

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

There are three questions every church needs to be able to answer: 1) Who are we?, 2) Who are our neighbors?, and 3) What is God calling us to do? The questions come from New Beginnings, a program offered through the Presbyterian Church that helps congregations to make meaningful decisions about their future. It's a good program, and it may be helpful to your church. But I think working on these questions will be helpful whether you use the program or not.

Who are we? A lot of congregations will describe themselves as a family. That can mean that they care for one another. While that seems like a good thing, not all families are healthy. Sometimes, they keep secrets. Sometimes, they bully one another. Depending on the individual, describing your congregation as a family may be a red flag. It may actually encourage people to turn away because their experience of family growing up was so abusive.

The idea of the congregation as a family may also unintentionally keep your church from growing. For example, how many people does your family have around the table at Thanksgiving? For my family, it's often only four. Even if we included all of my wife's siblings, their children and their grandchildren we would only have 21. Maybe your family is a lot larger. I suspect most families aren't. So describing your congregation as a family may actually limit your imagination and restrict your expectations of the number of people who could be involved.

Maybe you could describe your church as a learning community or a missional community. Maybe you could describe yourself as being open-minded, open-hearted followers of Jesus who encourage and support one another and who are committed to make a difference in their community. There are almost endless possibilities as to how you might answer the question "Who are we?" Frankly, the way many congregations describe themselves on Church Information Forms is just boring.

Who are our neighbors? Sometimes, churches don't know. Their members no longer live in the neighborhood where the church is located. Sometimes, they imagine the neighborhood is pretty much the same as when they were growing up, even if that was 50 or 60 years ago. Sometimes, they know the neighborhood has changed, but they live in denial. Or the changes make them angry or afraid. Sometimes, they are aware of the changes, but they don't know what to do about it.

We can find plenty of excuses as to why we don't know who our neighbors are. However, we can also find plenty of answers if we're willing to invest the time doing some research on the Internet or talking to local officials who have access to the data we need.

What is God calling us to do? Let me suggest the answer is not recreating the past. Instead, I think the answer needs to include both who we are and who our neighbors are. Sadly, sometimes we only worry about who we are, what we like and what we need while we ignore our neighbors. This exclusive attitude is killing our churches and our souls.

While we may not want or need to do this every year, it may be helpful to revisit these questions every other year. Change keeps happening whether we like it or not. If we can periodically work on these questions and talk about what we're seeing, it will help us to keep up, to be faithful and to be ready when it comes time to search for our next pastor.