

Executive Presbyter's Report to the Presbytery of Grand Canyon
Valley Presbyterian Church
June 10, 2003

Sometimes I feel like the boy who cried wolf. Repeatedly over the last four years I have spoken or sent out communications to you all about the awful financial condition of the presbytery. And so far, every year we have managed to come out OK at the end of the year. This may lead some folks to shrug their shoulders about our current budget woes and assume this is more of the same stewardship hype. Would that it were so. Last year we managed to come out in the black by paring down and under-spending an already conservative budget. The good news about last year is that we did not have to cut into the muscle of our budget, that is the mission support for our congregations and new church developments.

Unfortunately, the difficult financial circumstances now threatening the historic mission of this presbytery are real, and any further cutting of our even more conservative 2003 budget, beyond what the Budget Committee did last week, will slice into mission muscle. Let's acknowledge up front that these negative economic forces are real not only for the presbytery but also for individual congregations, for the synod, the General Assembly, and for all our ecumenical partner denominations. If misery loves company, we've got plenty of friends.

Members of the Budget Committee will report to you later in this meeting, with details and requests for assistance. So my report will provide background information. You'll have an opportunity to ask hard and specific questions later in this meeting.

Now there are many complicating factors related to the decline in presbytery income, but it is nevertheless easy to identify the immediate source of the problem. Giving to General (or Unified) Mission by churches in the presbytery is down compared with previous years. That's it! The decline in General Mission giving accounts for nearly all the shortfall on the income side of the presbytery's budget.

If this is a temporary phenomenon, reflecting the decline in the national economy, then we can hunker down, make some short-term tough decisions, and wait with confidence for our churches to resume and expand their previous levels of generous support for the mission of the presbytery and the larger church.

But if this is a long-term trend, wherein our churches move toward functional congregationalism and prefer to support non-Presbyterian mission to a greater extent and denominational mission less, then we will need to revise radically our mission priorities. And since the bulk of this presbytery's

mission is direct and indirect support of our own congregations, this will be an exceedingly painful procedure.

Everything -mission to racial/ethnic congregations, new church developments, congregational redevelopment, educational programs, campus ministry, investments in social justice, and presbytery staff- will have to be on the operating table, and by the time surgery is complete, some of our vital organs may be missing. Like the young man injured in a hiking accident, who amputated his own arm to save his life, we may have to cut off our own flesh and bone to survive financially -but I pray not.

Well, enough of depressing economic news. I want to shift the scene to some positive ways we in Grand Canyon Presbytery have contributed to the unveiling of the realm of God in our corner of the world and beyond. The first good news relates to action you have taken today: Brent, Stephanie, Mary Jane, Reginald.

A few weeks before General Assembly, I received a phone call from a staff person in Louisville. The General Assembly Council wanted to give me a tee-shirt at the Assembly, and she needed to know what size I wore. The reason for the tee-shirt was to recognize our presbytery for being in the top ten (among 173 presbyteries) in one of their mission giving categories for 2002. That category is per member giving to special offerings. Grand Canyon Presbytery is one of the best contributors in the entire denomination to One Great Hour of Sharing, the Peacemaking offering, the Pentecost offering, and the Christmas offering.

Since I wear such tee-shirts for exercising and working in the yard, and they shrink terribly, I said extra-large. As it turned out, it wasn't a tee-shirt at all, but the one I'm wearing, and it's way too big. But I figure it's not really my shirt, anyway. It belongs to the whole presbytery, so if any of you want to wear the presbytery's shirt, please let me know. I'll give you the shirt off my back.

The real message here is your generosity for mission in the larger church and world. This is not the first time we've made the top ten in one of the General Assembly mission categories, and I hope it will not be the last.

The General Assembly Council also reported recently on basic mission giving by presbyteries over the years 2000, 2001, and 2002, in total dollars (not per member), and Grand Canyon Presbytery ranks 18th out of 173. That's petty good. To the extent that it's OK for Calvinists to be proud, we should be very proud. Give yourselves a round of applause. We're number 18!

Here's a story I've told a bunch of times in recent weeks, so if you've heard it, please bear with me. Our Native American churches tend to approach recording church membership information differently from other churches. Many of our reservation congregations may report only thirty, forty or fifty members on their rolls, but if you ask around in the community,

hundreds of people will say they are members of the local Presbyterian church. The witness and influence of these congregations extend well beyond what's on the official membership rolls.

