

Graham Hart - General Presbyter
Annual Report and Reflections: Looking Back – Looking Ahead
January 28, 2016

Introduction

Without remembering where we have been, or why it was important to go there, we may find ourselves going in circles. **Part I** of these reflections, is offered as a reminder of what we said was important, so we can decide, as a presbytery, if we got to where we wanted to go. Are we in alignment with our goals? Are we making any progress? Also, given the nature of the presbytery, we have had a lot of transitions between meetings and not everyone was here when certain directional decisions were made, so this ‘look back’ is offered as a way for everyone to ‘catch up.’

But life and being “fully alive”, is the glory and delight in God, according to Irenaeus, the 2nd century theologian. It is not just about looking back; it’s about aspirations, dreams, and discerning where the Spirit of God is leading us now. **Part II** talks about what some of those dreams may look like, as well as lifting up some important issues that we are facing and would be wise to address.

In 2013, when we adopted our new organizational design and our mission/vision statement, we said this was more about changing our culture than it was about changing our structures. Changing a culture takes at least 5 years. So half way into this change, I offer a longer and more comprehensive review of our life together.

Part I: Looking Back – A Quick Review:

1. **One aspect of our Mission/Vision as a presbytery is to connect disciples in mission. How are we doing?**
Your gifts for Presbytery Mission enabled us to:

- support the work of Mision Peniel and our Presbytery Evangelist to Immokalee, Miguel Estrada;
- support a 10 member Mision Peniel Task Force, as it gives oversight on our behalf to this important work;
- support the work of Beth-El Farmworker Ministry. In 2014, Beth-El called Rev. Walter Chuquimia to become the pastor of the worshipping community in Wimauma. In 2015, Dave Moore retired and Kathy Dain, originally a Teaching Elder from Peace River Presbytery, was called to become their new Executive Director.
- support Cedarkirk, so the ministry that is transformative in the lives of so many young people can continue. Currently the Camp is exploring a capital campaign for some much needed improvements to the facility.
- support Doctors Les and Cindy Morgan, who are back in Bangladesh as medical missionaries, working with some of the most destitute people of the world;
- support Dan and Elizabeth Turk, mission co-workers in Madagascar, working to improve the agricultural techniques, as well as teaching Presbyterian pastors how to help their members grow better gardens and crops, which will reduce the levels of hunger in that part of God’s world.
- support missions around the world. Hunter Farrell passionately shared with us in November how our support of the mission work of the Presbyterian Church is making a difference.

Thanks be to God, thank you, and we thank the sessions, for being as generous as they can be in your congregational support of Presbyterian Missions.

2. **A second aspect central to our Mission/Vision is to affirm congregations.**

One of the ways we do that is through the Committee on Ministry. The Committee on Ministry has had a few busy and challenging years. Every liaison, working on your behalf, usually gives 2-3 hours a week working with the Pastor Nominating Committee (PNC). Thanks be to God, we have had such great liaisons. In 2014, there were 12 PNC’s at work. We rejoice that their work has led to the calling of new pastoral leadership for those congregations.

The Committee on Preparation for Ministry is working with 12 individuals, each a member of one of our 37 congregations and in various stages of their preparation process.

Additionally, the Finance Team and the Committee on Ministry are exploring how we can be of better support to each of our smaller to mid-size congregations. This past year they have worked with six congregations that have had some unique needs and challenges. This includes one church selling its existing property and moving to a new location, dealing with significant financial issues, and dealing with congregational conflict.

3. **The third aspect of our Mission/Vision Statement that shaped our work in 2015 is to be the Body of Christ together.**

Three years ago, when we adopted our new organizational design, we envisioned a different kind of presbytery, including how we conduct presbytery meetings. We said that we did not want to go back to business as usual. Rather, we wanted to re-claim some of the early history of our church when a presbytery functioned as a learning community, a supportive relational network, and had an outwardly focused missional emphasis. Also, we said that we would enter into a time of experimenting. Trying different things and knowing that it would take at least five years to figure things out.

