

Transitional Executive's Report to Presbytery, May 6, 2023

Becoming NCCP: A Tale of Two Presbyteries, A Pandemic, and A Vision
- The Rev. Dr. Mary E. Westfall, Transitional Executive Presbyter

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times. It was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness. It was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity. It was the season of light, it was the season of darkness. It was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair. So begins a description of the past 4 years of pandemic, culture wars, church decline, innovation, and adaptation. No, actually it is from the mid-1880's novel, "A Tale of Two Cities" by Charles Dickens. However, given what we have all been through, it may seem an apt description!

When I arrived as your Transitional Presbyter, there was already an awareness of the need to strengthen the presbytery and congregations challenged by the departures of a significant number of PCUSA churches to other denominations, as well as the need to heal from past wounds and chart a new path forward. Almost immediately, I joined deepening conversation about a possible joining of Stockton and Sacramento Presbyteries and learned about the differences between the two presbyteries as well as similarities and resonance. Each had experienced a significant loss of churches and members. Each continued to have a central focus on care for congregations and pastors and a commitment to ongoing mission endeavors.

Those early generative conversations lead to Stockton churches voting unanimously to unite with Sacramento Presbytery, over several other options available. With this good news, at the February 2020 joint presbytery meeting at Grace Presbyterian Church, Lodi, Rev. Nancy Clegg and I had the joy of announcing the new name for the uniting presbytery, voted on that day by Commissioners. North Central California Presbytery was born. The enthusiasm was palpable as we acknowledged, with gratitude "the new thing" God was doing in our midst. Even so, there was much work to be undertaken.

At an early March 2020 Joint Council retreat Stockton and Sacramento presbytery leaders began to arc out an ambitious 18-month plan for union between the two, which included regional gatherings, study and exploration, relationship building, shared worship/spiritual engagement and discernment across the region. Just days later that plan changed abruptly as our nation, state and churches shut down due to the corona virus. At the time, no one had any idea how significantly that global pandemic would change nearly every aspect of daily life, as well as the church itself.

With an inability to meet in-person the 18-month timeline created by the Joint Council was put on hold and across our region a major pivot took place, with plans and expectations necessarily altered. No matter the size of the congregation, immediately all were called upon to engage new technologies and altered ways of connecting and "being church," as we experienced an unfamiliar and often overwhelming new landscape.

It was a fearful and disorienting time with news reports announcing rising death tolls, families, couples, and elderly individuals sheltering in place without opportunity for engagement with their faith community or even their next door neighbors. Into such, clergy needed to become “televangelists” over-night. Musicians, silenced briefly, began creating church or home studio space to record music for use in worship. Nearly every congregation across our two previous presbyteries found a way to continue sharing the good news of the gospel, recording worship, live-streaming services, accessing Facebook Live or a YouTube channel. During a time of fear and uncertainty, faithful leaders across our newly emerging presbytery adapted new ways to lead, connect and care for one another. Pastors learned to preach to a camera rather than the faces of beloved members. Buildings closed, but the church remained open, striving to meet the spiritual needs of young and old during a surreal and challenging time. It was, at times, daunting, but people rose to the occasion, Session members, pastors, musicians, Deacons, church schoolteachers. Even as familiar practices faded, new rituals and rhythms were coming into being. North Central California Presbytery, from its beginning, a place of innovation, adaptation and the movement of the Holy Spirit.

At the presbytery level, leaders worked to support congregations and pastors, even while they, too, had to change the way they undertook nearly every aspect of their shared work. Council and each committee moved immediately from in-person meetings to zoom, something most had not used with any consistency, if at all. Those first meetings were not without challenges and mishaps, but without options, people persisted. Grants were available to churches needing technology upgrades. Weekly zoom groups were set up for clergy to connect, share resources and provide mutual support. We increased the frequency of the presbytery newsletter to get timely resources and information to churches, pastors, committee members, expanding new and existing tools to keep people connected across our vast region.

Do you recall how you and those around you rose to the occasion? Even in a time filled with fear and uncertainty, with cultural and racial tensions rippling across the nation and across our presbytery, we leaned into the moment together. Through resourcefulness, trial and error, patience and courage we found the capacity to worship and pray together, discuss, discern and make decisions at all levels of the presbytery and, by the grace of God, begin building new relationships, increasing trust in one another and striving to be faithful to our calling as God's beloved community. Pause for a moment to remember all that was undertaken. For what can you/we now give thanks?

