

## General Presbyter Report Bobbi White January 31, 2015

*"I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? (Isaiah 43:19)  
"Not anything will be able to separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus. (Romans 8:39)*

This month, **Heath Rada, Moderator of the PCUSA and elder from this Presbytery**, preached at the Montreat Presbyterian Church. He reflected on his experience the first six months as moderator using Romans 8:39, that "not anything will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

**Heath traveled to the Middle East because Christians had asked for representatives from the Pope and PCUSA.** Heath was humbled and inspired by the stories told by Christians from Iraq, Syria, Palestine, and Israel. The Christians shared that the PCUSA had built schools and hospitals and walked with them in times of trouble. One Christian drove through ISIS territory to meet with Heath. Another Christian told about a Muslim friend that helped his family escape, and his friend and family were killed because of it. Heath listened. They wanted someone to know about their struggles.

Heath described being in Washington at the signing of the latest addition of the Civil Rights Bill and the compliments and appreciation he received for the work of the PCUSA for those less fortunate. He described churches that are reaching out in new ways. He talked about our conflicts over issues, the vows we take as church members that Jesus Christ is our Lord and Savior, discussion with people that disagreed over scriptural interpretations, and the number of new members and worshipping communities. (Attached is his sermon for your reading. GP Attachment 1)

**How is God working in our midst and how often do we notice it?** When I travel around the Presbytery, I see that God is at work among us in more ways than we imagine. There are visible signs and "Holy Coincidences." God's work often starts with the idea or call of an individual or a committee. It often means risking doing something that might fail or has never been done before. Going where God calls us can be very challenging. The world is different now.

**I want to share some of the places I see God at work to encourage and challenge us to risk going with the Spirit, to give us new ideas, and to help us to see how God works in different ways with each situation. These examples are small and large membership churches, mountain and city churches, and theologically and economically different churches.**

**We are strengthened when we work together.**

**Gaston Area Presbyterians (GAP), "Working together to serve God," are hosting our January 31st Presbytery meeting.** Their mission statement is "to support and facilitate the efforts of congregations in Gaston County in their work to spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ." Their hope is in doing so, "that we transform churches so that their members may find new life and new energy to respond to God's call and others will be attracted to them and their work."

Formed as a result of meeting with the Evangelism Committee, the 16 GAP churches have been building Habitat Houses and raising money for Black Mountain Home for Children and Barbara Nagy. Recently, they started doing youth events together. They meet monthly at different churches, and also support Third Street's

backpack program for the local elementary school and the Samaritan Feet project, which gives out huge numbers of shoes.

**The Mayland Fellowship (churches in Mitchell, Avery, and Yancey counties)** will hold Holy Week evening worship services together from Palm Sunday through Wednesday with different preachers, choirs and hosts at the Spruce Pine First Church. They meet quarterly for worship and/or programs and provide \$800 scholarships to five to ten students from their churches.

**These churches are finding different ways to reach out to people in their community and provide times for neighbors and members to be together and do things together.**

**Three churches, Grassy Creek, Newdale and Micaville,** using Water to Wine Grant money from the Small Church Committee, have started providing meals to the elderly on the weekends, as well as a friendly contact. A social service worker said that some of the senior citizens have bare shelves and no food on the weekends. Many of our churches provide back packs so children will have food on weekends, so these churches are reaching out to meet a similar need for the elderly

**Trinity Presbyterian Church in Hendersonville** has a wonderful music outreach in their community. The Hendersonville Community Music Center is a 501c3 that Trinity formed to bring music opportunities to the whole community. They offer about 10 courses each semester, like drumming, piano lessons, kinder music, guitars, etc., most of which is held at the church. They also offer programs at the Boys and Girls Clubs and at Carolina Village. They are particularly excited about the programs for children. Because they are reaching out in music, the Hendersonville Youth Symphony practices in their sanctuary on Tuesday nights. The building is now a much busier place. There is new energy as they reach out to others in a new way.

**Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church** reaches out through the “Real Life Stories,” where people share their stories with the audience. People from the community and the church come together to hear people tell real stories at Avenue M. It is a time of neighbors enjoying being with neighbors and of a church reaching out to people who may not attend church. Although the stories are not church focused, they encourage people to reflect inward and think deeply about their lives in a safe space.

**Green Street in Morganton** realized that they had young girls in their church that would like to be a part of scouting, so they formed a Girl Scout Troop. They worked with a school to make it available. They have about 24 girls, about half from their church and half from the community. Green Street, a small membership church, only has a sanctuary, fellowship hall and room for GED and computer training. So, they spread out their groups from the Daisies to Brownies to Girls Scouts in the spaces available. The troop continues to grow.

When the whole country is dealing with racism, **Kenilworth Presbyterian Church in Asheville** reached out to the community, hosting the 5th Annual Kenilworth celebration of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. on Monday, January 19 in their Fellowship Hall to learn about this important issue. After a dinner, two UNCA professors talked about the “History of Civil Rights in WNC” and the “Current State of Racism Affecting Black Asheville.” The evening was moderated by Kenilworth elder Marvin Chambers, an icon of the Civil Rights Movement in NC. The night included musical entertainment and crafts for children.

**Westminster Presbyterian Church in Asheville** made a courageous and missional decision. They decided to sell their building and use the proceeds to continue their worshiping community in a different location

at 4:00 p.m. on Sundays. This time provided members of other churches an alternative time of worship, when needed. Westminster will continue to focus on their ministry and in addition, Michael Isaac, their minister, will be reaching out to others to form new opportunities for worship and Christian community.

We experienced the dynamic worship at **Unity Presbyterian Church in Denver** at the last presbytery meeting and appreciated Carol for sharing a worship workshop. Unity has one of the most welcoming websites (Unitypres.org). There is picture of the pastor, with these words. "Hi and welcome to Unity's website. I love being the pastor here because there is so many of our congregation who love to laugh, who take care of one another and those outside the church, and who have a heart for God. We have worship services on Sunday morning at 9:30 am and 11:00 am. You can join us at home or on vacation for live worship at 11:00 a.m. I hope you will roam around our website. Take a look at the video below . . . Better yet, come and see us! You will be most welcomed. Grace to you. Carol Clark." Not only is this a welcoming message, but they use technology providing a live feed of worship, several videos, and online giving. Take a look at your website. It is the first information many people will see.

**New web sites are helping smaller membership churches to reach out.** Many people go to the web to find a church and some churches do not have web sites. Through the Small Membership Committee and Foundation Forums, John Pea has offered to help smaller membership churches create and maintain up-to-date web sites and get Facebook accounts. The new web sites are spectacular. Go look at GAP, Kenilworth, Dulatown, Olney, John Knox, Etowah and Green Street. Come to the next Forum and find out more information and take advantage of this offer. We hope all churches will have web sites.

**The Small Membership Church/Foundation Forums will have an all day session on Saturday, February 21st in Morganton.** Those attending the quarterly Forums requested a Saturday event which would summarize the important things covered in the last eight sessions. Someone said, "We want a review so we can set up next steps." Come with the pastor, session, treasurer, and new members for an exciting time of looking at where God is calling you as a church in this crazy time, as you seek God's vision through prayer, listening and learning together.

**Doing ministry together multiplies our impact.**

**The Council and the Presbytery decided to be involved in a Ministry Campaign,** which will include raising funds for church development and for new worshiping communities to reach more people for Christ, for Camp Grier, for Guatemalan partnership education initiative and for the hospital, school, and medical clinics in Malawi. Our impact on these projects can be huge.

**Camp Grier,** which was owned by the Western North Carolina, Salem and Charlotte Presbyteries, will become a 501c3 corporation this month. We will sign over the deed to them at this Presbytery meeting. The majority of the Board members will be from these three presbyteries. We demonstrate our excitement about the direction the Camp is taking by including them in our Ministry Campaign. One church's newsletter said, "We have exciting things happening at Camp Grier, like our new MONSTER CLIMBING WALL & CHALLENGE COURSE; so come join us in Old Fort as we learn, laugh and grow together! We integrate lessons from the Bible with service to others, the arts and plenty of outdoor adventures! You'll discover many amazing things about yourself when you join us for a Summer Journey Program; so check us out at [www.campgrier.org](http://www.campgrier.org)."