So, how are we doing? In 2013, during Presbytery meetings, we invited ruling and teaching elders to come together for small group lectio divina style Bible studies and sharing stories. In 2014, we attempted to design our presbytery meetings around the 5 fold acts (and aspects) of worship, and structure our presbytery meetings as worshipful work (i.e. we had work to do, but everything was done in the spirit of worship, and a liturgy was developed accordingly by our Planning Team. In 2015, we experimented with having regional meetings in August/September, which were well received. The goal was to get ruling and teaching elders living in the same areas to know one another, as well as to be able to share with one another some of the issues and challenges their churches were facing.

Our Theme for 2014-2015 was, Being the Church in and for the 21st Century.

- February 2014 - Vera White, the Director of 1001 Worshipping Communities, began a conversation with us on how to reach out to the non-churched here in Southwest Florida. It is our hope that a church, or several churches together, will take the initiative to invite other churches in their area to begin exploring who is un-churched in their area, and how might they reach them.
- May 2014 - The church in the 21st Century is having a tough time. We tend to believe this is something new, that church conflict is also something new, and denominational debates on issues in which we differ is a modern phenomenon. Two teaching elders and one ruling elder led us in a conversation, not just on the particulars on which we may disagree, but rather “how” we disagree, and even with our differences, how we can live as the “Body of Christ together”.
- September 2014 - Chuck Salter, President of MissionInsite, a research firm that gathers demographic information for churches and governing bodies, shared with us key information about our area. Why? If we want to be the church in and for the 21st Century here in southwest Florida, then it is important for us to begin knowing our context.
- November 2014 - Debbie Rundlett, General Presbyter of Muskingum Valley, invited us to continue to look at what it means to be a presbytery living in this new 21st Century context.
- February 2015 - Baby-Boomers and Church. Being aware of the demographic realities. As we learned from MisionInsite, the next generation is moving to southwest Florida, but they may not be thinking about coming to church. Amy Hanson, author of Baby-Boomers and Beyond, in a two-day event helped us focus on this reality and each church was invited to develop its own action plan.
- May 2015 - Donald Buck shared a vision and case study of, “What does it mean to act and think missionally in one’s neighborhood”. The questions that were focused on were, what is God doing in our neighborhood and what is God calling us to be, and inviting and sending us to do?
- November 2015 - Hunter Farrell, Director of Global Mission, at three regional events and at the presbytery meeting, shared with us what God is up to in the world.

4. **Stewardship**

For reasons of clarity, transparency, and simplicity, three years ago the Presbytery voted to adopt what we have called the “Three Streams Funding Model.” Each session was asked to support each stream according to suggested percentages (see below) of a congregation’s contributions for the prior year. In the case of Synod/GA Per Capita, the amount by each of those bodies is determined and reported to us. What is given to each stream cannot, per action of the Presbytery, be used in other areas.

The Three Streams and what you gave to each stream in 2015 are:

- Synod and General Assembly per Capita. Total given \$70,050.
- Presbytery Mission (1.5 percent of the church’s congregational contributions). Total given \$254,097.
- Presbytery Ministry Operations (2.5 percent of the church’s congregational contributions), which is for the cost of being a Presbytery. Total given \$291,572.

The Treasurer and Finance Team of the Presbytery do a great job at giving oversight to finances. Through staff reductions, as well as renting some of the unused office space at the Presbytery Office, we were able to reduce expenses to the Presbytery for Ministry Operations. Thanks to your support of our work together.