In the midst of so much change, leaders from Stockton and Sacramento continued to meet and imagine the structure of the new presbytery. Task forces were established to sell the Sacramento office complex, explore possible new committee structures, envision how best to staff the emerging new presbytery, create a vision statement, articulate core values, determine a new location for the presbytery offices. At one time there were 8 task forces in place, each doing significant work under the guidance and

authority of the Joint Council. The task forces were comprised of leaders from Turlock to Red Bluff, Esparto to Placerville, and everywhere in-between. Without having to drive long distances, presbytery members, living hours and hours apart, joined together on regular zoom meetings to dream, plan, and design the way forward, all of it undertaken with prayer and an intentional commitment to following the Spirit and participating in the new thing God was doing.

By July of 2021, a special task force of the General Assembly approved the Stockton and Sacramento union, making North Central California Presbytery official. The first Moderator of the new presbytery was Rev. Joshua Trautman, pastor of Geneva Presbyterian Church, Modesto. All the while, countless leaders had been working to make the transition to the new presbytery as smooth as possible, a “homecoming” rather than an acquisition.

That same year the Visioning Task Force spent many months and several presbytery meetings refining a vision statement and core values to help guide and inspire the new presbytery, creating space for discussion and revision, until the following was adopted by full presbytery vote:

North Central California Presbytery, as disciples of Jesus Christ, seeks to:

Gather in love

Equip to Serve

Inspire Transformation

Embodying the gospel values of outreach, hospitality, bold witness, equity, justice, spiritual growth, community and radical love

Through further discussion and discernment the Restructure Task Force recommended the Committee on Ministry be renamed Vitality in Ministry (VIM), to clearly prioritize and name their commitment to helping congregations and pastors thrive. Two committees, Congregational Support and Pastoral Support, which previously had provided funding within Sacramento Presbytery (Cordova Funds), were merged into VIM so that it might be equipped to provide financial support as well as timely resources and procedural support. In some of its first action, VIM initiated two different presbytery-wide surveys, over a two-year period, to better ascertain the needs of congregations and pastors, and explore ways to enhance the relationship between the local church and the presbytery. Both surveys inspired transformation and led to the establishment of the “Congregational Partner Initiative,” now in pilot project phase. This new initiative takes the place of the traditional biennial or triennial visits and strives to build stronger bonds of trust and mutual care with and among congregations, providing new avenues to share resources, grants and other forms of support. The Congregational Partner planning team will be sharing an interpretive video during the May 6 presbytery

meeting to further explain the intent and vision of this initiative and encourage participation for the benefit of each congregation and the presbytery as a whole.

Another exciting addition to the presbytery structure has been the creation of the New Ministry Initiatives Committee, which has now been in place for over a year. Their role is to identify, support, and assess new innovative forms of ministry and promising New Worshipping Committees. With a funding source received through departing churches nearly 10 -12 years ago, NMI is poised to help encourage, financially support and expand new ministries across the region. Currently, they are working with three diverse new worshipping communities: Intercultural Mosaics, Iama Yoga, Casas de Paz and have just approved a new initiative led by Hunger Action Advocate, Nancy Disher, to help create, support and sustain greater mission and service opportunities with churches across the presbytery.

As the presbytery continues to live true to its vision and values, Council leadership, with the approval of presbytery, established the Gospel, Equity and Inclusion Task force (GEI) charged with helping provide an assessment of the presbytery's policies and practices with an eye toward the way those create greater access, inclusion and welcome or where change might be indicated. GEI Task Force will report at the May 6, 2023 Presbytery Meeting and share their progress on creating such an assessment, noting a survey being undertaken with all those who currently serve in leadership in the presbytery and a number of additional individuals who have served in the past in either the former Stockton or Sacramento presbyteries. The survey results will be translated into steps the presbytery can take toward more fully embodying a gospel commitment to full inclusion. Council will continue to support and oversee this important process.

Even during so much change, the presbytery has continued to offer a wide array of opportunities for growth and transformation. With regularity, the presbytery has hosted Pastoral Renewal Retreats, Justice Conferences, training for clergy, elders, administrators and those involved in church finance. Resources and leaders from our denomination have been called upon to support programs for congregations as they envision the future of their ministries and property, contend with natural disasters, re-envision mission and stewardship, explore the Matthew 25 Initiative and much more.

During 2021 and 2022 the over-arching theme of our presbytery gatherings was "Growing Strong in the Broken Places," and drew upon the image of *kintsugi*, the Japanese art form in which a broken or chipped piece of pottery is repaired using gold or silver lacquer. The result is a mended bowl, the cracks, still visible, but transformed into a thing of beauty, a metaphor for embracing flaws and imperfections. Through those challenging years, intention was given to deepening spiritual practices and core gospel teachings, acknowledging that even a presbytery can grow strong in the broken places as the Spirit moves in and among us. NCCP, a community of believers with flaws and imperfections, made evermore beautiful as the Spirit melds it together for loving service, bold witness and generous hospitality.

