

IN THIS TIME, IN THIS PLACE, FOR CHRIST'S SAKE
Reflections on the Presbytery of the Miami Valley 2011
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Who was the guilty?
Who brought this upon Thee?
Alas, my treason, Jesus hath undone Thee!
'Twas I, Lord Jesus,
I it was denied Thee:
I crucified Thee.¹

Introduction

I begin this fourth “state of the Presbytery” report with a sense of profound sadness. Irrespective of however we see things theologically, what we have been witnesses of, and party to over the last four months, four of our congregations separating from the denomination brings sadness – for all sorts of reasons: the loss of collegial relationships, the reality of brokenness of our trusting of each other, the diminishment of the richness of diverse theological discourse – all sorts of reasons. But overarching all of these is that, despite any of the best efforts from some wonderful and faithful people, the Church of Jesus Christ has been harmed.

And by our very natures, we all are complicit.

This is a tough realization and perhaps a tougher admission, but when we step away those positions of self-righteousness that have been so carefully crafted and arduously defended, and see ourselves in light of our fallen and broken natures, *we know it to be true*. And yet somehow, this is part of the good news.

They crucified him with the criminals. Which is more amazing, to find Jesus in such bad company, or to find the criminals in such good company? Jesus died precisely for these two criminals who were crucified on his right and left and went to their death with him. He did not die for the sake of a good world; he died for the sake of an evil world.

Karl Barth²

Good news.

¹ Johann Heermann c. 1640, trans. Robert Bridges 1899,

² Karl Barth, *Deliverance to the Captives*, Harper 1961

God's redemptive love is as necessary for us collectively as the Presbytery of the Miami Valley as it is for any individual anywhere. It is to this that the church must attest and demonstrate, and if we are unafraid to cry out our continuing need for this redemption and move to discern God's leading, we will make a vital and vibrant witness. We will testify to this good news.

It is impossible for me to consider what has happened throughout this denomination without also considering God's promises. I believe that through all this, God is providing new opportunities for the church to live better into its great ends. And I believe that we must begin a discipline to seek God's voice through humility and patience, to bring us to new seasons understanding how we as the Presbytery of the Miami Valley might embrace Jesus' vision and call.

Therefore, it is this context that my report to you for 2011 is framed. Unlike my reports of prior years, this will be less about recapping and reporting, and more about lifting up opportunities and laying out possibilities as we move into a new time profoundly changed and even profoundly sad; and by God's grace, profoundly free from bitterness.

Moving the Wheel

In June of this year, we will have completed five years of presbytery life in our "new design," which we also must acknowledge is no longer new. Much of what the design team set out to accomplish has indeed borne fruit – particularly by a more streamlined structure that can be seen as being more "permission giving." In fact, in many ways, the revised of the *Form of Government* in our *Book of Order*, which despite being for some fraught with serious concerns about a lack of clear authority, reflects quite well this presbytery has functioned over the last four and a half years.

But we also must admit that whatever successes we have had, much of which seemed to be evident in the wide participation from those across the spectrum of theological perspectives, they were not enough to overcome growing fissures of distrust, many of which were rooted in actions, attitudes and decisions, both local and national, that spanned decades.

As I stated earlier, I believe that God is providing new opportunities for the church to live into its great ends, and for this presbytery to embrace Jesus' vision and call.

So what might we do here and now?

Despite years of working with congregations and presbyteries to define and imagine *mission* and *vision*, I no longer see doing this as the terrific “fix” I once thought it to be. Not because such introspection and discernment is not of value, but because I think too often we might be trying “to reinvent the wheel,” when what is really needed is figuring out how “to move the wheel.”

From the perspective that Church of Jesus Christ exists to be the world’s response to Christ’s mission, it follows that the church does not need to reinvent that mission. That mission itself is aptly stated in Isaiah 61:

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn;³

Since that mission is not only clearly restated by Jesus when he reads in the temple in Nazareth, but proclaimed by Jesus as being “fulfilled in your hearing,” any “mission reinvention” seems superfluous and unnecessary. What is necessary however is *for us to discern where and how, using the resources we have been given by God, we might best engage that mission.* Moving the wheel.

