

ADDRESSING OUR CONGREGATIONAL CRISIS

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First, my thanks to our Presbytery Council for inviting me to make this presentation, and to the Committee on Ministry and its chairperson, Dr. Jay Wilkins, for granting time from their own portion of the docket.

The purpose of this address is to speak to the decline, and the hope of refinement and renewal, of our Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), chiefly because the state of our churches is too little known and understood, particularly, but my no means exclusively, among the laity. This relative silence is a perplexing situation not unlike the twelve ostriches with heads buried in the sand, when a thirteenth arrives and, looking around asks, "Where is everybody?"

I should like to address three things. First to unpack the situation that led to the present crisis in the churches. Second, to propose some objectives that I feel need to be addressed if we are to find a way through this emergency to provide a framework and suggest a strategy for meaningful and productive conversations. The third is to begin prayerful conversations among congregations that, if imaginatively guided and resourced, can spark productive strategies for renewal—for example, shared local initiatives.

Background I'm aware that, for many, statistics are about as inviting as road kill or a wet ochre sandwich. However they can be a helpful way of summarizing a situation so, to the statistically squeamish, I beg your indulgence for a few minutes.

Seven years ago at a seminary alumni/ae council meeting I learned a statistic that rocked me to the core. A Presbyterian Executive in California quoted a Board of Pensions staff member as saying that of our 11,000 PC (USA) churches, 70 percent were in some level of crisis, whether as to membership, worship attendance, financial contributions, or staff/leadership conflict, particularly with pastors.

So, during a three month sabbatical in 2003, I studied ten year membership trends of 1,204 PC (USA) churches, all the churches in fourteen diverse presbyteries from among ten of our sixteen synods. These included Donegal, Philadelphia and Pittsburg presbyteries. The results of this 11 percent sampling showed that only 8.1 percent of all of our churches had grown by *net one member* in ten years. What also surfaced was an alarming downward trend among formerly healthy, even vital, churches following the turn of the millennium. This prompted me to undertake a further study of this "millennial effect" in 2008 by looking at large PC (USA) churches—arbitrarily churches over 700 members—because these are often the vanguard churches among our presbyteries. There were 540 congregations of 700+ members by the end of 2006. I looked at three categories for each congregation—active membership, worship attendance, and financial contributions—which together give a more accurate and comprehensive assessment. These were studied over two, seven year periods, 1994-2000 and 2000-2006 so as to have a framework for comparison. The data shows an accelerating decline in the great majority of large congregations, many of whom were formerly thriving. Indeed only 10 congregations out of the 540 studied can be said now to be stable or improving.

The rate of decline of virtually all churches, no matter what size, is alarming. The same is true of other mainstream Protestant denominations, without exception. Yet a most immediate concern is the lack of awareness among congregational leaders about the extent of the problem. There is a pervasive sense in congregations that the membership, attendance, and financial issues that plague them are localized, that

it's just "our congregation." It is *everyone and everywhere*. The pattern runs like this. The first to show a deficit is worship attendance. The second is membership, because our rolls are less vigorously amended. The last is contributions, by which is meant general operating and mission funding. Contributions tends to keep pace longer because many who drop by the wayside are likely less committed contributors, while the more committed givers are encouraged to bridge the shortfall. But this can only last for two, perhaps three years.

Churches in the midst of this regression imagine themselves to be isolated cases. One may learn of other congregations' trials, but typically not the full extent of the problem. So local conflicts emerge in-house between officers and staff, principally the pastor, and few if any hopeful solutions are found.

Objectives A crucial objective is to help all church officers and staff, lay and ordained, to grasp the loss of congregational vitality as not just a symptom of their congregation. It is *every congregation's* challenge. The virus is pandemic across the nation and all mainstream denominations. The Catholic Church has kept somewhat better pace only because of the high proportion of Catholic immigrants in recent decades. Even the once immune Southern Baptist Convention has gone flat and declined over the last seven years. The Seeker church movement has acknowledged its own trials in terms of retention and assimilation. As to the much vaunted super and mega-churches, fewer than three percent of the worshipping public in the U.S.A. worship there on a given Sunday, and they are not immune.

