

**Report to the Presbytery of Grand Canyon
Community Presbyterian Church, Lake Havasu City, Arizona
September 14, 2007
Ken Moe, Executive Presbyter**

The theme of this presbytery meeting is building bridges. This report, which is in two parts, surveys ecclesiastical and social terrain across which bridges are needed. Today and at the November presbytery meeting we will examine statistical, demographic, generational, and doctrinal gorges in the landscape of the Presbytery of Grand Canyon and the Presbyterian Church (USA). Some of these gorges may be too wide for us ever to span. With others what we can see from our side of the divide may not have much appeal for us, so we may be tempted to ask why should we bother to expend the energy to build bridges to people we don't care to associate with.

We have two types of bridges to build. The first is to cover the gulf between feuding camps within our denominational communion. This kind of bridge requires humility in its construction but otherwise the work is not dangerous. The second type is to connect the snug and comfortable 20th century language and ethos of our congregations with the uncomfortable and skeptical worldviews and blogospheres of younger generations rising in the 21st century. This is dangerous work, because by engaging with these people, we risk changing our own treasured ways and views. Heaven forbid!

It's hard to build bridges out of wishful thinking. Wishful thinking makes poor construction material. So this report is intended to provide preparatory groundwork, to scrape down to the hard realities, so that we can anchor our bridges in bare, solid earth rather than on beautiful white clouds. Our bridges are metaphorical, of course, in that they are not steel and concrete. But they are real in that they involve flesh and blood human beings creating face-to-face relationships and covenants with one another.

Let's start with the Presbyterian Church (USA) presence in Arizona and then move to statistics about our presbytery. Between Grand Canyon and de Cristo presbyteries we have about 25,000 members in churches in Arizona. This represents about four tenths of one percent of the population of the state. If we add in our children on the baptized rolls, we're up to about 27,500, which is still less than one half of one percent of the state's population. Given the social, educational, missional, and professional achievements of our members, we enjoy influence far beyond our numbers, but the hard reality is that statistically, we are a small denomination. This means we will need to continue to build bridges to the larger society, because they're not likely to build bridges to us.

During the course of 2006, the combined churches in Grand Canyon Presbytery gained 680 new members by profession of faith. This includes confirmations. We received 382 by letter of transfer and by miscellaneous means gained 85 others, probably from restoration of inactives to church rolls. Total gains were 1147 people. These same congregations lost 371 members to death and 258 through letters of transfer to other churches. In addition, 807 people were removed from church rolls for other reasons. Total losses were 1436, producing a net loss of 289 members as of December 31, 2006.

There is some good news in these numbers and some bad news. Comparing certificates of transfer, we received 68% more letters *in* than letters *out*. And we experienced 55% more professions of faith than natural attrition through death. The bad

news is that 56% of our losses are from people leaving through the proverbial back door. Most people leave church the old fashioned way. They simply stop attending and in time are purged from the rolls. Some move to new locations and transfer membership. A few leave in a huff and send for their letters when they find other congregations, but mostly they simply drift away.

Were it not for the expense of per capita, churches would have less incentive to keep their rolls clean and up-to-date and our reported membership numbers probably would be much higher. But that would conceal the reality of lower participation in church life. If nothing else, we Presbyterians earn high marks for carefully counting members. The Rev. Thomas Ascol of the Southern Baptist Convention quipped that out of their sixteen million members, “The reality is, the FBI couldn’t find half of those if they had to.” Some churches, such as Roman Catholic and Latter Day Saints count members from baptism to death, even if they’ve joined other denominations. We Presbyterians don’t have a problem counting members; we have a problem retaining them.

Here are some trends for churches in our presbytery over the decade from 1996 to 2006. We chartered one church, Goodyear Village. We closed two churches, Covenant and West Valley, and closed one New Church Development, Peoria North. Of the 70 chartered churches open today, only 17 (or 24%) reported more members at the end of 2006 than they had a decade earlier. All the others showed net losses compared with 1996. But among those with gains compared with 1996, nine had actually declined in membership from a high point reached earlier in the decade.

For the record, let me announce the names of the eight churches in Grand Canyon Presbytery that reported their highest membership numbers in a decade as of December 31, 2006: Arizona Korean, Chandler, Heritage, Lehi, Maricopa, Mountain View, Pinnacle, and Salt River. Please note that four of these churches are racial/ethnic congregations. Two have not had a pastor for several years and the pastor of another retired in the middle of 2006 and an interim took the reins.

There are many competing claims as to why we are losing members. It is cold comfort to know that we are not alone in this trend. Virtually all the mainline denominations are on the decline, and worship attendance is down in those denominations that count membership in rather loose ways. The nationwide average attendance for Southern Baptist churches is 37% of reported membership. A former mega-church pastor believes the independent mega-churches have passed their peak and are beginning to decline. He currently serves a house church and sees that model as the church of the future.

Our denomination reached its peak forty years ago and we’ve been in consistent decline since. I’ve heard from several anecdotal sources that the mega-churches, too, may have peaked and have begun that same downward trajectory four decades after us. One measure of membership in the PC(USA), however, has remained stable over the past forty years. The ratio of female to male members has stayed pretty consistent at 58 women for every 42 men. What this portends for the future I have no idea.

