

Executive Presbyter's Report to the Presbytery of Grand Canyon
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Gilbert Presbyterian Church, Gilbert, Arizona
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Today I will offer miscellaneous reflections on the subject of evangelism. The immediate context for these remarks is the annual statistical report of membership for the year 2005. There's not a lot of good news in the report. We have seventy churches in the presbytery. A typical pattern for this presbytery is that in any given year, about one-third of our churches will register growth, one-third will remain stable, and one-third will show membership losses.

For the year 2005, only sixteen of the seventy reported gains of at least five members. That's 23%. Twenty-eight (or 40%) reported substantially the same numbers, although this includes some churches that did not report, so their figures are the same as 2004. Twenty-six (or 37%) of our churches reported losses of five or more members. The net loss for the presbytery as a whole comes out to 286 people, or a 1.7% decline. That may not look like a dramatic loss, but it's discouraging when we compare it with the fact that our presbytery encompasses one of the fastest growing population regions in the nation. This week the Arizona Republic reported that in the last five years, Maricopa County has experienced the largest population growth of any county in the nation. Every day the greater Phoenix metropolitan area welcomes 375 new people. And, of course, the rest of the state is growing rapidly, as well.

Let me throw a few more statistics at you before I begin ruminating about evangelism. According to pollster George Barna, the state with the highest percentage of residents attending large churches is Arizona. He didn't define large, but using a very generous standard of a thousand or more members, Grand Canyon Presbytery has three large churches. Dipping down into the 900s, we add one more. The seven largest churches in the presbytery, that is 10% of our congregations, account for 46% of the entire membership of the presbytery. So even if we don't have many large churches, the ones we have account for a disproportionate share of our overall membership; thus our numbers track with Barna in that sense.

Also according to Barna, adherents of non-Christian religions and non-believers make up 21% of the American population. That leaves a whopping 79% identifying themselves as Christian in some manner or other. But USA Today [3-7-2002] reports that only 50% of Americans consider themselves religious. Another 33% consider themselves spiritual but not religious. Ten percent say they are neither. That leaves 7% unaccounted for. Perhaps they are the folks who think of themselves as both religious and spiritual. USA Today also reports that church attendance throughout the countries of Europe ranges between five and fifteen percent of the population. In the United States church attendance hovers around 30% of the population. Much better than Europe, but still a minority activity.

Now of course, statistics can be interpreted many different ways. My purpose here is not to prove a point but to provide background data for some subjective and anecdotal comments.

As many of you know, I was born and raised in Phoenix and was under care of this presbytery when I went off to seminary. After two decades of doing ministry in

Pennsylvania, I returned here to become your Executive Presbyter in 1999. In the years since, I have reconnected with a number of my high school friends, some of whom I had not seen for more than thirty years.

These high school buddies I've reconnected with have three things in common. They grew up in Christian homes. They believe in God. And with one limited exception, they do not attend church. The single exception attends holiday services, such as Christmas and Easter, for what he describes as aesthetic reasons. He loves the drama of the liturgy but does not believe the doctrines. Generally they see themselves as not religious, but most of them are deeply spiritual souls. I have had some long one-on-one conversations with my spiritual friends about my Presbyterian faith and about the Christian faith in general, but that has not led any of them to become involved in church.

My observation is that most of our new members are reshuffled from other churches (our own or other denominations) rather than coming from the growing ranks of the genuinely unchurched. [As opposed to the temporarily unchurched, who come back when their children are old enough for Sunday school.] As I worship in churches throughout the presbytery, I see very few adult baptisms.

The church world we live and work in can function as a cocoon, isolating us from the larger secular world around us. Therefore it has been instructive for me to reconnect with these people I grew up with. Among them I am clearly the exception, not because I'm a minister, but simply because I am actively involved in church.

Here's what I've discovered about unchurched people who believe in God but do not see themselves as religious. They tend to be openly critical of the institutional church. They perceive the church (and they don't distinguish too carefully among denominations) as stuck in a conceptual world of pre-Enlightenment doctrines. They don't use those words but that's what they describe with their secular vocabularies. And this is a big turnoff for them.

What they read in the newspapers and see on television also influences their attitudes about church. From the media they encounter reports about clergy sexual abuse, a prominent minister praying for assassination of a national leader and the deaths of Supreme Court justices, church fights about sexuality and doctrinal purity, church groups picketing against homosexuals, church opposition to evolution and stem cell research, clergy proclaiming that Hurricane Katrina was God's will to punish our degenerate nation, school boards coming under control of creationists, Christian and other religious extremists justifying violence in the name of God, children with medical conditions being denied communion, and much more. What is reported is not anywhere near the whole story, of course. The good and redeeming stuff seldom gets published. Religious conflicts and controversies make the headlines. And these stories create negative impressions of the institutional church in the minds of these spiritual but unchurched people.

But don't blame the media. They don't single out the church for this kind of attention. They do this with every sector of society. The news business runs by the motto if it bleeds it leads. The problem is that there is no shortage of bad news stories relating to religion for the media to report. They don't have to search hard for church controversy. It permeates the social fabric of the nation. Church related good news is drowning in a rising tide of conflict-driven behavior by people representing religious traditions of all kinds.

Historic orthodox Christianity was born in the fourth century, not the first. Prior to the councils that hammered out the framework of doctrinal Christianity, the details of the Christian faith were more fluid and speculative. In the context of evangelism, the reality is that most unchurched people (who otherwise believe in God) do not believe all the doctrines of fourth century and pre-Enlightenment Christianity and likely never will. A few examples of doctrines they reject are the virgin birth, substitutionary atonement, the literal miracles of Jesus, and the literal existence of hell. The authority of the Bible (as opposed to the guiding wisdom of the Bible) is another problem for them. Many have serious trouble with the Trinity as well and consider the theology of Jesus as 100% human and 100% divine to be intellectually indefensible. Another stumbling block for them is the claim that God only saves those who follow Christ. They don't resonate with exclusivist doctrines. But many of them are nevertheless strongly attracted to the person and message of Jesus and to the mysterious transcendence of God.