A second objective is to underscore the cultural factors that impact our decline. These factors are not local or even national, but global. Over the last several years I have had conversations and communications with denominational and church leaders in the U.K., the U.S.A., Canada, Australia, New Zealand, France, and South Africa, and their plight among traditional Protestant churches is a virtual mirror image of our own. Some healthy signs are at work in the U.K., whose churches have been in decline much longer than in North America.

At its heart are two entrenched factors. The first is the evolving *culture of the baby boomers*, now into the third generation of post World War 2 population dominance. Boomers and their children now account for about 80 percent of the U.S. population. The leading edge of the first cohort left for college in 1964, and the following year began a noticeable then relentless decline in denominational numbers that has never abated. During this time, our denominations have continued to maintain churches that still largely operate on late 19th and early 20th century ecclesial and missionary models of being church, commonly presenting the gospel in an authoritarian mode that fosters a disconnect with those whom we seek to engage.

Boomers quickly learned to question and challenge everything, especially traditional authorities, including religion, that impact the individual from the *outside*. But in a society dominated by what sociologists call "disembedding"—the social dislocations produced by frequent mobility, multiple moves and jobs, separation from nuclear families, loss of neighborhood cohesion with its formative influences, newly associating with successive churches—these external "authorities" lose traction. So conditioned by loss of roots, the individual tends to shift the ground of authority from without to *within*. I become my own authority because little else can be trusted for life decisions. Duty and obligation, the core of former generations' allegiance, give way to pragmatism—what works and satisfies me and the needs of my family. Traditional church too often becomes an anachronism.

Far fewer boomers and their children were raised in the faith, further jeopardizing their engagement of an unreformed religion. Church, its odd vocabulary of salvation, the martial stiffness of immovable pews, an alien liturgy, present an impenetrable world for many. Watch among the faces in the pews in a memorial service! When parents do return to church, their motivations are often less from faith than from a felt desire to give a moral baseline to their children. So, often these good and decent people exit like lemmings once the ritual gateway of childhood emancipation has been reached. I call this "post confirmation syndrome." Post WW2 parents invest in value. They are far less commonly joiners, as Robert Putnam's stunning 2000 survey of "civic engagement and social capital," *Bowling Alone*, makes clear. These are not, as are sometimes characterized, the selfish generations. They have simply been formed differently by powerful cultural factors.

The second factor is the *impact of 9/11* which the statistics now show has been huge. Hardly a family does not know of a son, daughter, nephew, work colleague, or dear friend on foreign soil embroiled in a religious firestorm. So if the downturn in church membership from 1965 to 2000 looks like an Olympic ski-slope, the disenchantment with religion since 2001 looks even more precipitous. Add to these our national memories of the T.V. evangelism scandals, the more recent Catholic priesthood upheavals, denominational infighting over abortion and ordination, and fundamentalist Muslim exacerbated tensions across four continents, and Christianity is floundering for sustainable good news, with congregations too often looking frail and old. Commonly the mainstream church is tarred with the same brush as religious fundamentalism. Wary of personally committing to faith “certainties,” perhaps uncertain of the church’s motives, people simply walk away and stay away. In such numbers, the church, for many teens and young adults, is simply “uncool.” And the repercussions cut across geographic regions, theological spectra, and church sizes.

A common dilemma is also an opportunity for a unified response. But first we have to start talking with each other, recognizing our common plight, discovering common needs, and sharing best practices. For over thirty years our denomination has been consumed with differences among us, while neglecting to acknowledge what we share in common. Now, I have real confidence that long sought denominational healing may well be concealed within our common plight. In a recent visit with my 98 year old mother in the U.K. we talked about the impact of World War 2 on the British people. My dad was a POW in Germany for the last part of the war, so my mother, raising my two older brothers, could speak first hand of the conflict in which hardly a street or country lane in the nation did not know intimately of someone lost or badly injured, either armed forces or civilian. Yet what was most telling in her recollections was the united, resolute spirit of the British people, and their commitment to each other on a daily basis. Strength does come through adversity and a common plight.