**Guatemalan Partnership:** We just celebrated 20 years of working with two presbyteries in Guatemala with over 30 church to church partnerships. We have been building relationships for 20 years and learning from each other. Over 800 children are going to school now because of scholarships from the churches and presbytery. We have supported child nutrition, new stoves that vent the smoke and take less wood are in homes, saving money and smoke-related illness, and water filters. While in Guatemala, I was able to preach at the 20 year celebration, visit several churches, and participate in a memorial celebration for a pastor who was active in Guatemala and had visited our presbytery. It was amazing to hear about new possibilities, like the Presbyterian Women working with micro loans, experimenting with forming a library, and plans to improve education.

**Four youth went to Guatemala** this summer to participate with the youth there and together led a retreat. Two of those youth have done senior projects connected with Guatemala. One raised about \$1,500 at a concert for Guatemala. The other youth has produced a PowerPoint to help churches better understand the partnership, the challenges and opportunities.

Working together, we are making a difference in **Nkhoma, Malawi**. Almost 50% of our churches support **Dr. Barbara Nagy, pediatric doctor and public health leader**, who is hoping to do more preventive health in the villages now that she has a Public Health degree. We also support **the hospital, rural public health initiatives, and the Ebenezer School**. When the hospital first asked this presbytery to start a school so they could retain the medical staff, the community was not sure about it. The other choice was 100 children in a classroom with the teacher having the only book, or for the medical staff to move to another place. Now, the school has an excellent reputation, is attracting medical staff, and the school is looking to expand. Currently, they have classes for students pre-kindergarten through seventh grade. They are needing additional classes. I believe future leaders of Malawi will come from this school.

### **God is at work in our midst:**

As the Presbytery continues to live into **SEE, the Body of Christ**, build relationships, and

Strengthen congregations

Equip disciples

Engage in mission together.

***We need to listen to God, see what God is doing, celebrate and join in the work!***

# GP ATTACHMENT 1

Moderator's Sermon

Heath K. Rada

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## REFLECTIONS AND HOPE Montreat Presbyterian Church January 4, 2015

Happy New Year. The ball has dropped, the fireworks have sounded, the black eyed peas have been eaten and the resolutions have been made. It's time for a new beginning. If we focus on the future, we can all be hopeful. Sound familiar?

Well, in that vein I decided to look at the media to see what the new year is bringing. Where are the realities and hopes that surround us as we start another January with expectations of happy new year options?

Here is what I read in the paper this morning -

- Rescuers recover bodies from Air Asia Flight as family members grieve.
- Discrimination against young black men expands in USA
- Numbers of shootings of Police officers has increased dramatically
- Israel withholds \$125 million from Palestinian Authority
- Scholars affirm increased prejudice in US toward Jews
- Schism between Democrats and Republicans expand as Congress contemplates upcoming session
- Global warming effects are raven more serious than scientists once thought
- Christians are continue to be murdered and forced from their homes by Isis in Syria, Iraq and Lebanon

Oh my - that isn't what I was thinking when I said Happy New Year. So I decided I would go to one of the sources of my hope - my faith community - and read the hopeful signs in the Presbyterian News Media

Here's what I saw:

- The PCUSA is dying
- The Relationships between Presbyterians and Jews is at the lowest pointy in history
- Additional churches are leaving the PCUSA because the denomination no longer believes in the Authority of the Scripture nor do they affirm that Salvation comes through Jesus Christ.

YIKES!!! Where is the happy in this new year? What is there that I can be happy about if everything I read says we are living in such dire straits?

Let me try something else.

2015 is a new year. As we think about 2014 we are reminded of both good and bad things. You know, "should old acquaintance be forgot and never brought to mind?" I mean that's a real upper isn't it?

I don't know about you, but as I age, I find it harder some years to find the highlight of the past year as easily as I can find the downers. Think about it - when you think of one event of the past year which impacted you, is it something positive or negative? How many of you thought of something good? How many thought of something sad or difficult or unhappy?

