

Executive Presbyter's Report
Presbytery of Grand Canyon
March 20, 2010

Have you ever been stuck in a traffic jam? If I don't time my trip from Tucson on Monday and Wednesday mornings just right, I can count on hitting a quagmire on I-10 around Ray Road. And in the middle of the stop and go traffic, I start thinking – what if I got off on this exit and took surface roads? There's just no way of knowing which is better: stay the course, or take some other route. Sometimes there are no options – like back ups on I-10 just north or south of Casa Grande – no choice, but to follow the flow. Traffic jams are pretty frustrating experiences.

They also can be opportunities for some pretty creative solutions. Once, at a family wedding in New York City, we were on our way to the rehearsal and grabbed a taxi to cross Central Park – wrong time of day and we were stuck – I mean dead in the water – not moving an inch kind of stuck. My crazy brother-in-law takes out a ten dollar bill, leans forward and says, "It's yours if you can get us there in five minutes". I want you to picture this: we're in a two-lane road, dug into a trench across Central Park, with high rock walls on either side – traffic not moving in either direction. The crazy taxi drive takes the crazy brother-in-law's ten dollar bill and begins honking, moves to the right onto the side walk and proceeds to honk and slip by car after car, inches from those rock walls. Not one scratch and on time.

For years now, church leaders have been trying to tell us in polite ways that the church is stuck in a traffic jam. Too many of our congregations are not growing; too many of us have quit learning; we're stuck. Or, we've changed what we think and believe, but aren't sure what we can say without being afraid we'll be ostracized – or at least seen as odd. We're stuck. Not only that, we're getting older. A Presbyterian Panel report just out last month says that the average age of a Presbyterian pew sitter has gone from 58 to 60 in the last five years. The median age of pastors is 53 – half of the pastoral clergy are 12-13 years away from retirement. Nine out of ten Presbyterians are Anglo – so much for ethnic diversity. 40% of our members are moderate, 35% are conservative and 25% are liberal – whatever those terms may mean – and those numbers haven't changed much in the last 20 years; nor are they likely to. Are you getting the picture?

A more polite word for this "stuckness" is that we're caught in imaginative gridlock. I first heard of that idea from the writings of Edwin Friedman, a rabbi and family systems therapist who said that imaginative gridlock plagues the whole of our society, and here are its three characteristics: (1) people keep trying old ways to do things with more and more energy and resources, and the lack of results makes them try harder and harder; (2) people keep trying to solve old questions with new answers, rather than changing the questions; and (3) a polarization develops between extremes so that no one can imagine the infinite range of other possibilities between them. A polarization develops – in our politics, in our economics, in the church.

Imaginative Gridlock: the only way to start a new church is to plan it from the presbytery office (buy land, write grant applications, assemble a steering committee, call a pastor). Or, how about this: the only way to sing is with a keyboard attached to 100 or more metal pipes – or the only way to sing is with a keyboard, guitars, and drums. The only way to worship is with a formal

liturgy and a bulletin printed in increasingly larger type for all those aging eyes that have floaters and need trifocals. Polarization, can't imagine the infinite range of possibilities.

In 1992, Edwin Friedman spoke to Texas' Governor Ann Richards and her staff on the occasion of the 500th anniversary of the crossing of the Atlantic by Christopher Columbus. He argued that Europe was stuck in imaginative gridlock and faced an emotional barrier that was physical in nature: people were afraid to go exploring for fear of falling off the end of the world – the flat earth society had a lot of takers back then. Twenty years ago now, Friedman stated that our emotional barriers that keep us from changing are threefold: First, we value more data over maturity – that is we want to do one more study – one more research project - before deciding what we know deep down we should do. Second, we value empathy over responsibility – we allow people to stay put and not change by feeling sorry for them, accepting excuses rather than calling forth the sense of responsibility to one's own life and to the community. And third, we shut down strong leaders for fear of autocracy. That is, any decision a leader or a leadership team like a Session makes that we don't like becomes suspect – we accuse them of not listening, not considering our wants, not being respectful.

So here's the point: *Grand Canyon Presbytery is just as vulnerable to imaginative gridlock as any other part of the church – from congregations to the General Assembly.* And Friedman's point is that *you do not think your way into change.* You must start doing things differently and see what you learn. If you're not talking to each other, then you gotta start talking to each other, openly, respectfully, honestly, and with love. If you're not helping each other get on with the work building up the common life within the resources you have, then you gotta start doing that.

Which is why this interim time is important and this time of reflection and exploration is important. We're in a season of exploration right now. We're trying some things differently. The Council is praying for congregations; the Planning Committee is hosting small group conversations; the Committee on Ministry is organizing some ministers and CLP colleague groups. The Personnel Committee is trying out different ways to do performance reviews. The Stewardship Committee has tried a different style of an annual report. The Theology and Worship Committee invited us to renew our baptismal vows. All good ideas worth trying, but not enough. This is a time to try some other things differently around here and see what God tells us. ...which is why the next hour in this Presbytery meeting is important.

You see, while some exploration is driven by institutional change, the best exploration is motivated by our interests and passion. It is grounded in who we are, in what interests us and in our sense of God's call. The Planning Committee's invitation to us today is different from the last two meetings: it's a conversation that can lead us to form several action networks. Part of what makes this a great season for the presbytery is that we have the chance to discover common passion that can break the grip of imaginative gridlock and unite us in common cause. Even if none of the six groups reflects your greatest passion in the church, we hope you will find one that speaks to your heart, energy, and imagination. That's what will make this next hour extra special.

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