Affirming a Biblical Outcome One of the toughest times for biblical Israel was its sixth-century B.C. Babylonian Captivity. By then Judea was but a remnant of a formerly united Israel, and was taken into captivity for seventy years, the leaderless poor remaining on the land. It seems unlikely that anyone going into exile ever came home three generations later.

I believe that God is allowing the mainstream church in North America to be led into a latter-day “Babylonian-Captivity.” This is not a pleasant prospect. There is no magic bullet to forestall the inevitable. Rather, it seems an imperative for the church to be so driven so as to be *refined and renewed*.

And herein lies the good news. Israel’s captivity had extraordinary consequences for the community of faith. Fully one third of our Old Testament emerged from this brief period, creating a revolutionary theology. A new creation story opened the Scriptures. Post-exilic Isaiah’s soaring passages sought to break the emerging nation’s isolation from the gentile world. God was given a local habitation in neighborhood synagogues which would thereafter be come the locus of prayer and study wherever the community gathered. This was far different than worship at the Jerusalem temple alone. In a radical departure from the dispiriting notion of Sheol, the abode of all the dead, hope came to the faithful in the paradisiacal promise of a heaven for the righteous. The hope and expectation of a Messiah also began to flourish from this time. These refining principles changed Israel’s way of being faithful to God, and they formed the legacy of Judaism to its daughter faith, Christianity.

As a denomination we are compelled to fashion a renewing ecclesiology, a more rigorous and timely faithfulness for the church to live by. This desperately needs a sustaining partner. So I challenge every pastor here to require of your seminary that they redeploy their resources to better address the needs of their alumni/ae and the churches they were sent out to serve. It is a travesty for any seminary’s primary contacts with its alumni/ae to be more solicitous than serving. In these times one question from the seminaries to all who are struggling to bring the fields of the Lord to harvest, would mean the world: “How can we help?” Instead, I must confess, much of the church lies like one hemorrhaging blood on the sidewalk, while someone with a transfusion bottle rushes over and asks, “Excuse me, but would you mind donating this blood to a good cause?”

About four years ago at a Presbytery meeting we asked all the elders and pastors, what were the three most pressing concerns facing their congregation for congregational renewal? The top three responses were: evangelism/membership recruitment, leadership development, and finance/stewardship. The first and last of these, I believe, are misguided needs. If a new model of the church is to be resolutely Christ-centered, it must be driven by a desire to be faithful to Jesus rather than to the need for finances. If we are honest about our motives, it is the very desire for new members and the money they bring that most often drives our *angst* and stirs the tensions among us. *If we are faithful*, the means will follow our faithfulness, and produce a right connectionalism.

The Babylonian Exile lasted about seventy years. It will perhaps take us that long to emerge as a newly refined body of Christ. And if that refinement means losing the membership of those who cannot bring themselves to engage the claims of the gospel (all refining produces dross) that may not be a bad thing, if our present cross is to become a resurrection. The early church loved the image of the church as a ship, with all the courage and trust it inspired. Our challenge is to tear off Christendom's seventeen centuries of the accretion of barnacle and weed since Constantine's utilitarian handshake with the church, and embark on a new voyage of faithfulness. In this, we should remember how Jesus defined the work of evangelism as also shaking the dust from our feet and being willing to move on.

“Let's Talk” At the heart of renewal, I believe, lies a network of conversation and cooperation among our congregations. We need a bubble-up process for mutual enrichment, rather than our shop-worn filter down strategies of the past. In this, Jesus reminds us that the word we chose long ago for this body is *ecclesia*, fellowship. When I asked at the Presbytery meeting how many congregations in Donegal engage in *regular*, intentional fellowship with another congregation, only four of our sixty churches said they did (we at St. John's were not among them, I have to admit). We are not talking, praying and breaking bread with each other as we should. The image recalls the story of new arrivals at the pearly gates being granted a simultaneous vision of heaven and hell in which, in both venues, the people gathered around long dining tables. In the preferred venue the people looked bright, well fed and genial. In the other place they were surly, malnourished and fractious. Noticing that the occupants in both places had four-foot long spoons tied to their wrists, one of the party asked why there was such a difference in wellbeing. “It's quite simple really,” offered the guide, “in heaven they feed each other.”