Regardless of where you are on the scale of happy or unhappy reflections in your personal life, I dare say we all have a mixed bag of experiences we could share as we consider 2014.

## Moderator's Sermon

Most of you who know me also know that I am a pretty upbeat guy. I am usually happy, and enjoy life. And one would think that as I consider 2014, the extraordinary honor and privilege of being elected moderator of our denomination would be my highlight. It probably is, and it I do think of it positively. Yet, the complexity of it is like the complexity we all face in our lives. Joy mixed with sadness. Acceptance mixed with rejection. Life facing death. Freedom heavy with responsibility. It isn't simple. It is complex.

Thus we turn to the scriptures. And when we read Romans 8, and particularly verse 35, we do find that hope. Listen once again to that verse -

*The One who died for us (meaning Christ) who was raised to life for us!! - is in the presence of God at this very moment sticking up for us. Do you think anyone is going to be able to drive a wedge between us and Christ's love for us? There is no way! Not trouble, not hard times, not hatred, not hunger, not homelessness, not bullying threats, not backstabbing, not even the worst sins in Scripture. I'm absolutely convinced that nothing - NOTHING living or dead, angelic nor demonic, today or tomorrow, high or low, thinkable or unthinkable - absolutely NOTHING can get between us and God's love because of the way that Jesus our Master has embraced us."*

That my friends is what it's all about. That's why we are here this morning. That's why we can read the papers and still get out of bed in the morning.

I stand here today before you having had 6 of the most extraordinary months of my life. Serving as our denomination's Moderator is at once both humbling, affirming, frightening, exciting, exhausting and fulfilling. It is my privilege, along with Peggy at my side, to see our church and our world through new eyes. And I want to share some of that with you today.

First let's look at what we are seeing in the world? Our journey to the the Middle East in November has haunted us with visions of Christians (as well as people of other faith traditions) who are being discriminated against and killed with nary a second thought. Church grounds with tents where literally thousands of families are camped out and waiting to be able to go home, (and frankly with not much likelihood of that happening anytime soon) keep appearing in my dreams. Old women crying, young men pleading, young parents filled with panic are all part of what I saw. And why on earth was I there? Because they - the people in those countries - had asked Pope Frances for representatives of the Roman Catholic Church, and the officials of the PCUSA to send some people there to tell them that they were not forgotten - that they were in our prayers - that they mattered to us. And to be asked to share such moments of love was an overwhelming privilege.

The PCUSA was invited because in many of those countries it was through PCUSA missionaries that they had learned to have true hope. In addition to teaching about Jesus, our mission workers had built schools and hospitals. had joined hands in helping to assure a life of wholeness. And they wanted not only to have us assure them that we hadn't forgotten them but to tell us that they hadn't forgotten the words of Paul -

*NOTHING, absolutely nothing, can separate us from the love of God.*

Three weeks ago, Peggy and I returned from Peru. We met with officials of the Peruvian Churches who claim a relationship with the PCUSA and discussed those issues which unite us and others which might divide us. And we also participated in the remarkable

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Climate Conference 20 with citizens and leaders from around the world who are grossly aware that we are not doing what we need to do to take care of our environment. Did you know that in Lima Peru, a city the size of New York with 10 million people, in 15 years at the most, there will be no source of water for them to drink or use? We saw the effects of global warming where the ice caps on the majestic mountains which had been there for tens of thousands of years, had started a major meltdown in recent years and now were mere small caps on the highest mountains - and melting rapidly into oblivion. And we listened to renowned author and environmentalist Jeffrey Sachs who told us that we don't have to sacrifice economic gain to minimize the effects of this frightening occurrence and who, in a conversation with me, accepted my invitation to work with our seminaries and colleges in the PCUSA to look at some options for curriculum changes which might help to make a difference. But most importantly, in a march for climate care, which was to have a hoped for attendance of about 2000 people, we had over 20,000 of us marching through the streets of Lima. The overwhelming number of these folk were younger people - not necessarily idealists, but realists who were changing their majors and rallying their collective strength to speak to their own native lands about ways we can make a difference. They were hopeful. They believe that neither life nor death, nor global warming, nor predictions of doom and gloom, can separate us from the love of God - but that we also have a partnership with God which must be fulfilled.

