

Peace River Presbytery
Stated Meeting, Thursday, February 28, 2019
Final General Presbyter's Report

As the writer of old in Ecclesiastics said: "For everything there is a season, a time..." and it is that time; so, in April I will be saying good-bye to a role you called me to at a May Presbytery meeting 18 years ago. It is a work that I have loved, even with the challenges; and trust that I have been able to serve you over the years with "energy, intelligence, imagination and love."

I thank my family, especially Linda, for their support over 43 years of ordained ministry. Also, it is an honor that special people in my life have come to celebrate this time with me including my family, some close colleagues, friends, the pastor who gave me the charge when I was ordained in 1976, and long-time friend, not a minister, who gave me the charge when I was installed as your General Presbyter in 2001.

Since January, on Sundays I have been on - what one pastor said in his introductory remarks - "Graham's farewell tour". What has made this especially meaningful is the shared history I have had with these congregations, especially the ones that have faced significant challenges and now are doing well. The themes "Gratitude and Hope" continue to guide me in these final months. The metaphor of "flying the plane" at the same time as "trying to land the plane" has been challenging, but the runway is in sight, even as there are still some important issues to address. I am touched and grateful for the Steering Committee and staff planning the retirement celebration.

For those who are concerned, I am looking forward to the next chapter in life. I am in conversation about 2 ministry projects with some colleagues, as well as coaching in the Presbytery Leadership Formation program. Kayaking, writing, wood-working projects, home improvement projects, gardening, travel, camping, spending the summer with our family and 5 grandkids in Chicago, enjoying being with our youngest granddaughter (and family) who live in Sarasota, where we plan to continue to live, and having more leisurely time with Linda are some of the things that will fill my plate.

As with all members of Presbytery, the Presbytery must act on dissolving my call, as well as acting on my request to become HR which has not yet occurred but will happen today. The Personnel Team and co-moderators of COM have begun the conversation, as with all retiring ministers, on Separation Ethics. In summary, I will in every way possible, support the work of the Presbytery and the new General Presbyter, and I am confident in and praying for the GPNC in their decisions!

Some final thoughts, but not the last word: Opportunities, Challenges, and Remembrances

1. We are in a season of pastoral transitions. Currently there are 10 congregations in some form of transition. Over the years we typically average 3-6; so, we are in a high season of transitions.
2. Since readjusting our budget and right sizing our staff in 2010 we have operated within a balanced budget. However, due to the cost addressing our continuing problems with the roof, which were exacerbated by the 2017 hurricanes, the ending balance in 2018 is off by \$45,000. The Trustees have retained an attorney, who has determined that the roof was not installed properly and there are significant code violations which are currently being litigated.
3. We live in a time when the next generation coming to SW Florida is not churching as past generations. Every church will need to figure out how we reach that next generation. The 4 congregations around the West Villages (Venice) working with MissionInSite could be a model for how the Presbytery could come along side other congregations and offer help in this area.
4. Churches in the 50-150-member range will need to continue to look at new models and ways to develop and sustain their ministry. Through Congregational Vitality, the pastors of our smaller member congregations have been meeting. It will be important for the Presbytery to continue to support this effort.
5. The Steering Committee, along with the next General Presbyter, will need to work on recruiting new volunteers to serve in leadership roles in our committees and teams. That is also being addressed with the current task force looking at our structures and our volunteer needs. The challenge is to have as many people (especially the pastors of every congregation) involved in the life of the Presbytery, and at the same time have a structure that is right-sized for our ministry needs and volunteer base.
6. The new GP and the Board of Trustees will need to continue to work on stewardship and fund development. Every year the Trustees have tried different approaches. That kind of intentional mission interpretation will need to continue. In 2013 we started with the Three Streams Approach to Presbytery giving, which will need to be explained to the new GP – since this is unique to Peace River.
7. Mission Peniel, which operates under the oversight of Peace River through the Steering Committee and its teams, continues to be an important part of our ministry as a Presbytery. Since Miguel has become full-time, and with the

addition of Ruth DeYoe as Missions Coordinator, Mision Peniel has expanded its work with the migrant farmworker community in Immokalee. Recently, the Immokalee Fair Housing Alliance (IFHA), a non-profit organization, has been formed to work alongside Mision Peniel and the Coalition of Immokalee Workers. The IHFA represents a cross section of committed stake-holders and other denomination to help change the terrible and tragic housing conditions that exist with the migrant farmworker community. Let me know if you want to know more.

