

A little while and you not see me...you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice; you will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy...I have overcome the world...I chose you out of the world...Abide in me and I in you...Greater love has no one than this: that they lay down their life for their friends...You are my friends...One of you will betray me...Forgive them for they know not what they do...This is my body broken for you...This is the cup of the new covenant sealed in my blood...It is finished.

There is no particular order to these passages of Scripture--most coming from the Gospel of John. In listening to what Jesus was saying near his gruesome execution, I wondered how much we miss Jesus? Has our affluent lifestyle made us more dependent upon the things of this world? A visit to our oldest congregation (First, Elizabeth) or our newest (Millennium NCD) wakes me to the realities of Christians in America who have little of what I have materially, yet are spiritually rich in their dependence upon Christ. They want to abide in Christ. Some of them will all but lay down their lives for each other. A pastor and an elder, many years in the presbytery, lower their heads with sadness when discussing the ways we can betray one another in the presbytery, using our words, body language, and distancing in relationships to wound like the soldier pounding a nail into the hands and feet of Jesus on the cross. Sometimes I wonder if we know what we are doing. I think we often do. Our mission as a community of churches in Christ is betrayed, the body of Christ broken. Forgive us, dear God.

Forgive us that we who believe we know what's right, see no need to stop what we are doing and help the person/pastor/church wounded by the side of the road. We do not want to get defiled by touching them--and besides we are too busy.

Forgive us when we speak of building up the body of Christ but use our power, our voices, and our privileged positions as church officers to break it apart or ignore it.

Forgive us when we partake of the bread and cup, our communion in Christ, but seek no communion with all our member congregations because of enmities we keep.

Forgive us when we pass out bread to the hungry and house the homeless, but do not feed the spiritual needs and hungers they also seek to satisfy.

Forgive us when our spirituality grows small, very small, to only what we want for our ourselves and our church that we cannot hear the weeping and lamenting that cries for us to go further into the world (all of it) for which Christ gave his life.

God grant us the courage to repent, the willingness to love as Christ loved us, and the joy of believing that our lives are sustained by his living presence through the Holy Spirit and with those who abide in Christ. May the world see Christ by this love and joy.

(over)

The Rev. Robert Foltz-Morrison

Bad News/Good News and Responses/New Initiatives

First, the Bad News. The Council and I concur that there are some urgent needs in our presbytery. Many of our congregations are stressed; some experience unhealthy conditions. The Committee on Ministry needs some additional elders and pastors to help with 19 congregations in some form of transition (that's nearly 40% of our churches).

The Good News is this: If in the next 2-3 years all these churches and the presbytery resolve their transitions favorably with intentional mission plans that are bearing fruit, collectively the presbytery will be stronger.

The Good News: 13 (25%) of our member congregations reported membership *increases* in 2006 on their statistical reports: First, Clinton; First, Cranford; Second, Elizabeth; Fanwood; Liberty Corner; Linden; First, Metuchen; Middlesex; New Providence; Watchung Avenue; Crescent Avenue; Willow Grove; Townley, Union; First, Woodbridge. Different locations, but 725 persons joined in one year! What contributes?

The Bad News: 25 (50%) of our member congregations reported membership *decreases* most due to removal of inactive members (784), fewer to deaths (189), fewer to a number of persons transferring in 2006 (159)—some to another church in the presbytery. 12 (24%) of our churches have less than 100 members. All churches have life cycles where there is growth, stability, and decline. Church decline and death are not inevitable; but pastors and members must want change. Do we collectively want to resource each other? In what are we as churches/presbytery put our time and energy when we gather? Our mission is to care for our congregations, start new ones, and build up the body of Christ.

Good News: I am willing to work with any church that wants to look at ways at building health and strength, partner your church with a teaching church that has such strengths, or invite you into a cluster of churches with the intention of doing so.

Following the changes in my position description and my interests in building up our churches through more hands-on contact, I will be willing to meet with any pastors and their session who want to look at strategies to do so and I will encourage this to be done in networks or clusters of congregations working together on this. These are two clusters I will be spending time with in 2007:

(1) Latino Network: Nearly a dozen pastors have spoken about ministries with Latinos. A network is ongoing to support and grow these ministries. There will be a pre-presbytery gathering (5:30 PM) at First, Avenel; then another on April 17 at noon.

(2) Churches in Transition: This will include interim ministers/ministries, churches working together on congregational transformation, and those intentionally active as a session in growing healthier congregations.

Bad News: One measurement of energy and quality of life in the presbytery, as a community of churches, is attendance at presbytery meetings. This has been dropping in recent years, some pastors and sessions scheduling events at the same time.

Good News you should communicate: The Council is conscientiously working on presbytery meetings being opportunities for learning and worship, not just business we can only do when we gather in stated meetings. The pre-presbytery gatherings (at 5:30 PM in the months of March, May, June, November) provide up to an hour for fellowship or discussions around particular topics of interest. These gatherings also will introduce you to new ministers. Presbytery meetings provide time for churches to announce upcoming events and share assets in areas that contribute to congregational mission.