

Jeff's Jottings

Deck chairs on the Titanic

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Charles Schultz, March 15, 1981

Now that the joint PLT/TEP report on Presbytery practices going forward has been approved, I've heard the inevitable from a few folks: re-arranging the deck chairs on the Titanic again, I see.

That's a common assessment of efforts to re-form or re-structure long-standing institutions: that of an ultimately hopeless set of mundane actions in the midst of crisis. Too often, it's also accurate; we spend so much time shoring up structures and traditional practices that we miss, or ignore, the gash below the waterline.

Have we done that this time on the Good Ship PTCA? Did this latest effort at transition and change simply re-arrange the deck chairs? I don't think it did, for two reasons. The first is how PLT named the realities of our life together; shedding light on the below-the-waterline gash, if you will:

- *This is a Presbytery of deeply gifted individuals, significant resources, and important ministries. Our churches are absolutely vital to the communities they serve and must be nurtured and supported.*
- *But as a Presbytery, our sense of common mission and support has become worn and fractured — both through the pain of gracious separation procedures and through the neglect of our personal and professional relationships with each other.*
- *This reality, whether the product of particular past events or simply because we're too busy to invest in each other, causes the work of Presbytery to be increasingly disconnected from the challenges of our churches and pastors.*
- *But we love this church and what it stands for, and we are committed to being good colleagues in ministry. We believe in the gospel we proclaim as Presbyterians, and we believe that we can in fact strengthen and support each other in doing that. The Presbytery can be the place where that happens.*

The second, and more important reason, is where the PLT put the power for change in its proposal. The recommendations in the PLT report seek to address the realities they saw, not by re-structuring the Presbytery or doubling-down on “the way we’ve always done things,” but rather through encouraging this connected-but-often-not-related group of people called the PTCA to move from institution to community; from regulation to relationship; from structure and control toward equality and change. The ability to accomplish this shift, and thus the power to do so, lies finally not with the committees, structures, or individual leaders (like an EP, for example) of the Presbytery, but with the members and churches of the Presbytery. No one can force this kind of change. Rather, it asks of all of us a willingness and commitment both to disturb the system and to seek the common good. It's an all hands on deck proposal. The cost is our own time, talent, and treasure. The reward is health, vitality, and moral courage for our congregations and leaders.

I'm not sure whether we accomplish this with our chairs at the front or rear of the Good Ship PTCA. I am sure that, no matter where our chairs are, we will do this work best with our eyes on the one who walks across the water, calling us to follow Him into the communities and neighborhoods God has placed in our lives.

We can be the Presbytery you want. But only if you want. I invite you all to commit to this effort.