

January 12, 2012

Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

We all know that our denomination, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), is undergoing complex changes as countless people are seeking to follow God's will as they understand it. Recent votes on ordination standards and the revision of the Form of Government have brought a welcome change to some Presbyterians, but to others these changes have felt like a betrayal. We eight elders – whose theological and missional commitments reflect a wide range of the denomination – are writing to those struggling with the recent votes. Our message to you, simply, is to tell you that we love you and want to continue to serve Christ together with you in this part of the body of Christ.

On January 2-3, we gathered together to reflect on these times. The lectionary passage for that day was Eph. 4:1-16, the first part of which calls us to “make an effort to preserve the unity of the Spirit within the bond of peace...” That unity and that peace are suffering strain.

In a few days some 1,700 Presbyterians will be gathering in Orlando, Florida, for the purpose of exploring their denominational future. Some will be representing churches planning to pull out of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to form the nucleus of a new denominational expression, provisionally called the “New Reformed Body.” Most have not formed their future plans but are contemplating some change, either to follow the path into the NRB, or to try to co-affiliate with the NRB and PC(USA), or to explore alternative arrangements within the PC(USA), such as becoming an affinity network under the banner, “Fellowship of Presbyterians.” We also know of several dozen other churches that have initiated steps to transfer from the PC(USA) to the Evangelical Presbyterian Church or another denomination.

We know that those contemplating the possibility of leaving are bathing the decision in prayer, and are genuinely seeking to discern God's will in this.

However, we believe with all our hearts that perception is not reality, that the PC(USA) has not left its moorings, its commitment to proclaim the living Word of God – Jesus Christ – as revealed in the written word of God, holy Scripture. We do believe that the varying parties differ not over their belief in the Gospel but over how to apply its words of grace in particular ways.

Ephesians also reminds us that God's work is, in part, to continue to equip the church to build itself up into maturity. We see God doing that work in specific ways through this denomination. The PC(USA) is deeply missional. And it is elevating and equipping the calling to evangelize the world. The past General Assembly reaffirmed the commitment to “Grow Christ's Church Deep and Wide,” and the upcoming GA will take up the vision to plant 1,001 new worshipping communities in the next 10 years. The General Assembly Mission Council staff, such as those in the Church Growth and Transformation department, are equipping Presbyterians to give witness to the Gospel, to turn around churches and to turn shrinking churches into growing ones. As Tom Taylor, the California pastor from evangelical circles who now serves as President of the Presbyterian Foundation often affirms, “Planting and growing congregations, proclaiming the gospel effectively, building up the church - these are at the core of who we are as Presbyterians.

In the past five years, our denominational offices have recruited the experience, wisdom and witness of Presbyterians who support these values in unprecedented ways."

The PC(USA) simply has not turned its back proclaiming Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.

If you are a part of a congregation that is contemplating a move away from regular participation in the PC(USA), please insist that your leaders re-expose you to the voices of fellow Presbyterians who are resolute in their intentions to stay. Do not allow one-sided presentations to be all you consider as you seek to discern God's call to you and your congregation. At times like this, the grass surely can look greener beyond the fence and the desire to jump to that side may feel compelling, but to extend the overused cliché, the grass over there has its own problems, and the grass over here may be regenerating in ways you haven't noticed, and the process of jumping the fence brings some perils not obvious before taking the leap. The law of unintended consequences inevitably brings problems – many of which could have been foreseen by learning from the history we ignore at our peril. Jesus did tell us, after all, to count the cost before taking action.

Is the PC(USA) undergoing a season of change? For certain. We are feeling the birthpangs of a new church as it is being reformed by the Holy Spirit. But those changes are much broader than the divisive debates of recent years. The desire to discern what missional actually means "on the ground," to re-energize congregations losing momentum and to make a real life-giving difference in our communities is happening across the whole denomination. We are convinced that that reformation is strengthened by reinvesting ourselves and all of our congregations – and weakened by the departure of any.

We understand that it's difficult not knowing exactly where we're going to end up. But the road we are on, in seeking to proclaim God's Word to a 21st century culture, is not only exciting but transformative.

Yes, the Church of Jesus Christ is facing a complex, turbulent time. Yes, some of us are applauding the changes while others are grieving them. But the eight of us together share a genuine hope for the future of the PC(USA). In fact, we also have prepared a video in which we offer a personal witness to that hope. You can view it at HopeForThePCUSA.blogspot.com. We would love to hear from you the signs of hope you are seeing in the church, too; we invite you to share those hopes on that website.

We are confident that these hopes are sure – and will not disappoint – because they are based on the resurrection of Christ who has called us into this "one hope," even to be "one body and of one spirit."

Faithfully in Christ,

Cynthia Bolbach, First Presbyterian Church, Arlington, Va., Moderator of 219th General Assembly, ruling elder

Theresa Cho, St. John's Presbyterian Church, SF, teaching elder,

Vilmarie Cintrón-Olivieri, First Spanish Presbyterian Church, Miami, Fla., ruling elder

Jack Haberer, Presbyterian Outlook, Richmond, Va., teaching elder.
Julie Henderson, First Presbyterian Church, Brighton, Colo., ruling elder
Stan Ott, Vital Churches Institute, Oak Hill, Va., teaching elder
Byron Wade, Davie Street Presbyterian Church, Raleigh, N.C., Vice-Moderator of 218th General Assembly, teaching elder
Landon Whitsitt, Synod of Mid-America, Liberty, Mo., Vice-Moderator of 219th General Assembly, teaching elder

Organizations listed for identification purposes only.