In the next several weeks of this month and next, I am scheduled to go to South Sudan and Ethiopia, where I will see more hardship and meet people whose lives are facing challenges I cannot even imagine. I will return home and go to the borders of Texas and Mexico, where I will meet with mothers who are weeping as they say good bye to their children and smuggle them illegally into the United States - praying mightily that they will be cared for by someone who can assure them a quality of life they cannot have in their own homeland - where their likelihood of survival is extremely low. And once again, I believe I will hear words of hope as they testify to their faith in our Lord.

*For I believe we cannot be separated from the love of God - a love even more powerful than a Mother's love and desire to protect her young from harm. And the mothers will cry. And so will I.*

But let's turn our attention a moment to our own country. Where I am seeing hope in God's assuring love here in the USA? Do I see it on the streets of Ferguson Missouri or New York City? I haven't been to Ferguson. Some have criticized me for that - but I haven't gone because I was asked not to go at this time. You may wonder why. Let me express this using the dramatic words which were shared with me.

"Mr Moderator. Whereas we Presbyterians would always be glad to see you here, your visit would be viewed as patronizing. You would be seen as a symbol of someone who came too late. We needed the denomination here over the past two decades when our communities were fracturing. We needed help to find a focus that would allow us to find ways to live together. To come now would be viewed as a response to your own need - coming to salve the conscience of Presbyterians rather than to help us. We needed help long ago. Now we need to determine our next course of events among ourselves. We will call you when we think it would be helpful for you to come." I didn't hear this as a personal attack but instead a challenge. And it has helped me to look at events as they unfold and see where action is warranted now! when we can maybe make a difference!

## Moderator's Sermon

I was reminded of our visit to the White House a few months ago to watch President Obama sign the latest addition to the Civil Rights Bill. That morning Peggy and I had read in the newspaper that one of the main reasons this bill had passed had been through the efforts of churches and various non governmental organizations who had worked hard to lobby for its passage. And in the paper, the first organization named was the PCUSA. At the White House we were greeted by numerous people who said to us, "We are so grateful to your denomination for the ways you model what you believe. Your stand for justice, for caring "for the least of these" has allowed you to become a huge factor in impacting certain laws that have enhanced the quality of life from many who have faced hatred or discrimination." And in fact, we had some folks tell us they were considering changing their church membership to our denomination because of how we lived out our faith.

And I have to think again about the passage in Romans - *NOTHING can separate us from the love of God* and how critical it is that we reflect those words in both word and deed as we live out our faith. And I have been proud to be a part of our church.

So let's look now at our PCUSA. We are a divided body in many ways. We come together as a family that is reexamining what being family means. I find this to be both difficult and challenging. When I am asked if I believe the PCUSA is dying - and I am asked that often, my answer is different now than it was when I was elected six months ago. Then I said, "Absolutely not!!!" But now I have changed my answer. Instead, I say, "Yes. The Presbyterian Church of which I am a member is dying". But then I hasten to add - it is the church that I grew up in that is dying. It is the church of the 50's and 60's where everyone was a church member, and that's how you got jobs, and how you associated with certain groups of like minded people - that's the place that was the center of much of the social life of my growing up years - that's the church that is dying. But the PCUSA is not dying. Indeed we lost 152,000 members last year. But in contrast to some news reports that this is due to unhappiness in the church, the vast number of those losses were due to death (because we have been a church of older people) and the removal of inactive members from our roles. These members who are being removed are similar in number or percentage figures to other mainline denomination declines and reflect, according to sociologists and religious scholars, the secularization of our society rather than the dissatisfaction with decisions being made by our denomination.

