

General Presbyter's Report Bobbi White, General Presbyter

God Is Doing A New Thing!

Happy New Year! So, how is that New Year's resolution coming along, anyway? Often, we make the same resolution year after year, but we end up with the same results. Nothing impressive! Too often in churches, we do the same thing, and get the same results.

It is 2018! We are in a different world today, where the old way of doing things often does not work. Our churches are not seeing many visitors. We may have programs that don't function properly. Our mentality is that if we get a younger pastor, s/he will magically bring in lots of families. Or maybe, if we get a youth director or praise band, that will solve all our problems and help us to grow. It is not that easy, friends. We are now dealing with challenges where earlier formulas, which worked beautifully, are now seemingly defective.

People are not flooding into our churches each week. We need to learn new ways to connect. We are not sure how to reach out to those that don't come. One of our biggest challenges today is how to communicate the Good News of Jesus Christ to parents and children who have not been to church and don't know the family stories of being a Christian. We need to ask new questions and try different things.

Some of our churches have felt God's call to reach out in ministry in their communities to different people in need. Cherryville First is working with people affected by the opioid crisis. Grace Covenant is working with other churches in Asheville on immigration and finding ways to support immigrants in our area. They are looking for people to provide transportation help throughout Western North Carolina. Newton First has opened their doors when the temperature gets low. Food pantries and back pack programs abound. Each church needs to listen to the ways God is calling them into mission and ministry and how God is calling us to reach people for Christ. Those actions are not actions that you should just take. They were particularly suited for each particular church. What is your church trying to accomplish? What need is in your area? What do you feel God is calling you to do? What are the questions you should be asking and what options do you have?

Using Building HOPE dollars, the Presbytery has entered into a pilot project with the Presbyterian Foundation called "PneuMatrix." The program is built on the churches' understanding of what God is calling them to be and do. It helps churches examine spiritual, financial and energy strengths, as well as resources. The program tries to expand the options available to churches, and uses the Lewis and Clark journey as a metaphor for churches today. Lewis and Clark had expected to canoe to the West Coast. When they reached the mountains, they did not have the expertise for crossing the mountains. We are like that; we are in a new time where we cannot canoe to the west coast, but we are going to have to figure out how to cross the mountains. The book we are working with is called "Canoeing the Mountains." It talks about how we have to adapt to change. We need to use "Adaptive Change" to learn how to reach out to others. I'm excited about this journey with PneuMatrix and the churches that have elected to participate.

How willing are we to change in order to bring more people to Jesus Christ and to live as resurrection people? How willing are we to change in order to welcome and nurture new people in Christian community? There was a cartoon I saw recently. When people were asked if they thought change was necessary, everyone raised their hand. When they were asked if they were willing to change, no one raised their hand. We worship a God where the Holy Spirit is alive and will take us on an exciting journey IF we will trust and be willing to follow God in new ways while God walks with us.

In one church's recent congregational survey, 90% of the people responding said they had not invited anyone to church in the last year. Yet, statistics show that 80 to 90% of the people that visit a church do so because they are

personally invited. Many of us grew up not learning how to invite people to church because everyone we knew was going to church. Times are different, so we need to learn.

There are steps we can take. Begin to talk about our church, or even our faith, with people we contact. Tell four people each week about something that happened in your church. This week say, "I attended a worship service and the music was wonderful." Bring up that putting wood on a chapel wall makes the sound fantastic and also makes the chapel look wonderful. Or, that "I had a delightful time meeting with a committee of fabulous people." If someone asks about your weekend, get in the habit of sharing what happened at church. When they need church or community, maybe they will ask about your church and you can invite them to go!

The other thing we need to concentrate on is telling our faith story. Small groups, Sunday school classes, women's Bible study groups, all of these settings have the perfect opportunity to allow a person to share their faith journey at each meeting. Sharing our faith helps us to hear others' stories and allows us to reflect on God's presence in our life when we share our own journey. Ask, "How did you see God at work in your life last year?"

In this new year, let's be committed to tell people about our church, invite people, and share and listen to each other's faith journeys. Let's anticipate the boundless things God will be doing in our midst. In 2018, the Presbytery will continue to work to be the body of Christ, covenanting to strengthen congregations, equip disciples, pastors and leaders, and to engage in mission together. Churches will be trying creative ways to successfully reach out to unchurched people. This will allow our congregations to grow spiritually, missionally, and in numbers.

Some churches will receive a "Water to Wine" grant to reach out this year. One church is thinking of using a grant to develop a support group for people dealing with divorce. Other churches may try something different. So far, the grants awarded have been used for a wide variety of ministries – anything from youth outreach, elderly food programs, to a coffee house ministry and non-food pantries. Not all ideas will be successful, but you can't find out what will be fruitful without trying.

Congregations will continue to be supported as they look for new pastors. We will welcome gifted and faith-filled pastors into our flock. People will have the opportunity to grow in faith and experience God's grace through events like the Spirituality Retreat, led by Lisle Gwynn, on March 9-10 at Bonclarken Conference Center. Lisle is a young, gifted pastor known for her creative work in helping us understand God's word through all our senses, including art, music, prayer and worship. This opportunity is open to everyone, and should be affordable for all who want to attend. Supporting member spiritual growth helps individuals and strengthens congregations. In addition, the Pastor's Retreat is scheduled for September 17-19 and is designed to provide support for pastors, giving us a place to learn, share, brainstorm, and have fellowship time. It is also designed to include rest and renewal.

The Church Leadership School will continue to provide education, spiritual growth, and fellowship to members who wish to grow in their faith and knowledge and some will become commissioned pastors.

Presbytery youth will have an opportunity to grow in faith and mission. Churches have support in providing opportunities for engaging youth in our Presbytery.

Chrissie Mbewe will be with us in April to tell about our past and future support of the Nkhoma Ebenezer School in Malawi. As well, we will hear from John McCall, Mission Coworker from this Presbytery, to learn about how God is at work in Taiwan and China, as he spends six months in our midst.

The Spirit will do more than we expect, we just have to step out in faith. My prayer is that each of us will grow in our faith and relationship with God, and that we will share God's love with people in word and deed. I look forward to working with you in ministry in 2018!