

A Word from our General Presbyter Ed Thompson

Last month Rocky Poole, our Financial Administrator/Treasurer, and I went to a Board of Pensions Benefits Connection event. This was far different than the gatherings the Board of Pensions has held in the past, but it really needed to be different.

In the last year, the Board of Pensions has become a lot more flexible in the way it offers health insurance and retirement coverage for church employees and, in some cases, for pastors who are not in installed positions. There are far more options available now, and this event helped us become more familiar with the choices we have. You can certainly ask Rocky or I about the options for your church if you have any questions; really though, the best person to talk to about that would be Doug Portz, who is the Church Consultant assigned by the Board of Pensions to our presbytery. (These people used to be called Regional Representatives, but with all the changes adopted by the Board of Pensions, the titles of these positions have also been changed.) You can contact Doug at 215-587-7455 or at dportz@pensions.org.

The event we went to was held at Woods Memorial Presbyterian Church in Severna Park, Maryland, which is a suburb of Baltimore. It's a big church. The square footage of the building probably matched that of three or maybe even four of our smaller churches. On one wall near the entrance we used, they had pictures of their staff members. There are several of our congregations that don't have that many church members. As we were looking at these pictures, one thing jumped out at us. I think Rocky noticed it first. He said, "When I looked at that picture, I thought it said 'optimist.' I had to look at it again to see that it said 'organist.'"

Now why would any church need an optimist? An organist makes sense. At least if your church has an organ, you need someone to play it. (Side note: it's probably harder to find a church organist than it is a pastor.) The more I thought about it, though, the more sense it made to have someone be the church optimist. Maybe larger churches could even pay someone to be their optimist. Most of our churches, though, will probably have to rely on volunteer optimists. Every church needs at least one. Having a backup makes sense, however, because if you only have one optimist in your church, they'll get tired out and need to take a break or they'll go on vacation.

We certainly have enough church pessimists. There is no shortage of people who will speak up and tell us, "That will never work." Or "We tried that before, and it failed." Or "We don't have enough money to do that." Or "We don't have enough people to do that." Or "The Book of Order won't let us do that." (Side note: The Book of Order often gives us more permission than we think it does.)

I can understand church pessimists. I can understand the fear, the discouragement. I can understand wanting to save money, to hold on to what we have, to not set ourselves up for failure. I will also admit that sometimes pastors will have goofy ideas. I will admit that I have had goofy ideas. You don't necessarily want or need to do everything your pastor suggests – but you shouldn't turn down everything they bring up either.

I think it would be great for every church to have someone on staff, someone on session or some member who would be the church optimist. They would get excited. They would encourage new people and new ideas. They would offer a new way of looking at things. Before meetings could be hijacked by pessimists, they would say, "That's a great idea. Let's try it. You never know until you try."

You could say we looked at that staff member's picture the wrong way. Sometimes, though, looking at things in a different way makes more sense. Even though I like organ music, I think a church will be better served by having an optimist. Who is the optimist in your church? If you can't think of anyone who fills that role, maybe you could designate someone. Or maybe you could try doing it yourself.