Indeed some have been due to congregation leaving the denomination, and I we can't deny that nor hide our heads in the sand. But that is not the main reason. And we don't read about the other side of the story. Did you know that 72,000 people joined our denomination last year? Obviously that is a smaller number than the ones who were taken off the roles - but folks - in a time when being a part of a mainline church is no longer the "thing to do" and when people are joining the church because they want to live out their faith and participate in making a difference in the world rather than having a social outlet or to have a nice addition to their resume - 72,000 new members is huge. That is not indicative of a dying church.

And while we are looking at statistics, let me share a few more. My "other congregation" Grace Covenant in Asheville is nearing the 900 mark in membership. It is growing dramatically. And this past year at our annual meeting the amazing fact was shared that for the first time in the history of our local congregation we had more people under the age of 45 than older!!! So we asked them why - and they said, "Because this is a safe place. This is a place where I can discover who I am in relationship to my faith. I can ask questions. I can doubt. I can find affirmation in the process of growing, and not feel judged nor put down because I do or do not think exactly the way someone else does."

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Does that mean that people at Grace Covenant can believe anything and be a member? Emphatically the answer is no. But it does mean that the church offers people a place to discern who they are on this journey and to love and be loved in ways that builds them up.

I want to tell you a few more statistics, but let me also use this time to answer the two basic questions I am asked most frequently by people who are concerned about our denomination. First - Does the PCUSA believe in the Authority of the Scriptures? Unfortunately some of our former members and associates have condemned us as no longer believing that to be true. But that is a gross misinterpretation of the truth. In this room this morning there are many of you who are elders - teaching or ruling. Some of you have been Christian educators or missionaries or worked in the church in some other fashion. And for each of us who fits in that role, we have been ordained or installed into those positions. In our ordination vows we profess that we believe the Bible to be the Authoritative word of God. Period. Pure and simple. NO ONE in our denomination can serve in these roles and not believe that. So to accuse of of doing so is false teaching. Now does that mean we all believe in the same interpretation of every verse of scripture? NO. Does that mean that we don't read, study and discern God's word and seek to understand that it is a living word that can take on new and greater meaning as generations unfold. Absolutely not! And let's get to the big issue that most people are avoiding when they use this argument - Does that mean that we say that God approves of gay marriage or gay leadership in our churches. Forgive me for being so adamant in this, but I am heartsick at the misinformation I hear over and over both in our denomination and in other countries where former members of the PCUSA are telling their interpretations of what we believe. No. Our church has not said that in order to be a Presbyterian we need to believe that God has ordained a gay lifestyle as a part of our body of belief. A minister in our denomination is told that she or he is to follow one's own conscience as they carry out their beliefs about this. If they do not see this as being part of God's will, they do not have any demand or expectation that they should perform such a ceremony. Likewise, if a session of a local church believes this is not a part of God's will, they have the authority and right to say they will not allow such a marriage to take place in their house of worship - even if the minister disagrees.

Friends, the Bible is an amazing document that continues to reveal God's will and purpose for us as the years unfold. I am not here today to affirm nor to deny the Biblical authority which speaks to gay marriage. But what I can tell you is that Biblical scholars as well as Christians of deep faith disagree on the wording which refers to these matters. Recently I was talking to someone who was dealing with this issue and asked me if I believed we were changing God's definition of marriage by allowing same sex couples to unite. I told him that I wasn't the judge on this one - God is. But I also said that I believe that we need to be open to the fact that God might be revealing different things to us. For instance, I said that in the room where we were meeting there were likely a number of folk who were divorced. But I don't believe that we are called to take these people out into the streets in front of the church and stone them to death just because the Bible says we should do so. I don't believe that women are not capable nor eligible to teach and preach and lead our congregations just because the Bible says so. We see God's word revealed to us in new and amazing ways every day. I am not going to be the judge on whether or not gay marriage is sanctioned by God. But I DO believe we need to be open to exploring whether or not God is asking us to look anew at God's word as we live in a world that is significantly different than the one in existence when these words were written.

The other issue some raise is that members of the PCUSA don't believe that Jesus Christ is the way to salvation. Oh me.