In a recent e-letter, Moderator Joan Gray reported that the PC(USA) lost 46,000 members last year. Readers of the Layman Online tend to lay exclusive responsibility for this decline on liberals or progressives in the denomination. But not all of them make this claim. The Rev. Larry Brown, from the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, is a frequent contributor to the Layman Online. I enjoy reading his letters for his vigorous writing style

and wit, although I generally disagree with him on most theological matters. In his August 28, 2007 letter, Brown identified what he called “a recurring theme” of Layman contributors that the PC(USA) is “in a precipitous decline – and that is entirely because of liberal theology.”

Brown continued, “I know for a fact that my Evangelical Presbyterian Church presbytery has about the same number of members today that it had 15 years ago.” He further wrote, “The PCUSA Web site gives 10-year statistics for individual congregations. Comparing the stats of churches I knew to be conservative with ones I knew to be liberal, I concluded there doesn’t seem to be any connection between trends in membership and theological position.” After speculating about various factors, Brown concluded, “the decline in American Christianity seems to be across the board, affecting conservatives and liberals alike.”

With regard to Christian denominations in general, I’m inclined to agree with Rev. Brown. As to our own PC(USA), however, I’m not as sure. Church conflict contributes to membership decline, and our denomination has lived with continual conflict since its birth in 1983. Some of the conflict relates to personal behavior and congregational dynamics and some arises from theological disputes.

Jerry Andrews, Co-Moderator of the Presbyterian Coalition, an evangelical advocacy group, addressed that organization’s recent Gathering with these words: “American evangelicals are the most contentious group on the face of the Earth...If we didn’t argue all the time, we probably wouldn’t be evangelical.” He went on to say that the future of liberals in the denomination is in jeopardy and, “Perhaps we should schedule soon a proper burial.”

I find this kind of rhetoric troubling. The progressive side of the PC(USA) holds to its theology with equal fervor, but I have not heard any of them use such rancorous language about burying conservatives.

Dealing with church conflict has been a regular and continuing part of my work as Executive Presbyter here. I suppose that’s why I resonated with a conversation cited by Dean Thompson, President of Louisville Seminary, in a recent seminary newsletter. “Stop all that arguing!” said the mother to the little children on her patio. “We’re not arguing,” one child shot back. “We’re playing church.”

After another round of brooding about the persistence of troubled congregations, recently I did some historical analysis and made assessments about developments in churches of this presbytery during the eight years of my tenure as Executive Presbyter. One of the things I discovered was a constellation of churches that have experienced both conflict and membership decline.

In order to avoid unfair cross-cultural judgments about how disputes should be resolved and the value of maintaining membership rolls, I have excluded all our racial/ethnic congregations from the findings that follow, although many of them have gone through significant conflicts that would be worth studying. As I studied the data, the churches easily divided into two groups relative to the theological beliefs of their pastoral leaders. One group was congregations with pastors holding conservative/evangelical beliefs and the other was those with pastors holding moderate to progressive beliefs.

What emerged startled me. Now, these findings apply only to Grand Canyon Presbytery, so please don’t rush to universalize them. But here’s the bottom line. Of 21 churches with conservative/evangelical leadership, two-thirds (14) have experienced a

combination of conflict and membership decline over the past eight years. Of 24 churches with moderate to progressive leadership, one-sixth (4) have experienced both conflict and loss of members. Of course, other churches across the theological spectrum have reported membership decline without accompanying conflict, but it's well demonstrated that conflict exacerbates the outflow of members.

One way to interpret these results is to suggest that a predominately Anglo church in this presbytery with conservative/evangelical leadership has four times greater risk of experiencing both conflict and membership decline than a church with moderate or progressive leadership. This may be an over-simplification (and doesn't take into account whether pastor or parishioners initiated the conflict), but given Jerry Andrews' description of evangelicals as contentious, further reflection is warranted.

Evidence does not support the notion that most people leaving the PC(USA) are going to more conservative churches. Not to brag about declining membership but to put it in context, the PC(USA) loses in two years more than the entire membership of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC). Last year's membership increases in the EPC and Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) combined comes to about one-sixth of our losses, and our losses represent less than 2% of our total membership. And it is fair to say that not all of their increases have come from former PC(USA) members. Concomitantly, the total membership of the EPC, the PCA, and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church combined is about sixteen percent of the total PC(USA) membership. These more conservative Presbyterian bodies may represent potential alternatives for some of our members, but this would be a distinct minority among our larger, more inclusive denomination.

The loss of PC(USA) members to these smaller more conservative denominations is lamentable, and our numbers would be in much better shape if they had never left. The same lament also goes up for those who have left for more liberal churches or to no church at all. Alas, the hard reality is that we seem to be beset from all sides and current momentum favors further decline for our denomination.

At the next presbytery meeting I will continue this report with information about demographic and generational dynamics that present significant challenges for the future viability of the PC(USA). Here is a preview. A 2001 survey found that 16% of Americans had switched their religious identities at some time in their lives. Barry Kosmin, co-author of *Religion in a Free Market*, believes more switching will occur in the future. The biggest change came among those who professed no religious identity, growing from 8% to 14% of the population between 1990 and 2001.

Given the mostly negative publicity that all major religions have received in the last five years, it seems likely that this trend away from identifying with institutional religion will continue to grow. Sticking with the family religion is no longer a given among the rising generations. The key word, which young people extend to faith as well as consumer goods and services, is choice. In the emerging new world where religious adherence and rejection of religion are understood to be equally valid individual preferences we will find our most difficult challenges as well as our greatest opportunities.

To be continued in November. Thanks for listening.