5. **Staff reductions** -This has been the first full year with our new staff design, which included the elimination of one position. The challenge will be to continue shifting the paradigm of how we do presbytery and staff the work of the Presbytery. We continue to move out of the old organizational paradigm of the Presbytery being a mission and program agency with significant regulatory functions into a new paradigm reflected in our Mission/Vision Statement, as well as our guiding value which is to: return the work of the Presbytery to the members of the Presbytery. That transition continues to go on.
6. **The Pastoral Care Network** that was instituted during my sabbatical in 2014 continues reaching out to all the pastors of the Presbytery when they have special needs, as well as to be of support to all pastors by just checking in or going out for coffee and prayer. I am grateful and thank Grant Lowe, Taylor Hill, Lou Thomson, Bill Clough, Ron Miller and Cynthia Brasher for being part of this team. Their goal is to make Peace River a place where all our teaching elders are cared for, as well as practice good self-care whether active in ministry or retired.
7. **In May 2014, the Presbytery adopted, upon the recommendation of a Task Force of the Steering Committee, the “Gracious Dismissal Guidelines.”** Our hope in adopting these guidelines was that they would never be used. But like a divorce, it sadly happens. A conversation team, and then an Administrative Commission, per the guidelines, was formed to work with the pastor, session, and congregation at First Presbyterian Church, Fort Myers. After an 18-month process and many conversations, in the fall of 2015, the Administrative Commission recommended dismissing the congregation as well as the terms for the property settlement, in light of our “trust clause.” The pastor and members of the church were dismissed at the November 18, 2015 meeting of the Presbytery. The Finance Team has worked with them on carrying out the Presbytery’s decision related to the financial terms of the dismissal and all property issues. Our thanks to the 6-member Administrative Commission for their long and dedicated work.
8. **So... How are we doing? Evaluation** - As part of the Standing Rules, the Steering Committee is assigned the task of annually evaluating our systems and structures to insure that the Presbytery continues to build on its strengths, maintain its wholeness, fulfill its mission/vision and address challenges it is facing. In June 2015, at Pine Shores Presbyterian Church, Sarasota, the Steering Committee met for an all day workshop/retreat. Using an evaluative process called “World Café”, the Steering Committee named and celebrated some of our strengths which include our congregations and pastors. Additionally, other strengths as seen by the Steering Committee included, (note: sometimes the “we” refers to the Steering Committee, sometimes the Presbytery as a whole, sometimes our structures, etc.):
 - Adaptability/flexibility – as a Presbytery we seem to be open to change, and with some of our committees there is a willingness to use various assessment tools and evaluation processes;
 - Transparency;
 - There is a solid core of people invested in the Presbytery and its structures, who are committed to what we are being called to be and do as a Presbytery;
 - Coherence – a desire of most to focus on what we have in common, rather than what might pull us apart;
 - The “us/them” perspective within the Presbytery seems to be less;
 - We continue to become less regulatory and more missional;
 - Our mission/vision (sense of purpose) is clear;
 - For the most part, little negativity is evidenced;
 - A spirit of enthusiasm is present in most of the committees and teams;
 - The high quality of our stated meetings over the years;
 - Our staff;
 - Communication vehicles are there, even as we know they need to be more fully developed and used;
 - There is energy in and for the work we do, as evidenced in the teams and committees.
 - Mision Peniel.

As the Steering Committee focused on challenges to address, there were several significant conversations that emerged and are under consideration:

- We are aware that we are under-represented in the under 40 (and even 45) category in both our presbytery and congregational membership.
- The Missional Team has struggled since we created our new structures, and there has been confusion about things missional versus that which supports traditional mission.

Part II - Hopes, Dreams, Issues and New Initiatives as we “Look Ahead”– Some possible directions.

1. The Steering Committee identified three areas of priority to lift up and work on:

- How do we better recognize and embrace the diversity among us?
- How do we increase congregational and individual participation at Peace River Presbytery by making the Presbytery a valued and valuable partner in ministry? Especially as we live into the reality that Presbytery is “us.”
- How do we come together, stay together and serve together, rather than be “every church for itself?” (i.e. How do we increase the sense of collegiality among us, and focus on those areas which bring us together, help us stay together, and launch us out in mission together?)

2. For the long term growth, health, and over-sight of Mision Peniel, in 2016 the Steering Committee and the Presbytery will continue its work on clarifying the organizational relationship of Mision Peniel with the Presbytery. The work of Mision Peniel has captured the imagination and hearts of the congregations in Peace River. The work there is vital, and we have been well served by the Mision Peniel Task Force, which since Peace River assumed responsibility for Mision Peniel, has given over-sight to this work.