## Moderator's Sermon

Let me say simply - you cannot join the PCUSA without answering the question in the affirmative that says, "Do you believe that Jesus Christ is your Lord and Savior?" All of us who are members answered that question when we joined the church. It is still asked of every member today. So to twist facts and say that Presbyterians don't believe that is another untruth. Now the rub sometimes comes when Presbyterians say, "I don't believe that my Jewish friends, or my Muslim friends, are necessarily going to hell". How do we reconcile that with John 3:16? Well folks, the reality in my mind is that isn't a question we even need to raise. If I believe that Jesus is MY path to salvation, if the church I belong to says that all who are members of the church must believe the same thing, then I am very comfortable saying the rest of the flock will be judged by God." I am glad I am not the judge. In fact the Bible says quite clearly that we are NOT to be the judges - that is God's job. But I am very certain that for Heath Rada the way to eternal life must go through Jesus Christ.

Well, I'm preaching at you folks!!! And if you can't tell I feel passionately about these matters.

And one of the reasons is the scripture passage I have read to you today - Even as I struggle to understand the issues and the complexities of the world around me I know that I love and am loved by my Savior Jesus. And I know that nothing, absolutely NOTHING, can separate me from that love - because that is what He has promised. That is why he came to earth and lived and died in our midst. And that is why we can have hope for the new year.

Now let me close by sharing a few other facts about our denomination as we look toward this New Year. Did you know that there are 94 million Christians around the world today who claim that the reason they are Christians is because of the ministry of the PCUSA or its predecessors? Do you know that our form of government, which my friend Dean Thompson says is arguably the most democratic form of church government in the world - makes our decisions transparent to others in ways that other denominations are not, and therefore we do not relinquish decisions to bishops of Popes or others who some believe have special gifts to interpret God's word. We don't even do that for the Moderator!!!

Did you know that we had hoped to have over 100 new worshipping communities in the Presbyterian Church by last June's General Assembly and we had over 250 - now close to 300? Did you know that in spite of the fact that some say we are not doing an effective job of sending missionaries out into the world and evangelizing society, we have 180 mission coworkers in the field. And whereas that number may be smaller than the numbers we had in the 50's and 60's we now send thousands of people out on mission work programs to build churches, teach Bible Schools, care for children, provide medical relief, and on and on. My friends, we have more people serving Christ on the mission field today than we have ever had in our history - even if they aren't all full time employees of the church.

Its true that we have had over 350 congregations leave our family, but did you know we still have 10,000 congregations in our denomination?

It is NOT wrong for people to understand how to be the church in different ways. That is why there are different denominations and faiths. We interpret and understand who we are to be differently. When someone, or some body of the church decides it is time to leave and join another fellowship, I believe we should follow the laws of the church and of the state, and then join with them, hold their hands and offer prayers for them as they seek to be faithful followers. Doing so is not sinful. Believing differently is not always an act of hostility. However, when their decision is hostile and based on misinterpretations or untruths, I believe we should be up front in being bold with our own witness. We need to tell the truth as we understand it - not in a vindictive nor angry way, but in ways that

## Moderator's Sermon

**model the peacemaker Jesus Christ. We are an honest, honorable and faithful body of Christ. And in spite of the many issues over which we might disagree, we are held together as we have always been, by the unity of our belief in Christ.**

**Thus we head into the new Year. We may be maligned, and we may be celebrated. We may be criticized and we may be praised. Our church lives and our individual lives may be filled with joy this year, or we may be facing times of grief, separation and pain. But hear me, my dear friends. And listen as I sing a song I learned at one of the Montreat Youth Conferences a number of years ago. If you know it, join with me.**

***“For I’m persuaded to believe that you can’t separate us from the wonderful love of God. For above us God will send us and will come to live within us while in this sinful world we tread. NEEEEITHER life nor death nor principalities - things present nor things to come. And though the powers hate us they will never separate us from the wonderful love of God.”***

**Move forward Montreat Presbyterian Church knowing you have that power of God’s care and love. Carry on. Celebrate the past by laying the groundwork to be Missionaries in Montreat and outside the gate for many years to come. Your denomination salutes you. Your town celebrates you. And I am sure that God is smiling in whatever fashion God smiles as you gather to continue to serve in the name of Jesus the Christ. Amen**