures, have undertaken very intentional processes of discernment to discover where God might be calling them. These efforts are not part of any mandate from the presbytery, such as those often-begrudgingly-executed *mission studies* that are part of a pastoral transition, but instead reflect these congregations understanding that ministry is not only about destination but about journey. This is an extraordinarily powerful witness to how we trust that God unfolds the future, because it would be very easy and tempting to stay complacently amid comfort, and instead, these women and men have opened themselves up to responding to change – a position in which there is often little comfort and much vulnerability.

Neighborhoods

The Neighborhood concept, as envisioned in the new design, has been not well engaged by the presbytery. Only one neighborhood, the South East, has been consistently active. This is primarily due to a few pastors who took it upon themselves to organize bi-monthly, rotating lunch meetings. A bit more than half of the churches are represented both through pastors and laypersons. While there has been a bit of coordinated program that has emerged from this, the real benefit has been a burgeoning sense of community and connection. There has been some spotty activity in both the North West and South West, but as of yet no

consistency. In the North West, there has been a regular pastor's lunch among several of the more northerly churches for many years. This continues and certainly provides some of the same sense of community described in the South East neighborhood. Through an expansion of this luncheon, it might be possible to bring in more churches and laypersons as well. There has been no activity as all in the North East neighborhood.

Irrespective of the spottiness of the neighborhood concept's effectiveness, I think that there is quite a bit to be learned. First of all, while there have been some discussion and ideas to more formally organize the neighborhoods, fostering joint session meetings for instance, the council thus far has implemented any. This, I believe, is positive. If the presbytery is to be consistent with being in the "responsive ministry business" rather than the "program ministry business," it is essential that *structure for structure's sake not be imposed*. Second, it is also quite possible that we will find that despite the seemingly obvious good idea of the neighborhoods, particularly as related to the building of connection and community, there are areas within our presbytery culture where this concept might never take hold in a way that was envisioned in the new design. For instance, it is quite possible that in some places community might be built primarily electronically, as part of a continuing technology revolution and reformation. We need to be open to allowing this to happen. Our goal for the neighborhoods is to engage congregations with each other to build mission and ministry, and in many ways, how that happens is somewhat immaterial. Third, where we have seen effectiveness in the concept, our celebration must be concerned not with the success of the concept, but the result of the success. A wonderful moment occurred last spring at a South East lunch when a pastor, who has been in this presbytery for some time, and also active in much of presbytery life, stood up and said, "Because of these [neighborhood gatherings] I have come to think of many of you as not only colleagues, but friends, and until recently, I never took the opportunity to find out who you were."

Networks

2008 marked the first full year in which the presbytery coordinated much of its direct mission through networks. This effort began to move the presbytery from being an organization into which ministry was re-formed to fit our structure, to becoming an organization that could respond flexible to ministry needs as they arose. There were fifteen networks receiving formal designation for the year, several of which had received such designation for the last six months of 2007, the

first period in which the Network Support Committee oversaw this part of our mission initiatives.

The goal of having presbytery mission as a response to the interests and passions of congregations, seems to be a rousing success. In several cases, networks have replaced former presbytery committees once charged with some of the same mission focus. However, these networks did not simply become wholesale replacements of committees but looked instead to sharpen their focus and more clearly define their ministries, in light of both dwindling financial resources and changes in culture and expectations. Most of the networks designated in 2008 represented new initiatives concerned with a range of interests and concerns – missions in South America and Africa; youth and young adults; older adults; education in many different forms and arenas; evangelism; stewardship; and cultural diversity.

Most importantly has been the strengthening of existing congregational connections along with the forging of new bonds often between congregations with no prior shared history in mission and ministry.

Another aspect of the network program has been the thoughtfulness with which networks have approached their work and its relationship to funding. In 2008 the Network Support Committee began to “re-characterize” presbytery funding as *financial support*, as part of an attempt to underscore the need for networks to understand that they do not exist as merely conduits for governing body funding, but rather as the coordinators and facilitators for “hands-on” mission which has the power to change hearts and lives. In this regard, many networks have sought only the financial assistance that might be necessary to coordinate and facilitate and have seen part of their work as developing funding sources from within and outside of congregations, but in either case from persons who share a particular passion for this expression of Christian witness. And because every network is comprised of at least two partners from different congregations, churches in the presbytery are strengthened.

