

## Moderator's Report: Listening Sessions 2016

During the summer of 2016, I, as Moderator of Presbytery, traveled to five churches throughout the Presbytery and invited pastors, church leaders, members of congregations, and other interested parties, to meet with me for a "listening session" where they could ask questions, make comments, raise concerns, state opinions, on any of the various aspects of the Presbytery of Geneva or the Presbyterian Church in general. Among the five sites (Penn Yan, Ovid, Newark, Hornell and Horseheads) a total of 55 participants from 17 member churches spent two evening hours discussing, sharing, debating and eating pizza.

I will say right off, being at these listening sessions has been the highlight of my time as Moderator so far. The range of questions and opinions covered down-to-earth concerns about where our local mission monies go to broad questions about the social and political nature of the PCUSA. While some participants expressed wariness about the "intent" of conducting these sessions (did Presbytery have a hidden agenda?), I came away at the end of each session with a sense that people felt they had a true chance to say what was on their mind without retort or fear of repercussions. Some even expressed that this was the first time anyone from Presbytery had ever cared to hear what they had to say about the church.

I also came away from these sessions keenly aware that Presbyterians are not all cut by the same cookie cutter. As an example, one participant asked why Presbyterian worship services are so routine and lifeless, saying, "In Florida I go to an independent church and there's music, clapping, video, and a whole lot of energy. I come away so inspired!" At the next session, another participant asked, "Why do we have to have all this rock music, dancing in the aisles and other distractions in church? Church should be a calm, quiet and holy time."

Despite the obviously diverse nature of our members, it was clear to me that the folks in the Presbytery of Geneva (POG) are interested in what happens in their churches and in the larger levels of the denomination. While it would not be possible to list all the areas of discussion that occurred at all five sites (I do take notes, but I'm better at listening), I will share several general areas that were common among the different groups.

CAMP WHITMAN: What is its future? Can we afford it? Is there a way to make it useful for more than 10 weeks a year? How do we (the people in the pews) find out about the outcomes at the end of the season? What happened to the "work team" that used to handle lots of the repairs during the year?

PCUSA: Why does it get involved in issues like climate change, fossil fuels, immigration, homosexuality, etc.? Shouldn't we be focusing on building our spiritual relationship with God? What does PCUSA do for our individual churches?

YOUTH: How can the POG help us get more youth in church? (Bet you never saw that one coming!) Can POG hire interns to do youth ministry among several churches? Could POG work with other denominations to develop Christian Ed opportunities? What happened to the youth events that used to happen Presbytery-wide?

MISSION: How do we find out where our mission monies (POG) go? Can we get a list of mission projects? Could we hear about other churches who have successful mission projects so we could get ideas. How can POG help small churches connect with each other to do joint mission?

POG: What's going on with finding a new Executive Presbyter? Who do we go to for help without an EP? Is there an organizational chart that tells what each committee is responsible for? How can POG help us small churches grow? Why does it take so long to get anything done (find a new pastor)? Why doesn't POG provide any training for people elected to serve on PNC's? Why isn't the website more user friendly? Why isn't there an alphabetical listing of clergy if you know a name but don't know what church they serve?

In some cases I had answers, and in other cases I had wondered the same thing myself. Some of the questions raised were indeed already being addressed. The "cluster groups" that were formed in the spring spoke to the concern about bringing small churches together for common mission. Reports from Camp Whitman are presented at Presbytery meetings and are posted on the POG website. Plans are being made to update and simplify the POG website to make it more user friendly. The search for a Transitional Leader is well in progress and the next major step will occur at this coming Presbytery meeting.

Some of the questions have already been passed along to individuals and committees as appropriate. We will be working on an alphabetical directory of pastors, as well as preparing short descriptions of the many organizations and activities that receive Presbytery mission funds. And Camp Whitman would LOVE to have volunteers come to work on projects and repairs at the Camp.

As in any organization, good communication can help avoid problems and concerns, or poor communication can create problems or make them worse. I know that Presbytery leadership have their sights set on improving the lines of communication, but it takes all of us to be most effective. This report, for example, is online for anyone to read. As leaders in your own congregation, will you let others know about

it? Will you download a copy and post it, or make it a bulletin insert so those who attended the listening sessions will know that their concerns were not forgotten by the time I drove away? Will you encourage non-delegates to Presbytery to attend a meeting or two to hear the discussions and debates first-hand?

These questions are not intended to throw the burden all on you, but sometimes we forget that just because WE know something, that doesn't mean EVERYONE ELSE knows it, too.

I hope you find this report useful. I certainly found the sessions to be helpful, and I certainly hope they continue in some form in the future. And now I must go to try to remedy another small problem that was raised – How do we get more people in the pews? (If I have that one solved by the Presbytery meeting, I will share it with you.)

Blessings in Christ,

Dick Schied

Moderator