So it was encouraging to hear what happened in the Gila River Community at the Vah Ki Presbyterian Church on Easter Sunday this year. Vah Ki has been without a pastor for four years, and they've managed to stay together with supply preachers and elders leading worship. Jim Bruening moderated the session there until late last year, demonstrating much care and faithfulness, and then in November, my wife Shelly became moderator. As it happens, Shelly is involved in this story, but I would tell it just as joyfully no matter who the preacher was that day.

Easter is a grand day for baptisms. I worshiped at the Kingman Presbyterian Church on Easter Sunday, and Grif Vautier officiated at two baptisms that morning, one infant and one adult. It was great. And the same morning at the Vah Ki Presbyterian Church, Shelly baptized 22 children and three adults, and the session received nine new adult members.

Vah Ki is one of the churches that receives financial assistance from the presbytery. For the kind of witness to the gospel in that community demonstrated by what happened there on Easter, I believe every dime we have invested in that church has been worth it. But it's not the numbers per se that matter. It's not simply because the church increased its membership rolls by more than 10% and greatly expanded its baptismal roll in one day. It is because the faithful witness of the Presbyterians in that community continues to bear fruit year after year, even without a pastor. In good times and in bad, lives have been changed there. Lost souls have been found. I can't tell you how many, but God knows.

There are things that happen in all our congregations that can't be measured by objective standards. Mysterious acts of the Holy Spirit. Unfathomable transformations. The work of the gospel isn't tied to numerical gains and losses. Indeed, if the presbytery were a business enterprise, churches like Vah Ki and scores of others would have been long since closed for lack of profitability. But we are a church, not a business.

In Grand Canyon Presbytery church sanctuaries rise out of the desert in a host of improbable places. These buildings, some massive and some modest, stand as beacons for the people of their communities. And even if most of the folks in the neighborhood don't come to church very often, they are comforted to know that the church is there, with its doors open when a time of need arises. Remember how the people flocked to churches right after 9/11? A whole lot of them haven't been coming back very regularly, but thank God they had a place to go on that day.

We may not be able to measure the effects of our prayers, scripture

readings, and sermons on people who only come to church in response to tragedy, or for family events, or for Christmas and Easter. But I am convinced that our worship does have influence on the casual attendee as well as those who are in the pews every Sunday. What we do and what we stand for have effects far beyond the faithful core of the congregation.

Think about the place where you live. Imagine that there are no churches in your community. What would life be like there? They say the last institutions to leave changing neighborhoods are bars and churches. Both of these institutions make promises to people, offering comfort and relief from pain. Two different beacons shining forth to attract people. What if there were only one beacon left and it did not reflect the light of the gospel? Friends, the prospect of closing churches causes me extreme heartache.

Not chartering new ones brings me similar grief. During the last few months I've heard voices calling for more Presbyterian churches in our bounds. People from Goodyear and Litchfield Park in the West Valley have contacted me, saying that scores of people there are waiting for a Presbyterian presence. I've had similar calls from people in other parts of the Valley. Sadly, I've had to say we can't afford to help them.

Jose Olagues and I have studied maps and found 14 different places where we could start new churches if we had the financial resources to do so, half of them outside Maricopa County. We are surrounded by abundant need for a Reformed witness in developing neighborhoods and communities where there is no such presence now, and here we sit amid all these opulent human fields discouraged by the economic costs.

So now we come back to budget issues. And the underlying question about the budget boils down to this: Is the geographical collection of churches we call the Presbytery of Grand Canyon worth supporting and building up? If the answer is no, then we may as well quit right now. If the answer is yes, we have many decisions to make, many improvements to implement, and every congregation will have to contribute something for the common good, even if it's a widow's mite. Our larger and more affluent churches will have to contribute more so our small churches and mission outposts can keep their doors open.

In this season of Pentecost, it is appropriate and good to reflect on the plentiful cost of planting and maintaining churches. With the many different languages spoken within our bounds, we know the Pentecost experience first hand. I pray we Grand Canyon Presbyterians will flourish as a Pentecost people for generations to come.

Thank you for listening.

Kenneth A. Moe