Honoring All Gifts

Related to this shift to becoming responsive in ministry, is the on-going need to understand God’s continuing call to find ways for the church to honor all gifts. In theory, a decrease of structure would seem to limit the potential number of positions in “visible leadership” roles. However, if our permission giving approach

to ministry really works, the reverse can happen, because in many ways, new leadership will be both self-selecting and apparent by virtue of performance, rather by “having been in the club long enough.”

While statistics for diversity usually concern categories of race, ethnicity, gender, and age, this presbytery has also begun to extend these to include culture and theology. It would be naïve to think that this presbytery has arrived at a point where indeed there need be no concerns about honoring all gifts, the past year has seen interesting movement into raising awareness and consciousness in organic ways.

The Immanuel Korean New Church Development will be organized as a *particular congregation* in early 2009. This comes not because the very specific numeric goals and structure which were set as part of the process were strictly met, but rather because this presbytery has instead looked *to how this small new church development has consistently engaged in ministry and moved toward self-sufficiency through a wonderful witness of stewardship*. The decision to charter therefore is based on a more free way of thinking that takes into account a better understanding of Korean Presbyterian church culture; an understanding that was achieved by allowing this church and its pastor to educate us.

In October, a group began meeting to explore the various initiatives into Hispanic ministry in this presbytery. The group was essentially self-selecting and represented each of the congregations in which there has been such a ministry as well as congregations that are interested in exploring such an undertaking. After several meetings the focus of this group was sharpened to primarily assist these congregations in these endeavors, and perhaps develop a flexible “template” for use by other congregations in the future. What is particularly interesting about all of this is that the group specifically decided to remain for the time being as a “loose confederation” rather than a chartered or designated network, because of the understanding that right now, being flexible allows for more openness to not only arising needs but the work of the Holy Spirit. Part of the discussions at one point concerned urban ministry and it is quite possible that a new loosely confederated group may self-select and begin looking into this over the next couple of months.

The council has become more engaged in their concern for the need for all entities within the presbytery to work more closely in order that new voices may be heard and new gifts shared. This can expand our efforts from simply the traditional advisory role of the Committee on Representation to a full presbytery-wide cultural change. One area of challenge for us is to recognize the opportunities

presented in ministry under the denominations committee on Self Development of People. The presbytery's SDOP committee is the agency through which denominational funds can be applied for local mission, these funds are annually designated and the Presbytery of the Miami Valley has an allocation for 2009. However, we need the mission and ministry initiatives from congregations for SDOP projects.

Another point of celebration in the presbytery has been our ability for congregations to work together in ministry despite the rancor and difficulties that divide much of our denomination. This is certainly because we are not of one mind on many issues, but rather because we are learning that our different thoughts are not simply our opinions but are matters of conscience, rooted in our experiences in our individual and collective journeys of faith. This forbearance has allowed us to honor God by accepting that ultimate reconciliation and healing will be by God's province and that even through these times of denominational fragility and uncertainty, the Holy Spirit works in the world.

Committee on Ministry

One of the difficulties that face COMs across the denomination is the overload of work that seems to get attention too often on a "squeaky wheel" basis. Ideally, much COM work should be cast as triage – determining where efforts will most likely be most effective. The COM in the Presbytery of the Miami Valley is clearly moving toward that model.

Whether or not we want to admit it, often many of the problems that beset congregations, particularly are they relate to pastoral relationships are self-inflicted wounds, the responsibility for which is shared by congregations and the presbyter. Often these occur because too many decisions are made with good intentions but at the expense of making right decisions. There is a natural tension that exists between our desire to facilitate and affirm and the need sometimes to look at harsher and harder realities that might require us to even "say no."

Over the past year, our Committee on Ministry has shown a consistently growing acceptance to make some of those decisions. This is a great strength for creating climates in which vital, relevant and effective ministry can grow. It does not come without cost, however. Change in practice always is difficult and always is accompanied by misunderstanding. Some of these misunderstandings lead to tensions between the COM and churches who then direct frustrations toward the

presbytery which in turn makes COM work more difficult. Our COM's willingness to do its work thorough all of this is to be admired and valued. We will be a stronger presbytery with stronger congregations, because of it, and we will demonstrate how in this regard we honor God.