The same really holds true with trying our to create vision – or what we are so fond of calling “visioning.” In the Sermon on the Mount, does not Jesus really lay out *his* vision? Our task, therefore, is to discern *where and how we might embrace, and live into, his vision.* Moving the wheel.

What follows are five opportunities that might allow us to move the wheel.

Opportunity I: Connection and Commitment

We often consider the relationship between money and faith an unpleasant thing, but one that is necessary to consider. We are often afraid of offending if we talk too much about giving to the church lest we come across as judgmental, particularly when we use the word “tithes.” But we also know that there is a clear relationship between giving and growing spiritually; so we just tiptoe around it in our desire not to offend. However, by doing this we also lose the opportunity to use our financial data to provide us with information that might allow us to gauge our spiritual health, and our sense of call as followers of Jesus Christ.

³ *Isaiah 61:1-2* NRSV

The end of the year financial reports for 2011 show a net operating loss of \$35,455.74. The numbers alone however are only *data*; analysis of the data will provide *information*.

Exploring this data we find the following:

- Anticipated income was \$100,253.53 (14.1%) less than budgeted. This is seen in three areas: Mission (\$47,875.38), Per Capita (\$38,153.74) and Miscellaneous (\$14,224.41).
- Because many congregations designate the percentages of their mission giving, the “loss” applies mostly to the pass-through funds (\$43,074.92) to General Assembly and Synod (which has no effect on balance sheet). Mission giving to the presbytery was only \$4,800.46 (2.1%) lower than projected.
- Per Capita losses include \$18,330.50 in unpaid 2011 funds from the departing congregations. It is anticipated that as part of the negotiated agreements with those congregations, this will be paid. *The remaining \$19,823.24 in unpaid Per Capita is attributable to other churches in the presbytery, none withholding because of conscience or protest.*
- Nearly all of the loss of miscellaneous income (94.7%) reflects the vacancy of the Kirkmont house.
- Therefore, deducting the pass-through funds the net operating income loss is \$57,178.61 (9.6%).
- Expenses for 2011 totaled \$647,541.21 (90.9%) of the budgeted amount. When the pass-through expenses (\$43,074.92) are deducted *actual presbytery operating* expenses decreased by \$21,722.37.
- The net presbytery operating loss is therefore \$35,455.74 (6.0%).

A six percent operating loss is significant. However, after factoring in the Per Capita outstanding from the four departing congregations the *effective net* (i.e. the change to the financial value of the presbytery funds) is reduced to \$17,125.24 (2.9%).

Apart from the obvious – that even after the numbers have been parsed there is still an operating loss – what else is there that we might need to learn from this?

- When looking at the Per Capita shortfall, it seems that such is evidence that something is *systemically lacking in who and what we understand the presbytery to be*. It seems logical that any congregation choosing *not* to financially support a presbytery must do so either related to conscience or protest, or out of a lack of desire to be connected to other congregations (or an understanding of the value of being so connected). No congregation to which the \$19,823.24 in unpaid 2011 Per Capita is attributed has ever informed the presbytery of a decision not to pay, nor of any financial constraint of doing so. We need to ask, “Is Per Capita the best way of funding the presbytery?” But if this lack of funding is related to some sense of “de-valuing being in a presbytery,” then in all likelihood simply changing the method will not change the result; so a fundamental question arises, “how can we change this sense of value?”
- Mission giving beyond the presbytery level is declining. Giving from congregations to the General Assembly and Synod *fell short 37.7% and 18.3% respectively* from the amounts anticipated in the budget. What this represents is the “re-designation” of Unified Mission giving by congregations to percentages that differ from what is the presbytery recommendation. While this percentage re-designation clearly benefits the presbytery (the GA and Synod funds are “passed through”), it also continues a three-year trend, so we need to ask, “What does this indicate about our congregations’ perceptions of their connections to the denomination?”

Clearly we must be concerned with how the presbytery itself might best be funded. The Leadership Council is beginning to talk about this and will convene a small group to consider our current along other existing and even perhaps new models of presbytery funding. But it is important to recognize however, that whatever method of funding might be undertaken, funding itself does not exist in a vacuum – financial support must be related to the work to which we understand ourselves to be called.