Becoming NCCP occurred against a backdrop of pandemic, loss and fear. The losses were very real, as was the grief and anxiety that rippled through the culture and our daily lives. Those realities have forever shaped and changed the church. Even so, during these past 3 ½ years a tremendous amount of creativity, innovation and adaptation took place. Old narratives of scarcity, division and church battles have begun to give way to an emerging story of resilience, cooperation, abundance and despite so many unwelcomed changes, a recognition of new opportunities through which to be God's people, the body of Christ, a blessing to our region.

When I came as your Transitional Executive in September of 2019 none of us could have imagined just how much "transition" would take place for us all. And there is more to come. Recent reports from our denomination speak candidly about the continuing loss of members and congregations in the PCUSA. Changing demographics in the United States reflect that the future of our communities will increasingly include many more people of color, immigrants, refugees and a younger population. Most recently, *The Christian Century* published results of a study in which US teens reported preferring to affiliate with congregations that support social justice causes, mental health, poverty, with the top concerns of Gen Z (young adults) being racial justice, mental health issues, sexual abuse, human trafficking and global climate change.(April 2023). As the landscape of our nation changes how might this inform and shape the way forward for local congregations and the work of the presbytery?

It is fitting that this year's theme for the presbytery is "Journeying With Our Neighbor." After several years of needing to tend each other and our local church communities, our hearts and gaze now turn outward to reclaim the holy work of extending ourselves to those beyond our walls. We are called by Christ, to love our neighbor, extend ourselves to our neighbor, seek the Holy in the face of our neighbor. How will the presbytery and each local church engage with and respond to that theme as the Spirit guides us into the world, journeying with new partners, neighbors of varied ages, backgrounds, cultures, experiences? How will such holy encounters continue to shape, transform and bless the church and the work of NCCP?

Even as many congregations experience the loss of active members, there is also growth among new worshipping communities and other ministries that focus on new ways of gathering, serving, feeding, healing, advocating. Currently, nearly half of the congregations in our presbytery are without a settled, installed pastor, but they are not without opportunity to meet needs in their community. NCCP was forged in the fires of change. The invitation to innovation should not cause alarm, but loosen our grip and open our hearts and minds with imagination and possibilities. It is Christ's church, after all, and we are reminded in the Book of Order that Christ has equipped the church with everything it needs to fulfill God's mission in the world.

Even as fewer people may be walking through our church doors, there is also an incredible hunger in our culture for authentic community, for spaces of belonging, ritual and celebration. There is great opportunity across this presbytery to continue exploring new forms of ministry, outreach and advocacy. It may be hard to let go of certain

practices from which we have derived great meaning, but our God is a God of change, continuing to coax up life in new and varied forms. From its inception at Pentecost, the church has been evolving and changing as that same Spirit continues to coax up community in new and varied forms. The reality of the cross and the empty grave offer hope as we yield to the promise that, in God's economy, all that dies and falls away is transformed, reborn, given new, abundant life.

North Central California Presbytery is a story that is just beginning. A new presbytery arising out of pain and uncertainty, nurtured through love, necessary innovation, companionship, shared vision, deep faith, with the opportunity to bear abundant and life-giving fruit.

What a moment to be the church, the listening, learning, living and loving body of Christ in the world. The need is great. The opportunity, greater. More churches may close their doors, others relaunch. New partnerships will arise with other denominations and community partners who, likewise, have heard the call to discipleship and share a passion for improving the quality of life for the planet and all its inhabitants. Friends, "here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Do not be afraid."

(Frederick Buechner)

May you allow yourselves to be used for a holy purpose, a healing purpose, a hope-filled purpose, trusting in the One who has called you by name, promising to be with you in all times. North Central California Presbytery called forth to be a blessing.

Thanks be to God - Creating, Redeeming, Sustaining, now and forever.

With special thanks to partners on this journey:

Rev. Nancy Clegg, Shelley Mitchell, Rev. Jeri Viera Dahlke, Tayler Stone, Karen Sturtevant, Nancy Disher, John Arthur, Clair Pisor, Janice Hall (office colleagues, past and present)

RE Ann Johnson, Rev. Ivan Herman, Rev. Joshua Trautman, RE Pat Terry, Rev. Aart Van Beek, Rev. Grace Suwabe (Presbytery Moderators)

The many generous church members from across the presbytery who stepped into leadership positions in this unprecedented time, serving with creativity, imagination, intelligence and love.

The 40 plus congregations and new worshipping communities of NCCP that have continued to follow Christ and be light and love in challenging times