Vocation

For presbyteries, the primary agent for Christian vocation in ordained ministry is the Committee on Preparation for Ministry. Because the entire process is long and arduous, the women and men who serve on a CPM face an additional burden of not simply attending to the committee work itself, but also building and maintaining relationships with inquirers and candidates throughout their journeys. This requires them to navigate a path borders the twin responsibilities of being an advocate for a particular person trying to discern God's call, and serving the church to make sure that the highest standards for ministry are maintained.

Our presbytery's CPM has spent the past year also growing as a committee in covenant with each other and with the church, as they have shepherded persons along the vocational process. What has been particularly inspiring has been their ability to hold the dual responsibilities in tension as a way of honoring God. Two of our candidates recently successfully completed their ordination exams and are now beginning the last phases of their journeys to ordination. Other candidates continue in their exam processes and are receiving counseling and assistance from committee. This presbytery brought new inquirers under care, and moved others to candidate status.

What is expressly important to report is the CPM's ability to seriously work in helping inquirers and candidates in their discernment. Too often CPMs have been only facilitators of the process, which sadly, leads often to persons who are both unhappy and ineffective in ministry. This past year, the CPM has lovingly counseled several persons as they came to understand that God's call was not to ordained ministry, either in this denomination, or at this time. These were difficult undertakings by the CPM, but because they fully understand their role in the nourishment of God's church, each member embraced this responsibility.

This past year also saw three ordinations to Office Minister of Word and Sacrament in this presbytery, two for candidates under care of other presbyteries (who are now serving here) and one, Marciana Bain, under our care. Both Ms. Bain and Kelley Angleberger were ordained to specialized ministries, a VA Hospital

Chaplaincy and a local Homeless Agency respectively. Traditionally, the main question asked in consideration of a *validated ministry* is, “in what way does the ordination make a difference in the ability for the candidate to perform?” The presbytery in considering each of these ministries also looked beyond that question alone, to include “what does our validating this ministry say about how we value our role as Christians in a secular world?” Our consideration of this is something for which we need to be proud.

Kirkmont Center

This was clearly a year of transitions for Kirkmont Center. The most obvious sign was the departure of Ed DeLair, who after eleven years as the center’s director, returned to pastoral ministry in Pennsylvania, near where he grew up. During Ed’s near year-long discernment in his sense of call, he was actively engaged in helping Kirkmont to reorganize itself in order to fulfill the goal set in the new design, that it achieve financial self-sufficiency. There are currently two aspects to accomplishing this.

First, the transitional director, David Fleming, has been charged by the Trustees and Council to begin to look at the entire financial picture of the center’s operation. This has not been done in over a decade. His efforts, while still incomplete due to the overlap of Kirkmont’s “business years,” thus far show that the operation of the camp for 2009 will come significantly closer to self-sufficiency than in several years. Part of this is due to as well to changes in staffing and program patterns. Second, the Kirkmont Center Steering Committee has been looking to a major expansion of part of the existing program of the center, with respect to science and environmental education. This expansion, for which a full report is scheduled to be presented in February, will outline and propose a time table for the implementation of a major foray in cooperation with various educational institutions around the state. This undertaking may provide an infusion of capital funds to improve the facilities, and with such improvements there will accrue financial benefits for the continued church camp ministry of Kirkmont, as operations and maintenance costs will be lowered, as well the improved facilities being more desirable for continued and expanded use, which in turn will also generate revenue.

All of this however has not been without some emotional cost to the presbytery. Ed DeLair’s departure, coinciding with a significant shift in the presbytery’s budget process as related to the center, stirred up concern about whether or not Kirkmont

was going to continue. Much of these concerns have been allayed as plans for the coming camping year are taking shape, but the entire process has brought into relief the realities of the financial precariousness of church camps in general, particularly as we learn about more and more presbyteries that are closing camps throughout the denomination.

This can also be a time of discernment for this presbytery as well, and if we are open to where God might lead, that will be certainly a good thing. We have the opportunity before us to begin to look at discovering the full value of Kirkmont in relationship to our sense of call as a presbytery, and our understanding of how we need as disciples to steward our resources. If we are truly willing to undertake this process in the care and caress of the Holy Spirit there is no doubt that we will also come to a place in ministry that will honor our history and traditions without being fettered by any resistance to move into a new and unknown future.

