

## A Word from our General Presbyter

**Ed Thompson**

On Saturday, April 22, I gave the keynote address at the gathering of the Presbyterian Women of the Presbytery of West Virginia, which was held at the First Presbyterian Church of Parkersburg. One of the things I suggested to them is that they find ways to serve as mentors or partners to a younger generation of women if they want to pass on the values and wisdom they have and if they want Presbyterian Women to survive.

As I've reflected on that, I've realized that's easier said than done. It may also qualify as a version of "pastor fetch," a game where church members tell their pastor what the pastor should do, especially when they are not doing it or are not willing to do it themselves. I also realized this advice really applies to all of us. How do we pass on the values and wisdom we have? How do we pass on our faith to a younger generation? That's a question I've struggled with for a long time. I have not found any quick or easy answers.

Someone once said, "The church is always one generation away from extinction." (A quick Google search fails to reveal the author of that quote.) In some ways that may be true, but I'm not sure I completely believe it. Somehow, the church will survive. God is still at work in the world, and I believe God still has work for us to do. Now, individual congregations may not necessarily survive. I've closed enough churches in both Kansas and West Virginia to know that's certainly true. The church as we know it also may not survive. While in some ways that makes me sad, in other ways that's probably not a bad thing.

Churches that depend on tradition and only want to do things the way they've always done them probably need to die. Churches that have no passion, energy, spark or spirit need to die. Churches that only care about themselves and only want to write checks probably need to die. Actually, there's nothing wrong with writing checks, *per se*; writing checks can be a good and faithful thing. But it also seems to me it's one of the last things that happen as churches die. They write checks and give away all their money before they finally close their doors.

Churches that live and thrive reach out to their community; they go out into their community. I've heard that Jesus says, "Follow me" something like 57 times in the gospels. He never says, "Come to church." He often says, "Love your neighbor." He never says, "Worship me." I suspect these ideas come from Brian McLaren; I was listening to his audiobook [The Great Spiritual Migration](#) on my way to a West Virginia Council of Churches meeting in Wheeling. (That's available in the Resource Center if you're interested.) One of the things he said that struck me was "What if we spent more time in our session meetings thinking about how we can help our church members be more loving?" That may not be an exact quote, but that's how I remember it. I almost stopped the car so I could replay that section. He proposes that the church should be a school of love. I think that's a powerful idea.

That loving could take on a lot of different forms. It could certainly include food banks and clothing closets. It could include providing space for AA and NA meetings. I think it could also include taking the time to mentor people younger than we are or partnering with people of the same age or older – not to tell them what they need to do or believe but to take the time to listen to them and learn from them. Instead of trying to fix their lives or straighten them out, we can stand by them and love them. They may never come to worship or give the church a dime. That's not the point. If they know we love and support them, if they know God loves and supports them, that will be enough.

The church will look different in the years ahead. If we can be better at loving our neighbors, we will survive. If we only love ourselves, we don't need to.