

A Word from our General Presbyter

Ed Thompson

I met some of my closest friends in ministry during first year executive training. The Presbyterian Church does a much better job now of bringing together those who are in their first three years of serving as presbytery leaders and providing them with mentors and coaching. When I started, they just brought us together to listen to and learn from those who had already been serving in similar positions. I shouldn't diminish that training; it was invaluable, and I learned a lot. What I remember most, though, are the conversations we had over meals and at the end of the day.

I don't remember the context, but I clearly recall Dana Lindsley, who was the executive in the Presbytery of Southern New England, saying that he felt like he was a midwife for a new kind of church that was being born. That image has stuck with me for more than a decade. It still feels true. A new kind of church, as well as a new kind of presbytery, is being born. We don't know exactly what it's going to look like, but we know the old ways no longer work. Or perhaps it's better to say the old ways don't work as well as they used to. And we are scrambling to adapt.

Even 15 or maybe 20 years ago, most presbyteries called their executives (at least to their faces) either the "General Presbyter" or the "Executive Presbyter." Now, there are something like 30 different titles for these positions, and a few presbyteries, mostly for financial reasons, have eliminated the position entirely.

Certainly, we can learn from the past. We have to. But repeating the patterns of the past no longer seems to produce the same results. We can see that in seminary education. I remember talking with one pastor nearing retirement, who said, "Other than what I learned about the Bible, the things I learned in seminary no longer hold true. It's a different world." What was scary to me was that in a another meeting about a year later, I heard a younger pastor, who had graduated from seminary only five years earlier, say just about the same thing. The world – and the church – had changed so much that what they had learned in seminary no longer seemed relevant.

That emphasizes the need and the value for continuing education. It also emphasizes the need for all of us to keep learning, to have an open-minded attitude so we can keep looking for books, blogs and websites that stimulate us and challenge us in order to learn from others who have discovered things that work or at least work better than what we're doing now.

I think that also emphasizes the need for peer groups and the importance of talking with other pastors, Presbyterians as well as non-Presbyterians, about what they're seeing in their churches and the community as well as in the wider culture. Life is too complex to go it alone. We need to lean on one another and learn from one another. There's also no shame in borrowing from one another, giving credit where credit is due, of course.

It can be hard to give up the old ways. It can be hard to admit our old assumptions and ideas no longer hold true. But in spite of the pain involved in giving birth, there is also joy in creating something new. That newness nourishes the hope that things can be different and that they will be better.

I'm encouraged by the creative ministries I see our churches trying. One of my favorite parts of our presbytery meetings is "Good News from the Pews," when we get to hear some of these amazing stories. Sometimes, I think the only things holding us back are not a lack of money or people but just a lack of creativity and fear of failure.

I'm also encouraged by the work of our Ministry Committee. They're looking into ways to listen to the members of our smaller churches so that they can tell us what they need and how we can help them. They're also starting to think about what we might do differently to shorten the amount of time it takes for a church to find a new pastor. I'm not sure what either of those efforts will bring, but I'm convinced they're worth the time. It kind of makes me feel like a midwife. And all things considered, that's a good thing.