New Technologies

During the year a small group of persons from the presbytery have been having continuing conversations about how the church might more fully move into a culture of information technology. One result of these conversations was the paper *Technology in Ministry: Musings on an Electronic Presbytery*, which was shared with the Council. As a direct result there has been interest from the Leadership Development Office of the Office of Theology and Worship at the PCUSA headquarters in Louisville. In short the proposal is quite simple with two aspects. The first is to provide hardware and software to all of our congregations as a way of creating flexible and useful links for not only communications, but more importantly for building relationships in education and mission between congregations that might be geographically distant and perhaps culturally diverse, but who might share many of the same passions in ministry. The second aspect is to begin to reach people in a “virtual world” with the message of the Gospel. This is not simply some form of electronic evangelism which is little more than an electronic version of the traditional tract, but an attempt to begin to build redemptive communities and fellowships, initially in an electronic world, reaching persons in the manner, language and vocabulary of their technological culture, and subsequently providing a means for these persons to then connect in physical community through a church. It seems as though there is no place where this is being done in this manner. The church’s embrace of technology, while in some places quite sophisticated, is still for the most part oriented to using technology to do traditional things in a more updated way. This concept is a radical shift,

requiring a nearly entirely new way of understanding spiritual community in a world that has become largely trans-physical. To do this will require significant funding, for both the technology costs as well as the ministry personnel costs. We are exploring avenues for grants to fund this as a pilot program for three years.

A “spinoff” of this is the proposal for the virtual resource center. The new design required that the presbytery’s current (traditional) resource center be evaluated, reformed, and redesigned. During this process, the task force (appointed by the Council) recognized a rapidly decreasing use of the resource center. Over a four year period use dwindled to less than one fourth of what it had been for many years. The direct result of this was that for the year ending June 2008, every item circulated cost almost \$34.00! Much of this was a reflection of the change in culture from the physical library to the virtual library. And while this change is not qualitative (i.e. virtual resources are “better” – indeed one can argue quite persuasively for the opposite), it is substantially quantitative. Overwhelmingly more and more persons, particularly those generations that we often identify as not being in church, avail themselves of almost entirely virtual resources. The virtual resource center therefore begins to recognize that our unique resources therefore are people and experiences, and we have begun to “mine” them in an effort to provide a searchable database for all of our congregations. The physical resource center will continue as part of the ministry of Southminster Presbyterian Church and will be fully accessible to the entire presbytery.

The presbytery initiated a new website in September, clearer and more interactive than its predecessor, and over the coming year will expand to become the central communications hub for all committees and other entities of the presbytery. It is envisioned, for instance, that members of committees will be able to access all of their reports and minutes in a password protected sub-site, as well being able to have continuous communications between meetings via bulletin boards, postings, and chat rooms.

It is clear that we need to move in these directions if we are serious about reaching those “who do not sit in our pews.” Doing this will not mean that we must give up our traditions nor our legacies, but rather that we will respond to Christ’s call that that we “go into the world” – not that we should expect the world to come to us. This is a call to the whole church and the Presbytery of the Miami Valley can lead in the response.

In Closing

None of what has happened here in 2008 would have been possible without a remarkable commitment from our clergy and congregations. This commitment takes many forms, the most obvious of which is financial. The congregations in the Presbytery of the Miami Valley have been very supportive, very generous, and very trusting. I believe that our efforts together have been responsive, grateful, and faithful.

The Church of Jesus Christ seems foremost to be about relationships – with God, with Christ, and with the Holy Spirit, and in witness thereof, with each other. There are dozens and dozens of women and men who make this all possible. It is this “community of servants” on which the greatness of Presbyterianism rests, particularly as it relates to the world in ministry. It would be amazing if we were to one day total up the hours spent by all of these faithful as they work on their own time to witness God’s to work in the world. And because of this, all the negative charges that might be leveled at the church, fairly or unfairly, are so vastly outweighed by all the good that comes from commitment to Jesus Christ, even though so much of the world might not to admit it. These faithful persons toil with no desire for recognition or honors, and this attribute allows them to “*perform a Mitzvah for the sake of heaven*” – which sits near the top of Maimonides’ *Eight Degrees of Charity*.

Finally, it is also essential that each of you know how blessed both you and I are with an extraordinary presbytery staff, who see their work not only through the eyes of the professionals that indeed they are, but through hearts of ministry. They honor and serve all of us as they honor and serve God.

It is my privilege to serve you.