Opportunity II: God and Mammon

Without minimizing this time of great economic stress and uncertainty, I think it is important for all of us in the church, in the presbytery, to see our words and our actions through the lens of being followers of Jesus Christ.

For me, of the Great Ends of the Church, *the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world* seems to hold in tension *promise* and *pragmatism*, particularly as these relate to

our sense of stewardship and providence. Our faith tells us, and the Biblical thread confirms: God's promises are kept – there is God's provision for our need. But our worldly natures tell us quite the opposite: we must hold on to what we have as a “hedge” against tomorrow's unknown fortunes.

How do we resolve this tension?

I believe that we must, in light of our profession of Jesus as Lord and Savior, *measure* our commitment and work against this Great End: “How do *our* decisions and actions exhibit the Kingdom of Heaven?”

It would seem that we have ample evidence in our faith that *there is enough* – consider alone that the story of the *Loaves and Fishes* is recounted in each of the four Gospels – and in this lectionary year, Mark's gospel specifically shows the disciples as acting out of their sense (and fear) of scarcity, while clearly Jesus acts from the surety of God's abundance. There is enough.

Let me stress again that I have no intention of downplaying the financial difficulties through which so many of us have gone, and continue to go. But how we understand these difficulties in our paths of discipleship, and how we witness to that understanding is critical if we really wish to live out our call as part of the Church of Jesus Christ. Clearly we must be pragmatic, but foremost we must demonstrate to the world what it means to live by the assurance of God's promise.

In this context, consider the following:

Each year, the Office of General Assembly records and publishes detailed and comprehensive statistics on congregations. Because the compilation of this comes from year end congregational reporting, the published data are always one year old. Therefore the most recent full year for which we have statistics is 2010.

- Adjusting for the four departing congregations as well as the two that recently closed (Springhill and Dayton, Good Shepherd), *actual aggregate expenses* for all of the congregations in the Presbytery of the Miami Valley totaled \$11,494,132.00. This total also *does not include* any capital expenditures.
- For the same adjusted set of congregations, *actual aggregate income* was \$12,864,671.00. This total *does not include* any unrealized capital gains, contributions to capital projects, or income from outside grants.

Therefore, as the year 2011 began, the *collective net liquid assets* for the congregations in the Presbytery of the Miami Valley showed an *increase* over the prior year of \$1,370,539.00. Were churches not eleemosynary organizations, this would be considered *profit*.

If we really value our connections with each other as Presbyterians, might we see an opportunity here to strengthen those connections?

This presbytery is pretty typical of others across our denominational spectrum in that nearly half of our congregations have *fewer than 100 members*. And while we all understand that size itself is no determinant of vitality in ministry, we also must acknowledge that mathematical economics alone of small congregations present challenges directly related to their size. While it is also true that not every small congregation, suddenly finding itself free from financial worry, would necessarily be transformed into a thriving community, for some small congregations, financial assistance might make a great difference indeed.

Imagine if there was a fund available for such assistance. Imagine as well that such a fund had been created from congregations tithing 2010's \$1,370,539.00 "profit."

Imagine what *other opportunities* are out there from such a tithe.

Might doing this be seen as a tangible exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven?

Opportunity III: Investing Resources in Ministry

For nearly half a century, this presbytery has been richly blessed with by the ministry of Kirkmont Center. Beginning in 2010 the operation of this ministry has been under the direction of independent entity Kirkmont Center, Inc., which continues to have strong connections to the presbytery. Because of this independence it is inappropriate for this report to address KCI's "operational year" and will focus instead on KCI's relationship with the presbytery, which continues as landlord, contributor and major user.

As outlined in my presbytery report of 2010, the presbytery engaged a consultant to study safety and procedural concerns at the camp. This work, begun in 2010, was completed in early 2011 and provided KCI with a "road map" to transform many of its practices and policies to reflect state-of-the-industry best practices. The KCI directors, staff and board worked closely in developing, and incrementally implementing, this plan. From the presbytery's perspective the results thus far are very encouraging. In fact, KCI has continued to work with the consultant not only to "tune and re-tune" this

transformation, but also as part of a process seeking accreditation from the American Camp Association. Such accreditation is considered to be the gold standard against which the practices and policies of all camps are measured.

