

GENERAL PRESBYTER REPORT APRIL 25, 2017

*Jesus said to his disciples, "As the Father loves me, so I love you." John 15:9
"As the Father sent me, so I send you." John 20:21*

I have experienced the beauty of the Holy Week and the Easter season. I am continually amazed at the depth of God's love for each of us and the incredible responsibility we have as Christ's disciples.

The Presbytery Mission as the Body of Christ is to covenant to **SEE**:
 Strengthen Churches
 Equip disciples
 Engage in Mission.

To fulfill our mission and God's call to each of us, we need to live as Easter people.

In today's world, our situation is close to that of the early church in terms of reaching out to the people who do not know the stories of God's great love. We need new language and ways to describe the importance of our faith. How do we show and speak of God's amazing love to generations who do not know about Christianity or about God's love? Telling about our faith journey and what Jesus means to us in personal ways can speak to different generations. If we are going to continue to be the church, we must change and learn how to share God's story.

One of the most important tasks of the Presbytery is to help churches find new pastors and transitional pastors that will guide our churches in meeting today's challenges, and help us learn to share our faith in new ways. The person who has led us in this challenge over the last couple of years, **Barbara Ross, will be retiring from presbytery staff effective June 30, 2017.** Barbara has served the presbytery since 2010, first as a volunteer staff member and then as a part-time Presbytery Associate. She has worked with churches throughout the presbytery, but mostly in the Mayland area. Barbara has provided elder training and assisted with many of our Pastor Nominating Committees. She has put together training, information, and a process that could be used by all the churches' Pastor Nominating Committees. Barbara is wonderful at brainstorming and is a wise and insightful person. She will be missed by many people, particularly by those of us who have worked closely with her over the last several years. We are still determining how to continue the work she has been doing.

In the last few months, I have attended many churches. Each time, I come away saying to myself, "If I lived in that community and wanted a church, I would like to go there." However, I realize there are fewer people like me who are looking for churches. Now, we have to reach out to encourage people to walk in the door or come in the side door through other programs or people. In each church, multiple factors draw me there. It is music, the sermon, the friendliness that could become friendship, the mission, the care for children and youth, and the care for each member. In each church, I sense a vitality of faith. The statistics still say that being personally invited is the way more than 80% of people come. Invite others to events, programs, and worship. Are we praying to see how God wants us to witness to our community in new ways, and to strengthen the old ways?

A church recently shared some ways of inviting and welcoming people. One of the first things said is that we are not the guest in a church, but the host and hostess. People are not looking for a friendly

place, but places where they can make friends. To help children grow, small churches can know everyone's name and serve as an encouraging place to grow as a youth, just as a larger church might excel in programming. Often people come through the side door - the men's breakfast, a mission trip, the parent of youth, or a circle. One publication said every mission trip, ball team, senior citizen trip, and choir should include non-members. Look for ways to invite people to your church. Share at least three times each week something exciting or interesting about your church or what you have done or experienced because you are a member. When someone has a crisis or is looking for a church, they will remember what you have been saying.

This month, the Presbytery sponsored a Spirituality Retreat that also looked at social justice action. One person shared that she was having trouble talking to her friends and church members because people often got mad at those who disagreed with them. This was shared by others. One of the fun and difficult exercises we did involved learning to listen to each other. We were matched with a partner. One person had a minute to describe their opinion about a controversial issue. We had many different perspectives. The second person had a minute to try to tell the first person what they had said. Then you got a new partner and a new topic. After about ten topics, we had learned to listen better and to speak easier. It was such a good exercise that we commend that to others. You had to listen so intently that you really became interested in the others person's opinion and gave them your full attention and respect. It was a wonderful retreat with worship and sharing.

The Presbytery is finishing the active phase of the Building HOPE Campaign. There will be some foundations, individuals and churches that will continue to give or that may give for the first time, but we will be focusing on using the contributions for mission and ministry. Things are already happening. We have raised over one million eight hundred thousand dollars! We are thankful to Dick Larson, who was the Building HOPE Campaign Manager. We could not have done this without him. Thank you, Dick!

