

NEW OCCASIONS TEACH NEW DUTIES
Reflections of 2009 in the Presbytery of the Miami Valley
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Introduction

One of the great American hymns is sadly seldom sung anymore. *Once to Every Man and Nation*, primarily owing to its seemingly-exclusive language no longer appears in our hymnal. This seems to me to be simultaneously understandable and foolish. Understandable because clearly for too long too much language was indeed too exclusive and clearly had the effect of keeping a status quo of “hierarchical holiness.” But also foolish, as the history of this hymn – its intent by its author to become a paean to the mid-nineteenth century anti-slavery movement and its use as exactly that – robs us of understanding how powerful faith expressed in music can be.

While all of that is for another time, referenced here are some of James Russell Lowell’s stirring words from that hymn:

*By the light of burning martyrs, Jesus’ bleeding feet I track,
Toiling up new Calvaries ever with the cross that turns not back.
New occasions teach new duties, Time makes ancient good uncouth;
They must upward still and onward, who would keep abreast of truth.*

Too often we find that the church resists change, even though we understand the Biblical narrative to be ever so much centered on change. Paraphrasing Corrie Ten Boom, too often out of our fear of an unknown future we fear to trust a known God. But change *is* part of God’s plan, and change happens irrespective of our wishes or resistance. Sometimes changes is fluid, and sometimes change is abrupt. But there is always change.

2009, like every other year, was a year of change, both fluid and abrupt. Overall, this presbytery moved through the year’s changes pretty well. But perhaps more importantly, what we see is that the work undertaken several years ago to completely structurally transform ourselves, has yielded an interesting dividend: we are

becoming equipped to *explore* change, actively navigating its seas, rather than simply being tossed about begrudgingly to new destinations because we try so hard to remain where we are comfortable.

So, how we have moved through those seas?

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 way of doing things.

Presbytery Meetings

In last year’s observations, I discussed the four different formats for each of that year’s presbytery meetings, and how each reflected some sense of the change brought about by our living into our presbytery’s new design.

Having the experience from 2008 that clearly instructed us that there might be indeed different forms of convocation and different ways of doing business, 2009’s presbytery meetings moved us in directions that even more effectively sharpen our ability to equip our congregations for ministry and leadership, while also strengthening and building bridges to fellowship both existing and new.

The September meeting with its theme of Stewardship, and November’s meeting which focused on Technology, not only provided new and useful information and resources to those present, but also empowered new voices of leadership in our presbytery -- confirming that indeed our greatest resource we can share with each other, is *all of us*.

Presbytery meetings that provide resources and instruction effectively equip others for ministry, and this lies at the heart of the strength and potential of our connectional nature. One interesting outgrowth of this is a heightened sense of trust and forbearance. For instance, we are becoming much more comfortable with the use of consent agendas, which underscores our sense that leadership is informed, capable and faithful – a sense that allows for acceptance that decisions

and recommendations are made from collective wisdom, and that it is not necessary for the entire body to micromanage what can be properly managed by those properly responsible.

Stewardship and Finance

Not surprisingly, 2009 was a difficult year financially for the Presbytery of the Miami Valley. The budget that was approved by the presbytery in September 2008 was, of course, based on economic projections that within a month would be understood to be not possible. The economic crisis was in full sway, however, when most churches began *their* budgeting processes. The results were somewhat predictable.

Congregations, either projecting shortfalls or understandably fearing an unknown economic future, cut expenses wherever possible – sometimes in church programs, occasionally through staff reductions, and frequently in benevolence giving. Accordingly, several congregations informed the presbytery that for 2009 they would give nothing in mission to the presbytery or denomination.

Rather than immediately make its own projections, the Council and Trustees wisely decided to adopt a “monitoring” mode, carefully tracking income and expenses in order to inform them as to the appropriate response. It would have been much easier to present a revised budget to the presbytery cutting expenses where possible to account for projected shortfalls. The difficulty with that approach, however, is that once allocated expense funds are cut, should income not fall as severely as anticipated, restoration requires a new budget to be approved.

The presbytery leadership’s course indeed proved wise as our year-end reports reveal that while there was indeed a significant shortfall in income (\$98,241.56 or about 12.54%), there was also a lowering of expenses of an equivalent amount (\$99,954.78 or about 12.76%). The net effect of the balance of actual income and expenses thus met the goal of the balanced budget approved by presbytery for the year.