The question is, how do we best fulfill our fiduciary responsibility? The original vision was to create Mision Peniel as a separate non-profit corporation, like Beth El and Cedarkirk, who are covenant partners, but are separate from the Presbytery. The Mision Peniel Task Force in the past year is thinking that continuing the relationship as it now exists may be the best direction for the future, and that conversation will continue.

3. Several teaching elders are deeply concerned about what is happening in our area with the working poor, (i.e. the Alice Project). What can we do? What should we do? What is our responsibility, in light of Jesus’ commandments and word to them? In several of our counties, 20% - 25% of all children do not know where their next meal will come from or the quality of that meal. On one hand, we live in an extremely affluent area, but on the other, the needs just under the surface are great. What do we want to do? What can we do? How do we come together regionally to address these needs? (Note several of our churches host the food banks for their area, and are keenly aware of these needs, and are to be commended and affirmed for their vision and work!

4. Regional gatherings - When we approved our new organizational design, we did a future story exercise on dreaming about how we would know if we were being faithful and successful, as we lived into the new way of being a presbytery. One of the changes envisioned was; “*there would be more regional gatherings and sharing in Bible Study.*” Last August, ruling and teaching elders met at 3 regional gatherings, which were well attended and well received. One ruling elder said; “*it was the first time he really understood and experienced what it means to be a connectional church*”.

In 2016, I believe we need to continue to develop a culture in our presbytery in which we experiment and strengthen the “regionalization of our work” so that:

- ruling elders in the same town can come together to be of support to one another,
- or sessions can come together to strategically address common needs in their area,
- or pastors are able to be of mutual support for one another.

5. Church Growth, Congregational Re-development, Pastoral Networking - Through the efforts of the Committee on Ministry, the Finance Team, and the Missional Team, we find new ways to;

- deepen the support among the churches that have solo pastors;
- explore how we can strengthen efforts in church re-vitalization;
- encourage pastors to be of mutual support to each other;
- figure out, before there is a crisis in finances or conflict within a congregation, how the Presbytery, which is us together, can be of deeper support, encouragement and help, before it’s too late for that congregation;

- see if there are emerging needs in our area and respond with other churches in the area to address those needs;
 - learn together how to reach baby-boomers. Just because they are moving here in great numbers does not mean they will come to our churches in great numbers.
6. **New Approaches for Pastoral Transitions** - In this time of rapid cultural, spiritual, and economic change, when congregational vulnerabilities get easily accentuated, especially in times of transition, is there another model for dealing with pastoral transitions that will help Peace River Presbytery better serve our congregations? Does a congregation, when its young or mid-career pastor accepts another call, need to be surprised and feel like a jilted lover? Can congregations, who know that their pastor will retire within 3-5 years, need to feel like they are in a holding pattern until the pastor calls it quits? Is there a way to accept that transitions are a part of life, and healthy pastors and congregations have ways to deal with them without the pastors becoming lame ducks or feeling forced out? Or the congregations having no voice in an important part of their life, namely their future? The Committee on Ministry has spent the past year in conversations around these topics. Is there another way? In the coming year they will keep working on, **An Adaptive Approach to Church Leadership and Pastoral Transitions**.
7. **The Well** - In 2013, as we dreamed what our future story might look like in 5 years we envisioned;
- That there would be an awareness of the missional endeavors of each congregation, as well as opportunities for joining with each other in those endeavors;
 - Communications vehicles within and among the Presbytery (i.e., congregations, pastors, and presbytery leaders) would be more interactive and internet based, and we would know more about how God is at work in each of our congregations;

So, how can we do that? The Steering Committee has an idea. It's called **The Well**. This is envisioned to be an internet based web-site that a congregational leader can go to find out, for instance,

- Who is involved in a mission project in Africa,
- Who has resources to share on developing child protection policies,
- Who has room on mission trip for members of other churches to go,
- Who has a program or bible study which they are willing to share or give to another church,
- Or who has created a new "worshipping community" as an outreach of that congregation.

