

A Word from our General Presbyter

Ed Thompson

This past Saturday, I got back from Big Tent. In case you've never heard of it, Big Tent is a national gathering of Presbyterians held in the years between our biennial General Assembly meetings. I've been to four of the five we've had.

While I like General Assembly meetings, I love Big Tent. It has great worship, wonderful music and terrific speakers and workshops. This year, the Bible Study, led by Eric Barretto, a New Testament Professor from Princeton Seminary, was outstanding. (To be honest, I thought about sleeping in and just skipping Bible study, but I'm glad I didn't.)

Big Tent is sometimes described as a Presbyterian family reunion. It was for me. I had the chance to see friends from other presbyteries where I've served, touch base with other presbytery executives, chat with national staff and hear from our co-moderators and the Stated Clerk of the denomination.

This year's theme was "Race, Reconciliation, Reformation." Held in St. Louis and probably reflecting the demographics of that city, this was probably the most racially-diverse gathering of Presbyterians I have ever attended. Friday evening, we had the chance to visit some of the African-American churches in the area. First Presbyterian Church of Ferguson was a popular choice. However, there was also a good crowd at the Cote Brilliante Presbyterian Church. (I chose that congregation because a friend of mine had been a pastor there.) For over three hours, we enjoyed dinner and engaged in "Holy Conversations around Race." We need more of these frank conversations.

Here are some things I learned from the three workshops I took.

1. "Changing Face of Ministry"

- 51% of the Teaching Elders under age 65 at year end 2016 will be 65 or older by 2026. (Another way to think of this: more than half of our current pastors could retire in the next 10 years.)
- Since 2010, the PC(USA) has ordained more women than men as Teaching Elders/Ministers of the Word and Sacrament.
- Only 1/3 of the current inquirers and candidates are white men.

2. "Measuring Congregational Vitality is More Useful than Counting Heads"

The Office of Evangelism and the Office of Research Services have been working together on a project to help measure congregational vitality. They feel every church has the possibility of vitality and that just looking at church membership numbers really doesn't tell you enough. We had the opportunity to take a draft version of a discernment tool they're developing for church leaders to assess spiritual vitality in congregations. Here are the seven areas they're asking about:

- Lifelong Christian Formation
- Outward Incarnational Focus
- Intentional Evangelism
- Healthy Systems
- Caring Relationships
- Empowering Servant Leadership
- Spirit-Inspired Worship

If you're interested, I can make copies of the questionnaire they gave us. Although it's not in its final form, it might be useful and could provoke some interesting conversations. Or simply stay tuned; they hope to release the final version later this year. I'll publicize it when they do.

3. The View From Here – Discussing the Future of the PC (U.S.A.) with the Stated Clerk

J. Herbert Nelson was elected Stated Clerk of the General Assembly at its 2016 meeting a little over a year ago. He often says, “We are not dying; we are reforming.” He emphasized that during his sermon at the opening worship service. He pointed out:

1. The Reformation took place over a long period of time; it didn’t happen overnight.
2. Many of us thought that reunion (meaning the reunion between the “Northern” and Southern branches of the Presbyterian Church in 1983) was enough; it wasn’t. Now we’re stuck with each other.
3. We need to develop an identity. Or another way to put it, How do we define the picture that we see?

I thought to myself, “I bet he sometimes wonders, ‘What have I gotten myself into?’” To be honest, I sometimes ask myself the same question.

Big Tent was fun. It was challenging. It gave me a lot to think about. It was a good continuing education experience, and it will happen again in 2019. I hope you’ll join me at the next Big Tent.