As a response to the ongoing monitoring of finances, the 2010 budget approved by presbytery this past September represents an overall decrease of 11.1% and is projected as balanced.

It is important however, that we understand what the ramifications of lowered levels of giving have been. Reductions in mission allocations beyond the presbytery comprised about 45% of the reduced expenses. While these funds, to General Assembly and Synod, are “pass-throughs” – that is funds that are either specifically designated by congregations or percentages of undesignated mission giving – the net effect is still the same: in 2009 the congregations of the presbytery gave less money in outreach. Decreases in presbytery mission spending, through our networks, accounted for about another 20%, and the rest realized through savings in general operating expense.

What remains challenging is our collective need to forge relationships in which congregations implicitly and intuitively understand that all of us *together* make up the presbytery, rather than the notion that the presbytery might be *just some other mission cause*. When congregations, out of both the economic uncertainty and their financial difficulties, eliminate presbytery support as a way of cost-cutting, they buy into the latter notion that “the presbytery is made up of *others*.” Congregations understanding that the presbytery is expression of our connections in ministry with each other deal with economic stress differently, acknowledging that together we are indeed in the same boat, and that we will navigate our stormy seas more effectively together.

So the challenge ahead is how do we build these kinds of relationships?

Congregations

Two congregations closed in 2009 – First United Presbyterian Church in Camden and Heritage Presbyterian Church in Dayton.

The Camden congregation had dwindled to nine members and had, for several years, closed for the winter season. The session requested the presbytery close the church as it seemed that this seemed to be the proper time to cease operations. Resources and energy were low. Geographical demographics seemed to bring about no real viable prospect for renewal. Their desire was to close quietly, with a final service in May. They were forthright and faithful throughout the process as was the Administrative Commission appointed to carry out the task.

Heritage Presbyterian Church, which came into being in 1981, had struggled for several years with an aging congregation and dwindling resources. Although blessed with a new building, large site, and location amid great expansion, the

congregation could not seem to connect with their surroundings as they had no doubt hoped.

Part of this seems to be due to their history of having been a congregation that began elsewhere and then moved to its present location with having no prior established connection to that location. This was often the way our denomination approached new church development – identifying a location with potential for growth and development, and erecting a structure. This approach worked well during the post-war expansion of the 1940s and 1950s, but there are many important differences today. Previously, emerging neighborhoods were often populated by persons who had “generational” church connections and could therefore reasonably be expected to respond positively to new church development. The last thirty years or so however, more and more people have become further and further removed from connections to church life, so the same assumptions cannot be made. Successful new church development is more contextual, more organic, and more missional.

Like the congregation in Camden, Heritage Presbyterian Church brought honor and dignity to the process of closing. The session and congregation had worked diligently for nearly a year to discern if they had the energy and desire to undergo a “reinventing” of themselves – a church transformation. When they understood that this was not something they could undertake, they decided to close. But their work with regard to closing allowed them to witness to the presbytery how legacy might best be defined and how ministry can continue in forms beyond our imagining.

The former Heritage Presbyterian Church is now the home of Immanuel Korean Presbyterian Church, which was made a “particular congregation” of the Presbytery of the Miami Valley last spring. While the formation of any new congregation is cause to celebrate, this brought with it a new dimension because of a wonderful assist given Immanuel by Heritage. Beyond the transfer of the building, Immanuel Korean Presbyterian Church was presented with an astounding financial gift from as part of the action of the session in mission. A gift which when combined with Immanuel’s nascent building fund, allowed the outstanding debt on the building to be quickly retired.

Neighborhoods

In the South East there continue to be neighborhood gatherings. These have been bi-monthly fellowship events. Attendance has been fluid and fluctuates from as few

as six persons to as many as two dozen. The greatest value seems to be that these gatherings provide a “collegium” of sorts that includes *both* clergy and laypersons.

Last year I opined that one of the reasons that it seemed that our neighborhood concept seemed not to take hold might be due to an emerging use of electronic technology in building congregational connections. This seems more and more likely as more and more congregations have connected through Network ministries, which are not necessarily geographically bound, and often much of their organization and maintenance occurs in a virtual world. Thus there are growing connections throughout the presbytery, but not necessarily fostered by the neighborhood concept. On balance, this can only be understood as a very good thing.