This puts denominations like ours in a tough position. We have a distinguished history of theological study and inquiry, including early Reformation and post-Enlightenment thought. Within the wide bounds of the Reformed Tradition, we welcome modern scholarship and critical analysis. Orthodox Calvinists and process theologians sit side by side in presbytery meetings. If, doctrinally speaking, we were to loosen up far enough to accommodate the views of these unchurched people, so the argument goes, then we wouldn't stand for anything at all. And if we stay the way we are, there actually is room for some of these unchurched skeptics to become members -but not ordained officers. This is not much of a promise, however, for we don't appear to be very attractive to them, anyway. It's not easy to explain Presbyterianism to these folks, because we don't travel the easy theological roads. So if we stay the way we are or move toward stronger doctrinal control, we won't attract the spiritual unchurched, but we'll likely continue to recycle and reshuffle already churching people coming from other denominations and other Presbyterian churches. And thank God for them. If it were not for the Midwest and California Presbyterians, and the former Methodists, Lutherans, and other Protestants moving here and trying out their neighborhood Presbyterian congregations, and the lapsed Catholics and former fundamentalists who come into our sanctuaries, our numbers would be much lower than they are now.

Given this state of affairs, it appears that through attrition we will continue to decline in membership. Some of our core members and ministers will leave because we don't toe the doctrinal line strongly enough, and more will drop out because they struggle with some of the same doctrinal doubts as their unchurched sisters and brothers. So what are we to do?

Recently, in a small group discussion about generational evangelism, a denominational leader from another presbytery said we've probably got all the boomers we're going to get. Being slightly more optimistic, I suspect there may be a few more out there who will eventually find homes in the PC(USA), but not many. A similar situation applies with the generation Xers. Those who want simple black and white answers will find church homes elsewhere. Those who struggle to make sense of the more complex world they live in may try us out, but they won't stay if they find a gated theological community.

I know this is a real downer. But I'd rather face unpleasant reality than bury my head in the sand or make excuses for failure. I don't have any magic answers to the

problem. And there is something to be said for a deliberate decision to live out our continuing decline as a faithful remnant, doing our part to advance the Gospel in our peculiarly Reformed way. Maybe God is calling us to be that faithful remnant of the historically broad middle path of Christianity. But where does that path lead? Will we be pushed aside eventually by competing societal trends?

I see four strong trends affecting our membership right now that could in combined fashion eventually overwhelm us. They are rigid orthodoxy, entertainment oriented patriotic civil religion, non-religious spirituality, and secular humanism. Well, martyrdom does have a revered place in the Christian imagination.

Then again, maybe our concern over membership numbers is misplaced. In a recent article for the Alban Institute [In Focus, 2006], Anthony Robinson argues that a relationship exists between our core theological convictions and the health of our congregations. Citing Michael Foss, Robinson indicates the need for a shift from a church culture of membership to a culture of discipleship.

In the face of what he describes as “the free-market of spirituality in North America,” Robinson writes, “[W]e tend to go to default options from the culture. The church becomes an entertainment experience with audience ratings, a purveyor of spiritual goods and services, a religious club for people who share the same world-view and experiences, a coalition united around a set of causes or sociopolitical agendas, or simply a gathering place where people have their individual spiritual experiences.”

In that perspective, maybe our efforts at evangelism miss the boat. Most of our focus on evangelism has been to achieve growth in membership numbers, reversing the decline. And on one hand, numerical growth is a good thing. On the other, there are risks associated with obsessively counting heads and pouring excessive energy into recruitment. There are other, deeper ways of growing a church, but they are not easily counted or measured.

And yet, focusing exclusively on discipleship also carries risk. Shifting energies to strengthen the faithful remnant can become an excuse for liberal and conservative Presbyterians alike to explain away congregational losses. If the Presbyterian Church (USA) is declining in numbers in a place like Arizona where the population is hugely burgeoning, this is an ominous sign in any context.

Still we have hope and faith in the providence of God. In characteristic Presbyterian fashion, the Presbytery of Eastern Virginia has sent an overture to the 217th General Assembly calling for the appointment of a task force. This is how we Presbyterians demonstrate faithfulness. And I think this proposal is a good idea. They are calling for a task force to analyze Presbyterian Church (USA) congregations that have shown significant growth over the last two or three years and to report back to the next General Assembly with what they have learned about these growing churches that the rest of our churches can benefit from.

Assuming the GA approves the overture, it’s possible that what they learn will be good news that other congregations realistically can make use of. Numerical growth can bring hope that in turn encourages and energizes our continuing efforts to make disciples. Potentially, however, the task force may discover things that prove to be discouraging. What if they learn that the growing PC(USA) churches are the ones that have been co-opted by the entertainment oriented American culture? What if the growing churches are the ones that coalesce around narrow doctrinal agendas, or conversely, soft-pedal their

theological integrity? What if the fastest growing congregations are the ones that offer the most attractive spiritual goods and services to Protestant consumers? None of these would be particularly good news for maintaining a distinctive Presbyterian witness in the land.

Based on my unsystematic observations of the numerically growing congregations in this presbytery, over the long term I am cautiously optimistic about revitalizing the PC(USA) presence under the Arizona sun. Underline the word cautiously. For the immediate future, however, we have a lot of work to do in both evangelism and discipleship if we want to turn around the slow decline. Let us pray for the strength and wisdom to do this. Thank you for listening.