

## **A Word from our General Presbyter Ed Thompson**

During the last week of September, the West Virginia Council of Churches held a retreat for their Board of Directors that looked at the Spiritual State of Appalachia. That theme followed up on a conference they held in the spring on the State of Appalachia. Unfortunately, I missed that event because of my mother-in-law's funeral, but apparently it dealt more with the economy and the environment of our region.

I was glad I was able to make this one. An insight, which may seem obvious, is that there are significant differences within Appalachia, as well as within our state. For example, Charleston is not Wheeling, Huntington is not Lewisburg, and Martinsburg is not Fairmont. Someone suggested that maybe what we needed to do is conduct a listening tour around the state to learn more about each locale and what's really going on in our area. This may or may not happen. But we did develop a list of four questions that we could ask that would tell us what we would want to know about the person we're talking to, as well as about their community.

- 1) What gives you hope? The answer to this would give us a sense of what the individual thinks the future holds for them, as well as whether they're optimistic or pessimistic about the future of their community. The response might also tell us something about their religious views. Certainly, if someone only talks about heaven as a source of hope that might be a good indication that they've given up on the local economy.
- 2) What do you think of when you hear the word God? We struggled with the wording of this question, and this seemed to be the phrasing with which most people were comfortable. It recognizes the increasing religious diversity within the state, as well as the rising number of people who claim to be "spiritual, but not religious." The question also recognizes the diversity within Christianity, as well as within denominations. Not all Baptists are alike. Not all United Methodists are alike. Certainly not all Presbyterians are alike. It strikes me that this is also probably true within any one congregation.
- 3) How are things with your soul? While the phrasing of this question may seem somewhat archaic, nevertheless the answer we get will probably be quite revealing. It may tell us more about the individual we're talking to, but it could also reflect some issues in the community that they find troubling. For instance, maybe there are a large number of people dealing with drug addiction or alcoholism. Maybe the divorce rate or the unemployment rate is high. Maybe the local economy, as well as the housing market, has collapsed. Although you might have to explain the question to some people, once they understand what we're trying to get at, they should have a lot to say.
- 4) What keeps you here? Some of us wanted to ask, "Why are you here?" but that seemed to take a more existentialist turn than most people wanted. The answer could reflect their family history and ties to the land. It could reflect their job or career choices. It might also reflect the local culture or the environment.

How would you answer those questions? What questions would you want to ask? Let's talk about it. If we do, we'll learn more about one another and the communities where we live, as well as about our state.