It would seem therefore that our best course with respect to the neighborhoods would be to do nothing as a presbytery – simply allowing those places where there seems to be viability to continue in an organic way, while not trying to jump start activity in places where there is no interest.

Networks

After two and one half years of Network activity, the concept of using congregational partnerships, rather than broader presbytery committees to respond in ministry to specific needs continues to teach us much about new perspectives to understand effective ways of “being” a presbytery.

Networks that were formed “from scratch” – that is groups with no former committee antecedent – seem to engage more effectively in their areas of ministry. For those networks that were formed as an attempt to “pick up the work” of a former presbytery committee the learning curve often has been much steeper, but in several cases these new networks have indeed learned to understand their ministries in a different way bringing about real transformation.

One of the aspects of our network concept that is beginning to emerge with more clarity concerns specifically how the presbytery funding for networks is applied. The Network Support Committee has begun to change its language to address financial support more as “financial aid” rather than simply funding. The most successful networks undertake ministry that grows from the work of those engaged, rather than simply being a clearinghouse through which funds might pass through. This is because it is very clear that often where there is little real

personal engagement in the work of the ministry, there is not a strong sense of ownership. This understanding is often key to congregations that become transformative – discipleship must be built from all aspects and gifts: time, talent and treasure. The networks that have thrived seem to understand this best. Simply passing through funding does not engage individuals in moving toward discipleship as much do ministries in which personal relationships are built. To further understand this, look simply at the great spiritual growth that has transformed those persons who have assisted in on-site relief on the Gulf Coast over the last five years. Our successful networks seem to tap into precisely this kind of transformation.

Committee on Ministry

The Committee on Ministry began 2009 with having spent a year willingly undertaking a more directed role in assessing congregations in order to understand where the committee's work can be most effective. Out of that experience the COM determined that it would better serve both congregations and the presbytery through some significant structural and procedural changes.

At the COM's request the presbytery reduced the number of members by about one fourth – while on its face such a move might seem to create more work for fewer people, the reality was that the actual work was already being done by a smaller group of committed persons on the committee. This is not unusual for large committees – often many persons are not as engaged in the work as they should be and their lack of attention allows for much to “fall through the cracks.” The COM recognized that it was better for hard working persons to plan the entire workload than unexpectedly to have “to pick up the slack.”

Meetings were entirely restructured. The reality is that our past practice of meeting monthly for two hours did not allow for adequate time for committee members to more fully understand the issues and dynamics in congregations with which they were not specifically assigned. One of the ways that COMs work effectively is to draw upon the collective wisdom of the group, but to do that requires that there is adequate understanding of the issues by members of the group. In addition, longer meetings allowed for several other elements to be added. There is now a period of worship in the middle of the meeting; there is a regular time for members to share stories of their faith journeys; and the committee shares dinner. All of these build and strengthen relationships between members of the committee, and this ultimately allows the committee to work more effectively together.

The COM has begun a program to conduct a triennial visit in every congregation by the close of 2011. Nearly one third of our churches were visited in 2009. These visits, mandated by the Book of Order are an effective way for the presbytery to connect and assist with congregations and pastors. Doing this as a regular practice had become haphazard in this presbytery over the years, but these new efforts by the COM are effectively addressing that.

To better assist congregation with the call process, the COM has created and adopted a *Transitions Manual* outlining process and expectations for committees, pastors, candidates and the presbytery. There are clearer points of engagement for the COM delineated in the manual, some of which are departures from our former practices, but all designed to make the process be smoother and better understood.

The COM has become more pro-active in addressing difficulties in congregations, recommending mediators and consultants when appropriate, providing outside counseling and assessment for pastors to help build skills and perspective, and requesting that the presbytery authorize administrative commissions where necessary. This pro-active stance allows for early response to issues arising in congregational life, often which can be well addressed before they expand into crisis.

Diversity

We are clearly moving forward in our desire to honor the gifts of diversity. Whether there has been more visible participation from members of the Committee on Representation in their advisory role in so much of our presbytery's life and structure. It is their goal that the word diversity comes to be understood as itself have "diversity of definition" -- race, gender, ability, culture, journey, theology.