This “makeover process” has not been limited to camping programs and facilities. The board has extensively and self-critically examined all of KCI’s accounting practices and financial policies in order to make sure that these adhere to stringent and responsible standards. This thorough review shows that there has not been good and sound financial accountability concerning Kirkmont for many years, the responsibility for which is ultimately the presbytery’s because we own the land, and until 2010 directly operated the camp. What is critical here is not lamenting what was not done previously, but rather celebrating what is trying to be done now. This new financial accountability will bring about good fiduciary responsibility of the camping program and properly respectful stewardship of the land – not only to KCI, but to the presbytery as well. This is long overdue, and heartily welcomed.

It is also critical at this juncture that the presbytery understand that the overall financial position of KCI is best termed *precarious*. It is quite possible that KCI might not survive at all, but should that come about, *it will not be because the right people were not doing the right things*. There is still much to overcome – neglect of facility maintenance and upgrade, anachronistic practices and policies, outside economic stress, cultural changes affecting the sense of value of Christian camping – each of which has financial implications. And while *precarious* is an apt description, the presbytery leadership feels the best people are now in place to bring about a successful transformation.

For many years in this presbytery, economic shortfalls for Kirkmont were “made up for” by using presbytery reserves. Our aforementioned lack of financial accountability, practice and policy contributed to our lack of a clear picture of the financial sustainability of Kirkmont itself. Often, fees charged were knowingly inadequate to cover expenses, but rationalized by our desire for our facilities to have the greatest use possible. At best this might be termed a *Hobson’s choice* – between use and inactivity – but any desire for full utilization cannot be fulfilled at the expense of good stewardship.

In fact, there is much merit to the argument that the presbytery’s former practice of “making good” on the shortfall, might be seen as some form of enabling, and begs the question, “how much did our *congregations* really value Kirkmont?” because the truth is, such bailouts are always seen as using the *presbytery’s money*, even though the congregations make up the presbytery. But now, what is particularly encouraging is a shift from seeing the presbytery as the source of “bailout,” to the *congregations in the presbytery* as potential partners in investment. KCI has taken short term loans from congregations at interest rates competitive with those being earned by other invested

funds. While these are, on their face, “unsecured loans,” it is expected that the presbytery, as owner of the land, will consider them as “first obligations” should KCI not survive and the facilities be sold. Congregations making these loans are also making a statement of support that is *positive, direct and pro-active*. Such boldness needs to be lifted up, particularly in a denomination that too often makes investment decisions of what it will *not* support.

We must begin discussing about what it means for the presbytery to maintain ownership of the land. In the longer term, KCI might find itself in a far better position by owning the facilities it operates. Conversely, the presbytery might find that its future economic responsibility for the maintenance and improvement of the facilities, as well as its general liability, is financially daunting and perhaps ill-advised. Without speculating on what a transfer or sale of ownership might require, there are many scenarios in which the presbytery’s interest in the land can be protected. These conversations will be good to have and having them will be another act of responsible stewardship.

Opportunity IV: The Reality of New Language

Last October in Pittsburgh, Joseph D. Small, the former Director of the Office of Theology and Worship for the PC(USA), addressed the annual conference of the Association of Executive Presbyters specifically about our denomination’s new language of who and what we are – teaching elders, ruling elders, and councils.

He spoke eloquently of the difference these new terms are intended to make – how we might understand teaching and ruling elders as *ordered ministries of the church* rather than *offices* and how they are coupled together and responsible together for serving the community in the life of faith in the church. *Council* is a term intended to allow movement away from the notion that the primary purpose of a session, presbytery, or any other entity we formerly thought of as “governing bodies” is to govern.

