

GENERAL PRESBYTER REPORT

January 29, 2011

“The apostles and the elders met to consider this matter. After there had been much debate, . . .”
(Acts 15:6, 7a)

In the early church, the disciples did not always agree about theology or practice. Acts tells us about some of the disagreements. Paul’s letters outline others. The debates were at the heart of the early church’s understanding of people’s relationship to God and what it meant to be faithful and holy. They reflected different interpretations of scripture. It took a while to work out some of the different understandings of God’s will, even though individuals were certain that their understanding was the right one.

God worked through their debates and councils, the meetings of the apostles and other church leaders. There were examples of decisions seeming to be made and coming up again. In Acts and in Paul’s letters, we see the debates continuing. Peter did not sit and eat with the Gentile Christians. Some felt Gentile converts needed to become Jews first, keeping all the law. There were questions of eating meat that had been sacrificed to idols. We believe then and now that the Holy Spirit works actively in our debates, our discussions and our processes to work towards discerning God’s will.

At this presbytery meeting, we will be dealing with issues around G-6.0106b. Faithful Christians, who study scripture and get down on their knees and pray, have many different opinions. It is a Biblical issue with people coming to different conclusions. It is an issue of compassion, with varying opinions of how to best be loving and be faithful to scripture. It is an emotion issue. For some people, it affects their core identity as to what it means to be Christian. It is an issue at the heart of our understanding of whom God calls us to be and how God calls us to act. This is true of those who will vote yes, no and abstain from voting.

Because this is an important faith issue, we need to listen closely to each person with an understanding that he or she is trying to be faithful and hear God’s voice. I have often said that it would be easier if when we read scripture, we would all come to the same conclusion. That is not the case. God calls us to struggle with different understandings. Sometimes, I wonder if God judges us more on the correct outcome or on the way we relate to each other and the process we use to try to discern God’s will for us.

Do we trust that Christ is truly the head of the Church and that the Holy Spirit is involved in our process and our desire to be faithful? My understanding of Reformed theology is that we believe God is walking with us as we make decisions in meetings and as we try to listen to the Holy Spirit in our midst. I believe that is the case. I do not think the Holy Spirit is active only when my opinions are held. I also believe that if we are trying to be faithful and get it wrong, God will help us correct it. I believe God is at work in our midst. God’s working in our midst may not be as visible now, as it will be years from now when we look back on this process.

I also believe that God is calling us to fields that are ripe for harvest. We have resources and we have greater strength when we work together on evangelism, mission and ministry. I believe God calls us together, even when we disagree about some things, but are strongly committed to the Lordship of Jesus Christ and the Good News. We have work to do for the kingdom. I realize after we vote and the denomination votes, there will be many unhappy people, no matter what the outcome. The early church did not agree on everything either. However, let us remember Jesus’ prayer for his disciples, “those of us who believe and have not seen”

(John 20). We will be witnesses by what we do when we vote and after we vote. We are commanded to love one another which is not always easy. And together we are to be about the work of witnessing to God's grace and love.

God is about doing powerful things in our midst and in our churches, including those with a variety of theological perspectives, filled with people with a variety of theological perspectives. I see that as I travel around the Presbytery. I believe just as Christ sent people, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you," that we have work to do.

We have work to do together, whether we agree or disagree with the voting. There are many people in our communities that do not know the good news or have a relationship with Jesus Christ. There are people that need to be nurtured in the faith. There are struggling churches that need our support and can't make it on their own. We have children and adults in our communities that go hungry and need shelter. We have Christians in Guatemala, Malawi and other parts of the world that need our help and our prayers and we need them to hear God's voice. We have youth to bring up in the faith. So let's continue to try to listen carefully to each other and to God. Let us with renewed energy work together to continue to preach the good news and reach out in mission and ministry to a hurting community and world.

No matter how sharp our debates or the outcome of our votes, I would hope that at the end of the presbytery meeting, we would be able to trust that the Holy Spirit is working and will continue to work among us. I hope one day we will be able to say, "it seems good to the Holy Spirit and to us. (Acts 15)." In the meantime, I pray that we will be able to demonstrate our love for each other and God's love for the world by our ministry and mission.