To acknowledge the challenges we share is the first step toward mutual encouragement. By talking, discovering potential resources, and identifying best practices we build a shared confidence. Let me offer what we are doing at St. John's. We are a long way from perfection, to be sure, but we have managed to keep our head fractionally above the rising waters. I share these thoughts out of deep personal conviction and some encouraging success.

- First, commit to building faithful spiritual lives through deliberate *spiritual formation*. Spiritual formation, simply put, is a daily discipline of prayer, study, reflection, and a way of being that translates these things into habits of the heart and Christian conduct. In short, SF is a commitment to the maturing of the Christian self when Jesus says, very simply, “Follow me.”
- Give people a place to belong. Because people come to church from a whole spectrum of motives, they need some *small group fellowship* in which to recharge and really engage others. Most people who do not find a place to plug in within nine months of joining, drift away. Small group examples at St. John's (in addition to Sunday School and youth fellowships) are a variety of music cells: choirs, instrumental and vocal ensembles and bands, bell choirs, a dinner club, book studies, several Bible studies, including ALPHA, Habitat and Follow the Carpenter service groups; Spiritual Companions and Inward Journey (SF groups); an interfaith group, and in-home fellowship gatherings.
- People love *gathering at table*. “Supper at St. John's” meets weekly over a ten week series, beginning with a splendid meal and table fellowship, dismissing to video presentations, then to small group discussion guided by a leader. S@SJ has been a transformative experience for us.

- *Worship* that seeks to glorify God and touch the core of our humanity. I've found that mapping out a worship and preaching schedule 6-8 weeks ahead enriches everything in worship and preaching preparation. We don't do a "blended service" (traditional and contemporary or arts driven), but we will have some form of composite service typically once a month.
- Be *willing to fail*, having committed beforehand in partnership together. When you fail, and have learned its lesson, support one another and move on. I know of nowhere in the Gospels where Jesus required us to be successful, only to be faithful. Be willing, also, to say, "I was wrong"—it's enormously cleansing.
- *Talk and listen* to people, specially their needs, but don't try to be all things to all people.
- Invest in *great staff* who love Jesus and have a passion for people.
- Search out *excellent resources*, and share what you find. In these trying times, corporations and local governments increasingly find that cooperation and sharing ideas is surprisingly far more of a gain than a loss. Congregations, too, can learn the truth of this without fear of people jumping ship.
- Embrace the local community. Invite them to use your facilities. Jesus would be the first to remind us to love our neighbor. Church buildings, even in busy churches, have more regularly unused space—with the possible exception of some funeral homes—than is moral. Neighborhood housing associations, bridge clubs, scouting, birthday and anniversary parties, neighborhood watches, civic groups, town meetings, MADD, SADD, and similar organizations, ALANON, AA and other support groups, children's musical groups. Most are eager to cover utilities and then some. And we say we can't get people to come to church!
- Finally and firstly, again—*pray*. Pray daily, hourly, such that it becomes the soul's fabric. Prayer, conversation with God, is the key that unlocks the Kingdom. Which is why it is the geometric center, the heart of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:1 – 7:29 [6:10-13]). To adopt the discipline of prayer means it will transform oneself. It will transform what we do. It will transform our church. If we do not pray, no matter how hard we work, plan and strategize, nothing of consequence will happen.

The thought of my affliction and my homelessness
 is wormwood and gall!
 My soul continually thinks of it
 and is bowed down within me.
 But this I call to mind,
 and therefore I have hope:

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases,
 his mercies never come to an end;
 they are new every morning
 great is your faithfulness.
 "The Lord is my portion," says my soul,
 "therefore I will hope in him.

Lamentations 3:19-24