Back when presbyteries were governing bodies, “council” was the term many of us used for a subset of the presbytery rather than the whole. But “presbytery council” was really a euphemism for “executive committee.” Now, the whole presbytery – as well as the whole session and the whole general assembly – is a council. The name indicates an assembly to consult together, discussing what we used to call “the spiritual welfare of the church.” Councils are not bureaucratically organized to hear reports and vote. Councils are called to give thoughtful, sustained attention to the faith and faithfulness of the church. When you hear “council,” think Nicaea, or Barmen rather than the school board or the state legislature.⁴

⁴ Joseph D. Small, “*What in the Church is a Council*” AEPs address, October 19, 2011

Small states an obvious “truth” of presbyteries –they are composed of representatives from local congregations. But he stresses that these men and women are not just “any representatives, but teaching and ruling elders.” And in this connection to our new language, he continues:

When they [come] together in council, they do not leave behind their essential calling; they are still ordered ministers with responsibility for teaching the Faith and measuring fidelity to the gospel in the church. So, what would it look like if presbyteries were primarily places for teaching and learning, discernment and mutual accountability? How might a presbytery meeting be shaped if worship and study were at its heart rather than an occasional, poorly attended add-on?⁵

Several years ago we began to move away from presbytery meetings that were primarily about governance, and toward meetings that considered more emphasis on education and equipping. In addition, we also began to contemplate the forms of the meetings themselves – how worship might be interwoven throughout the convocation, rather than being a separate element. Our efforts have yielded some good results, along with others that charitably might best be described as “learning experiences.” We need to keep at this, and I have no doubt that we will.

But in the context of considering our new terms, my interest sits not in merely how we conduct ourselves in our gathering, but rather *how we understand ourselves in our being*. I am struck and intrigued by the idea of consulting together to discuss and discern “the spiritual welfare of the church” and I wonder what might happen if such discussion and discernment pervaded how we relate to each other as individuals and as congregations. If our *primary function* as a presbytery, seen through the lens of being a council, is not to govern but to “give thoughtful, sustained attention to the faith and faithfulness of the church” then what is our *primary purpose* in our functioning?

In discussing the intent of the changed language concerning teaching and ruling elders, Small writes:

Teaching elders deepen congregational understanding of the whole gospel. Ruling elders discern the “progress” of the gospel in the life of the congregation. Teaching elders call for deepened faith and faithful living. Ruling elders measure out congregational growth in faith and faithfulness.⁶

Suppose we looked at how this might apply to a presbytery – not specifically in the gathering of the presbytery, but rather in the being of the presbytery. The presbytery does not exist apart from its congregations. It would seem therefore that if, in our

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Ibid

functioning as a council, we looked to reflect the respective roles in the congregation held by teaching and ruling elders (and remember, that each the member of, or representative to the presbytery is either one or the other) then our call would be to deepen and measure out the faith and faithfulness of our community, which is our congregations.

A way of restating this as our *primary purpose* is:

The presbytery equips, prepares, and nurtures congregations in their ministries for God's mission for the transformation of creation and humanity by calling all people to Christ.

This is really quite simple to understand – the presbytery's primary purpose relates to *assisting congregations to do their work*. The presbytery is not called to be some sort of “larger” congregation replicating or duplicating the specific work understood to be the province of the local congregation or parish. The presbytery's call is to help its congregations live out their call more effectively.

While this might be simple to state, the work is not simple to do. But it is certainly worth doing. I believe that if we can distance ourselves from our often-preconceived notions of how we must be the presbytery – functions expressed first in governance and legislature – we can find our way in doing this work.

Opportunity V: Discerning New Ways to Relate

What we have been through over the last four months has been difficult, and although this time of difficulty is not over yet, we can see a time when the “dust will settle” as we anticipate the final resolutions with departing congregations as orderly and gracious.

In our distress, one of the consistent laments has been that “as a presbytery we are all poorer for having gone through this.” This has been expressed from many persons representing differing sides of our theological division and in our disagreement over denominational direction. And my experience and impression has been that all of those expressing such lament have been completely sincere – they are hurting, they are sad, they are wounded. And they grieve.

I stated earlier that our fissures of distrust were rooted in actions, attitudes and decisions that spanned decades and that irrespective of how well we seemed to relate to each other here in this presbytery for the last four years, we could not overcome their breaking wide open. But I also know that if we think that “once the dust has settled,

once the deals are done, there will be no more breaches for us to worry about,” we will delude ourselves. The fissures of distrust will not somehow depart with congregations.

Consider Paul’s letters to the nascent congregations scattered throughout early Christendom: while providing insight and direction as to beliefs and controversies in the early church, they are often equally concerned with the *relationships* in the community – how Christians ought to engage each other specifically *because* they are a community of Christ.

