

Report of the General Presbyter

Dr. Kevin Yoho
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Presbytery Center
192 Broad St. Bloomfield, NJ 07003-2606
973-429-2500 office • 973-429-2333 fax
www.newarkpresbytery.org • info@newarkpresbytery.org

Together Transforming
Lives, Congregations, Communities, World
Connected to the Synod of the Northeast and Presbyterian Church (USA)

GP Proclamation

Liberty Corner, NJ: Liberty Corner PC
01/21: Retooling Ministry for the 21st Century pastor training Event 7. 11 NP pastors joined pastors from Elizabeth and Palisades.

New York: NYC Presbytery
02/08: African American Church Growth Strategy Team meeting.

Montclair, NJ: Central PC
02/09: Session meeting.

New Brunswick, NJ: First PC
03/08: NJ G/EP's meeting. Convener.

Montclair, NJ: Central PC
03/07: Congregational forum.

Updates

Haiti Gift Goal Achieved: \$27,025: Thank you!

Thank you for your generous and timely response to the Moderator's challenge on behalf of Haiti's people. Contributions forwarded to Presbyterian Disaster Assistance through the Presbytery exceeded \$27,000. I am grateful for this demonstration of love. Please let me know what your congregation may have sent directly to PDA, or other Haiti relief effort. We will continue to pass-through all gifts received.

GP Report, January 2010 GP to visit Sessions.

I highlighted in my January report my commitment to resource sessions and pastors. I look forward to listening with your session in the coming months. Check your calendar today and let me know when I can spend 33 minutes with you. (Yes, the "33" is an intentional time request. Can your session correctly guess how the digits "33" relates to my visit? Check details online.)

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Readiness to Change The Future "Start walking" never looked so good.

John 5:1-8 Soon another Feast came around and Jesus was back in Jerusalem. Near the Sheep Gate in Jerusalem there was a pool, in Hebrew called Bethesda, with five alcoves. Hundreds of sick people; blind, crippled, paralyzed—were in these alcoves. One man had been an invalid there for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him stretched out by the pool and knew how long he had been there, he said, "Do you want to get well?"

The sick man said, "Sir, when the water is stirred, I don't have anybody to put me in the pool. By the time I get there, somebody else is already in."

Jesus said, "Get up, take your bedroll, start walking." The man was healed on the spot. He picked up his bedroll and walked off.

The Process of Growth

The Gospel of John tells the story of God's love for the changing world. The passage from John 5 tells a story of "one man" healed among "hundreds" sick by the pool and conveys both the promise and the compromise of hope.

Thirty-eight (38) years could be considered a long time. Thirty-eight years ago I was a recent graduate from Parkdale High School, Class of 1972. Go Panthers! Yeah, thirty-eight years is a long time. (My sister says that's me in the photo to the right. I guess she's right.)



Happily, I changed. I grew. We all can change. We all can grow.

Thirty-eight years ago your house cost \$25,000, the White House broke into the Watergate, the Dow-Jones hit 1020 while Hotel California hit #1, people landed on the moon, the HP-35 calculator landed in your hand, HBO handed you the first cable program, and IBM's supercomputer filled a room. Amazing.

Thirty-eight years ago the Presbyterian Church counted 4,000,000 members. Newark Presbytery had 18,000 members in 52 churches with more than 900,000 neighbors within its bounds. Few knew in 1972 that growth was on a slippery slope of decline, and even fewer knew that the decline of all churches, and all other volunteer associations from PTA's to the bowling leagues could be attributed to the same cause; organizational disconnect from an increasingly fragmented community life. This is huge.

What about that "one man" at the pool? The scope of change during thirty-eight years, would be as if that man settled down by the pool, paralyzed, with Nixon in office, and ended up meeting Jesus when Obama was president. He laid down by that pool expecting somehow or another to get better. (He was there for his health.) In the same way, the time it took to go from 4M to 2M members; that man waited, and waited, and waited for something to change. We should not be surprised at the Master's question upon learning how long the "one man" had been lying there, "Do you want to get well?"

The Readiness Factor of Growth

People, organizations, even complex organizations like churches, change when they are ready to change. There has to be a readiness to change. The paralyzed

Continued, p2.



Continued from p1.

man by the pool was not ready to change until that day he met Jesus.

Instead of taking responsibility for his situation, he made excuses. Remember he offered, "Someone always gets to angel-troubled waters before me!"

In that moment, he must have finally heard himself. He recognized that in thirty-eight years, he was no better off. He was only more miserable, still alone by the pool, and sadly, older too.

Jesus did not argue with the man about the past, about the angels, about the others who got in first, about his waiting such a terribly long time. Jesus essentially asked, "How's that working for you?," and invited the man into the future. He had to take responsibility for himself and take the first step he alone could make. Jesus said, "Get up, take your bedroll, start walking."

Organizations are like people.

They are alike and they are different. Not every church is at the same place developmentally, spiritually, organizationally, or operationally. These are the psychological and sociological implications of the metaphor of the Body of Christ.

It is characteristic of island cultures to believe that the people on the island are substantially different from those on continents even to the point that the same medicines that are effective in other places will lose their efficacy when applied locally.

But we are the Body of Christ. If we focus too heavily on our differences, we cannot learn from one another, cannot collaborate, and cannot commune.

If we focus too heavily on the sameness, we stifle individualization and creativity and our unique sent-ness into the world by the Holy Spirit. So the question is not whether all forty-one congregations in Newark Presbytery

are large or small; new or old; urban, suburban, ex-urban; predominately mono-cultural or multi-cultural; well financed or lacking in resources; racially and/or ethnically diverse or not.

The question to ask is: What is common to all of us and what is distinctive.

What was common to all the people, "Near the Sheep Gate in Jerusalem," by the pool was they were all in need of a hopeful future.

What was distinctive to all the people was their individual readiness to change.

Meeting With Sessions

As I have the privilege to meet with our sessions (introduced in January), I understand that each church will vary widely in their readiness to change, and what that change should look like for them. Some congregations may be largely decided and determined to change. The session can explore the depth of such apparent motivation in their congregation, and begin consolidating commitment.

Others will be reluctant or even hostile at the outset. At the extreme, some sessions and/or congregations may feel coerced by finances, context, or history to change, or remain unchanged. I respect that position. Remaining in that pre-contemplation stage of change is unsustainable in the longterm.

Most congregations, however, have already entertained some change initiatives and perhaps even created history to express the process somewhere in the contemplation stage. They may already be dabbling with taking action, but still need consolidation of motivation for change. Or clarity for their vision. This may be thought of as the tipping point of a motivational balance. If your congregation is at this stage it is critical that you move away from a seesaw that favors status quo versus the other that favors change.

There are perceived benefits of changing, and feared consequences of continuing unchanged. The "one man" by the pool had to decide if the hopeful, promised future captured in the words, "Start walking!" was more compelling than the compromise endured by of the "hundreds" remaining as they were; life passing them by, counting the wasted years.

Our task together, in a presbytery and congregation partnership, is to shift the balance of weight in favor of change. I look forward to listening, and helping your session listen, and move toward God's preferred future of hope. Let's get up and start walking.

Sincerely,



Dr. Kevin Yoho
General Presbyter