Camp Grier is pleased to give churches in our Presbytery a \$100 camper discount because of Building HOPE and the Presbytery's budgeted contribution to the camp. Camp Grier is thriving and you all have been able to contribute. We are excited about all the new opportunities and updated facilities. Building HOPE and volunteer members from this Presbytery have helped to renovate two lodges. The lodge now being completed was completely gutted, new rooms and bathrooms were constructed, and a porch and deck were added. Wow! Also, soon they will have miles of trails for mountain bikes and horses and they continue to use the new equipment purchased. \$110,000 has been contributed to Camp Grier so far. The thing that has most impressed us is that some of that money has had matching dollars and much of the work has been donated. Jason McDougald and the Board are doing excellent work. We will continue to partner with them through Building HOPE and our budget.

Our Malawi May Mission Team is ready to work with the hospital, update two of the rural clinics, and work with the Ebenezer School on their plans. The Ebenezer School now has more than 300 students, pre-kindergarten to 7th grade. The school and the hospital for the rural clinics are in the process of requesting Building HOPE funds. We celebrate that they have a mobile health unit which can be used to improve preventive care, vaccinations, and prenatal care. In addition, we have been able to contribute \$20,000 for medicine, of which \$10,000 came from Building HOPE. We will be providing pictures when the team returns.

Through the Building HOPE Campaign, the Guatemala Partnership now has six university scholarships. Both presbyteries in Guatemala have received help for seminarians and the seminaries. Suchi's Seminary has provided us a holistic five year plan. We are excited about their plan. Their

seminary plan not only contains Theology and Bible, but also plans to have courses in community development. Through Building HOPE, there are four churches in the process of establishing a “Reading Corner.” These will be like little libraries in the churches and each church will be also taking the books out into the communities. This is to enable kids, particularly elementary age, to have a chance to gain a love for reading. The Partnership is also working on future teacher formation classes, with about 30 teachers in Sur Occidente Presbytery. Several years ago, there was a plan put together by educators from the presbyteries with no hope of being implemented. Now through God’s work, much more will be accomplished.

With the ending of the Campaign, the ministry for Vital Churches will begin to take shape. We will have two task forces working in the Presbytery. One will look at pastor and church leader education and support. They are to look holistically at the support needed for pastors and how multiple venues work together. The other task force will be looking at church development, revitalization, support for growing churches, 1001 Worshipping Communities, and transformation. Each church is unique, but some things can be used by multiple churches. This is a new day, and we need to look a new ways as well as old successes. Stay tuned for further updates.

Summer is coming soon! Summer is a time for Vacation Bible School or Vacation Bible Camp. Are kids more excited about a camp or school? Morganton’s Vacation Bible Camp, which is now from 9:30 a.m. to 3:00 p.m., went from 25-30 kids to 106, and has a waiting list. They asked different questions such as “what do the parents need” and “what do the kids want?” The week-long Bible Camp has had great success.

One church challenged kids who are away for summer vacations or visiting different parents or grandparents. Jill Kimbirl at First Gastonia prepared boxes for the kids to have during the summer. The boxes had activities and stories inside. She mailed them, but they could also have been given out in person. The kids enjoyed getting mail and stayed in touch with the church as they did their summer activities.

Some of our churches are struggling with the immigration and refugee issues. People and churches have varied experiences. What does it mean that scripture tells us that we are to welcome the strangers? Whether we believe in illegal immigration or not, the way we treat people who have lived in our country for many years reflects on our understanding of Christ’s call. I have been attending the Morganton ecumenical group that meets at the Catholic Church to learn about immigration issues and the people affected. There is great fear among the Hispanic/Latino community. It is affecting children and youth who are citizens. One doctor said she is seeing the negative impact on their health. Some undocumented immigrants are keeping their children out of sports because they are afraid to drive. Children and youth in some families have been told to be prepared to come home and find that your father, mother, or both have been taken away. Many of these people have lived their entire youth and adult lives in this country, and have no idea how to navigate a place they may not have been in for 20 or 30 years. Some have been working to get papers, paid huge lawyer bills, pay taxes and even own their own business, and are still waiting. This fear is often shared by friends, and those friends are often in your youth group and church. Sometimes the families are your neighbors. For me, I am trying to find ways to be supportive of our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Some of our churches are looking at providing sanctuary. Others do not see this as an issue in their community. All of us must look at God’s call in this situation, which will be as different as our location and understanding of scripture. Our denomination has tried to put a variety of resources on the PCUSA website and we will be adding resources on our website.

As we continue the Easter Season and into Pentecost, we must take seriously Jesus' commandments:

“Love one another and bear much fruit.”

“As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”

“Be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

Peace,
Bobbi