How might we discern and discover what God might have us do to build, nurture and strengthen our relationships with each other *in, and because of,* this time of trouble?

That we need to do this seems obvious. But *how* we should do this, probably will take us through some unknown territory. It would also seem obvious that simply because we might “properly” decide (read: legislatively) some direction or practice, that such is not necessarily right. If each of us, in our theological orientation and perspective, in our journey of faith, ascribes to seek the truth, each of us also must ascribe to the idea that only God alone can fully know and fully possess the truth. For any of us to claim otherwise would seem to place us on a personal tower of Babel. In this way must our theological discourse be framed, and that is quite impossible if those conversations are placed in a context of winning or losing.

If we are going build, strengthen and nurture relationships with each other, then we need to really get to know each other to understand how each of us strives to seek the truth. We must do this apart from our voting because legislative process is often about winning and losing, about who’s in and who’s out, and emotionality and defensiveness, not unexpectedly, rise.

Therefore, we must aspire to learn to relate to each other as being the part of the community in Christ.

Where Do We Go from Here?

Peter Drucker, considered by many as the 20th Century’s most influential thinker and important writer on *Management Theory*, once said (in fact, he said it over and over!) that leaders of non-profit organizations must ask two questions: “What is our business?” and “How’s business?”

This is not news for much of the church. There are countless books about church culture and congregational revitalization that offer direction for transformation emanating from

these two questions. No doubt every one of them has some value. But the intended thrust of these books is primarily concerned with the second question – trying to find ways of allowing the church to look at itself openly and honestly, unafraid of seeing the warts, because we all acknowledge that we need to *do better* – attract younger people and families, provide a relevance to contemporary society and culture, and grow in ways that would seem to assure our future continuance.

It is no different for this presbytery. And our answer to the second question while revealing much about doing some things right also, and perhaps more importantly, reveals much about doing some things “not so right.”

I also think that we too easily pass over about the need to ask the *first* question. We assume that our sense of “what is our business” is clear to both us and those we serve. I am not so sure, because the negative parts of the answer to the second question seem to indicate otherwise. The things that we are doing “not so right” should give us great concern that there is often not much clarity about what it is we are supposed to do.

So, what might we do?

I believe that neither question should ever be asked independently. Doing so creates the pitfall of the assumption that the evidence of who we are called to be is not interrelated with how we are to live out that calling. Without continually seeking a better understanding of our sense of God’s call (What is our business?), we quantify our performance (How’s business?) often in metrics that really do little more than provide some palliative or provoke some panic.

We measure things like money, membership, and attendance, without looking for the evidence of what might these indices lead us to explore about how God calls us.

Church consultant Gil Rendle writes:

Regarding measures, a system gets what it pays attention to. Another way to say the same thing is that a system produces what it measures. If the system measures nothing, that is what it gets. Without measures we cannot focus on what we are called to produce.”What if your outputs are inherently *not* measureable?” asks Jim Collins in his monograph on social sector organizations, which include churches and denominations. “The basic idea is still the same,” he writes, “Separate inputs from outputs and hold yourself accountable for progress in outputs, *even if those outputs defy measurements.*” In other words, if the result of ministry cannot be measured quantitatively, it must be *described* so that conversation can continue about whether we are approaching the description.⁷

⁷ Gil Rendle *Journey in the Wilderness*, Abingdon Press, 2010

If we understand our outputs as defying measurements, and I believe that most of us do, then we must seek to describe our “performance” in relation to how we describe ourselves as a presbytery. This does not mean that our metrical markers are irrelevant, but rather that we must resist over-valuing them.

This will move us away from seeking *measurements*, and toward Joseph Small’s idea of “measuring out” faith and faithfulness. *Measuring out* refers not to *doling* or *apportioning*, but rather to the *drawing out of an understanding* of how we are growing in our fidelity to the Gospel. We can do this by always intertwining Drucker’s questions, never seeing one independently from the other.

We must consider everything *we do as a presbytery* – our programs, our decisions, our policies – in the light of our understanding of *who we are as a presbytery*. This is how we can measure out the faith and faithfulness of our community.

And we will demonstrate our fidelity to the Gospel.

In this time.

In this place.

For Christ’s sake.