8. Beth-El Farmworker Ministry and Cedarkirk continue to be essential and important Covenant Partners in the ministries they do. I would remind the Presbytery of the Capital Campaign that Cedarkirk is now conducting. I ask that if you know of a person who has a heart for kids, and the ability to make a difference, their Capital Campaign is a worthy cause, and needs our support! Let John Reiter know if you want more information.
9. PRP's Strategic Directions and Priorities, which the Presbytery adopted in November 2018, will be an important roadmap for the Presbytery and the new General Presbyter in the years to come. When I started in 2001, the Presbytery had also done a major mission study before I started which helped shape my early years and work.
10. Part of my work over the years has been to attempt to get everyone to the table, and to value every voice within the Presbytery. Sometimes that was not easy, but I believe we have a presbytery where people can hear and respect one another. I trust that is now part of our culture.
11. I am excited for the new partnership with Matanzas (Cuba) Presbytery and the congregations that have established partnership church relationships, as well as the possibilities and new ministries the Blessing Grants may generate.

Some remembrances of earlier time:

1. When I was called to Peace River, there were three important issues that shaped those early years.
 - a. There were concerns that the Presbytery was spending all its time responding to fires without clear policies in place that might keep some of the fires from starting in the first place. The initial task was not just to put out fires but build a fire house. The first 6 years of my time as your GP involved developing some policies and procedures to guide our life together. One example is the decision to have mandated boundary training, which I believe has helped all of us be more mindful and aware, and served our congregations well.
 - b. Additionally, new church development was an important priority. At one time PRP had 5 NCD's including one racial-ethnic congregation. The good news is 3 continue to this day. Peace, Lakewood Ranch will have its dedication of their sanctuary next week; Christ Church of Longboat Key is thriving and Hope United continues and is currently exploring whether to move to a new location. The housing crisis and economic down-turn were challenges too big to overcome, so the NCD in Naples, and our Portuguese speaking Brazilian congregation were not able to sustain. Lessons were learned, but faithful ministry done.
 - c. Over the years there have been congregations that have faced challenges that led to the Presbytery's involvement. But thanks be to God, those congregations are thriving churches today and that is the heart of what it means to be Presbyterians, we come along side of each other.
2. When I came the Presbytery would meet for 5-6 hours, and it was primarily all business. Ruling elders told me that the meetings were like a "pastor's union" meeting. Along the way, in order to make Presbytery meeting more meaningful to both teaching and ruling elders, we have experimented with various formats over the years. We have moved from a format that was all business to structuring our meetings to be relevant, informative, worshipful, Christ-centered, missional within the context of being a learning community. I trust you will continue to experiment and try out new ways to come together as a presbytery.
3. Life happens, and when it does, this presbytery has responded. It has been a privilege to help lead this presbytery through challenging times, as when Hurricane Charlie came through the Presbytery; as well as working with the leadership of the Presbytery during the challenges of congregations seeking to leave our denomination. There were two who we dismissed, and a third is still with us today and is thriving! So, I thank God for this season and time with you, and will be praying, and rooting you on as this next chapter begins.

With gratitude, hope, and a full heart... "knowing that the one who begins the good work in you will bring it to completion on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ." Thanks be to God.

Graham

Graham Hart

General Presbyter

graham@peacriverpresbytery.org

In the future 2grahamhart@gmail.org