The organizing of Immanuel Korean Presbyterian Church as a *particular congregation* provides our presbytery with a new racial-ethnic congregation. What is particularly interesting is the goal of this congregation to honor diversity within itself. While they worship in the Korean language, they regularly provide written English guides of the service and summaries of the sermon as well as occasionally providing simultaneous "real time" translation. The latter is their goal for every Sunday. Regularly worshiping with them are several non-Korean speaking and non-Asian persons, including persons of Color.

Identifying God's call for them to reach out their community, the congregation of Oakland Presbyterian Church in Springfield elected the Reverend Derrick Laroy Weston, who is African American, as their pastor on December 6, 2009 effective January 1, 2010. Rev. Weston is from Pittsburgh Presbytery where he was engaged in a community outreach ministry. This ethnic majority congregation sought the best person to equip them to respond to their sense of call, without giving thought to that person's ethnicity or gender. Perhaps equally importantly, there was no coercion or pressure from the presbytery, but rather good work from the Committee on Ministry as well from as Interim Pastor Tom Martin. This good work allowed for the congregation to be present to the movement of the Holy Spirit.

Kirkmont Center

After almost three years of work by the Kirkmont Steering Committee, the report *Kirkmont Center Plan for Self-sustainability* was approved by the presbytery in a special called meeting in July. The plan protects the interests of the Presbytery of the Miami Valley – maintaining a healthy ministry of Christian formation for children and adults – while expanding the center's science and environmental education programs in partnership with other entities including public schools. This expansion will allow for greater potential financial stability through both private and public, but non-church sources.

The new entity, *Kirkmont Center, Inc. (KCI)*, directs the program, use, staffing and maintenance of the facility but with no ownership in the land and buildings. They are governed by a separate Board of Trustees, necessary to expand the potential funding base, but within KCI's charter, the Presbytery of the Miami Valley has majority representation of the board. The Reverend David Fleming has been hired as the initial Executive Director of Kirkmont Center, Inc.

As part of moving toward the creating of this new entity, 2009 allowed for very intentional reflection from many of the Kirkmont staff and leaders. These reports and observations were explored and digested by a Council task force which reported in October, proposing goals for strengthening the center's value in Christian formation, particularly as it relates to the camp program. Their findings will assist the newly hired Church Camp & Retreat Director, Kate Hopta in her work.

Technology

The presbytery is almost fully electronic in its communications. Dozens of prayer requests, bulletin inserts and announcements are electronically sent out each month regularly to as many as five hundred persons. The cost of this is negligible – the preparation time is about one sixth of a hard copy process, there is no direct duplication cost, and the savings in electronic transmission over traditional mail is enormous – about ten thousand dollars per year were we to send the same number of pieces of information out!

Technology has allowed us to much more effectively assist congregations and pastors, by providing timely responses to requests for information and consultation. We are also much more able to share news accurately and quickly. This is especially important and effective in our enriching of our presbytery community by our pastor care for one another.

We are able to tell stories that need to be told in much more effective ways – not only through the written word, but through pictures, videos, spoken words and music. We are able to share the work of every congregation with every other in our presbytery, and though this, we are seeing partnerships in ministry that bridge the tangled streams of our complex schedules and geographies.

We have been moving forward but slowly toward our goal of a virtual resource center. One of the key steps was to undertake a comprehensive survey of persons throughout the presbytery to discover how technology is both currently used and how its future use and expansion might be accurately projected. This has been completed and will now be applied to the next step in creating the electronic resource center. It is expected that within the first part of 2010 there will be an *alpha* version up and running and freely accessible to all through our website.

The website, redesigned in 2008, has been running for about fifteen months and has itself become a central place where information is shared, and documents are stored and retrieved. The website is growing into a becoming the hub from which electronic links, like spokes, reach to an ever growing periphery of church and secular culture.

In Closing

Over this last year I have spent much time with colleagues from many other presbyteries, and I marvel that even although 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 these things with hope and confidence – not out of some 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.

So how does all of this happen?

Because I cannot find better words than those with which I closed last year’s report, I repeat them here.

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.