Our goal is to make accessible and real one of the principles at the heart of our reformed way of doing church. Specifically, no pastor is a lone ranger and churches do not live in isolated silos cut off from each other, but are organically connected and are accountable to each other. Leaders in our congregations would have access to **The Well**, so as to share best practices and resources that you are willing to share with others; AND congregational leaders could also draw from **The Well** if they have some particular need.

8. **Cuba** –This past Fall, Peace River was invited, with the other presbyteries in Florida, to consider meeting with the Presbyterian leadership in Cuba. The Steering Committee approved Clint Cottrell, Winston Lawson and me to go on this bridge-building trip with representatives from Tampa Bay and Tropical Florida Presbyteries. We will be meeting with leaders from their three presbyteries as well as, some of their seminary professors, from February 10-15, 2016, at the Presbyterian Seminary at Matanzas. The three Cuban presbyteries and their seminary have survived one of the most difficult challenges, namely keeping their faith communities active and vibrant during the Castro regime. They have faced many extremes but have sustained their community. We have much to learn from their experience and their faith walk. As south Floridians, with growing Spanish communities, this is an opportunity to build leadership relationships with those of the reformed faith in Cuba.
9. **Presbyterian World Mission: A BHAG**, "a Big Hairy Audacious Goal!" Is it possible to find some way to endow one global mission co-worker as a presbytery? We have heard of the impact our mission work has had around the world. We have heard of the challenges and reduced funding that is putting some of that work in jeopardy. The goal is...are there individuals or churches in Peace River that may have the vision and capacity to make a difference and endow one mission co-worker? The three main priorities of Presbyterian World Mission are addressing the roots that cause poverty, especially as it affects women and children, sharing the good news of God's love in Jesus Christ through evangelism and discipleship, and being agents of reconciliation amid cultures of violence, including our own. We can make a difference. This is a BHAG...but wouldn't it be great if we could find a way to do that.

In 2016, the dream, hope and prayer are that in Peace River, each of our churches, and all pastors would drink deep of the "Living Waters" which is our presbytery meeting theme for the coming year.

- Sailing on the water, Jan 28th – The Sail Boat Church (Joan Gray)
- Drinking deep from the waters (renewal of baptismal vows) – April 28th
- Sharing the water, (use image of the well; further development of networking, partnering, among congregations, etc.)
- Navigating, Journeying, Traveling through Stormy Waters - Nov. 10th

On a personal note I want to offer my thanks and express my gratitude for the journey we are on. During my sabbatical time in 2014, I thought long and hard about life, faith and our work together. During that time some old and new values, beliefs and things I want to remember emerged. I have tried to keep in front of me this past year, and I offer them again as a reminder to myself as well as to share again with you something of my values and aspirations and the who and why of my life.

- *Life is a gift. Life is about grace.*
- *Life is best lived from a place of gratitude.*
- *Life is best lived if I can be present, aware and mindful in this moment, and not distracted by external demands or internal what ifs, if only, and other internal distracting conversations.*
- *Life is more about rhythm than it is keeping one's balance.*
- *Life is about relationships before it is about anything else, and that is true for the Presbytery as well.*
- *Life is more than work.*
- *Life is about learning and ever growing and living with humility.*
- *'Building the new is distinctively different than fixing the old.'*
- *When you don't know what to do, just put your foot in the river.*
- *Listen to the voices silenced.*
- *So faith, hope, love abide, these three, but the greatest of these is love...so says Paul...so hopes every couple who is married. As Bishop Tutu said, "There's no question about the reality of evil, of injustice, of suffering, but at the center of this existence is a heart beating with love." As we have been about church business, sometimes we forget what is at the center.*

As a young pastor, when I was by myself in the sanctuary thinking and praying, I was profoundly moved by our belief that "God so loved the world..." Or as we read in 1 John: "God is love..." At the heart of creation is a heart beating with love. Wow!

So as we look back and look ahead as a presbytery, I am...

Grateful to our God...

Who is the Wind in our Sails...

and the Rudder to Guide us along the Way!

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