

THE MODERATOR'S MESSAGE

By Reverend Robert N. Burkins, Sr.

I greet you in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and count it an honor to serve as your moderator. I am truly grateful for all of your prayers and support as we journey to discover what faithfulness requires of us.

I also want to commend you for the tremendous outpouring of support for victims of the recent earthquake in Haiti. To date the Presbytery of Newark has received and disbursed over \$27,000 given by congregations and individuals within the bounds of our Presbytery. Other congregations and individuals have sent contributions through Presbyterian Disaster Assistance, the American Red Cross and through other means. The rebuilding of Haiti will not occur quickly and without a sustained effort on the part of those who care. Please continue to lend all the support you can.



Above you will see a picture of the Choluteca Bridge in Honduras. The bridge, built in the 1930's by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, survived the severe Hurricane Mitch of 1998, although the road it was connected to did not.

As I looked at the picture of the bridge, it caused me to think about the church and some of the challenges we face today. The Choluteca Bridge was an engineering marvel. For years, it was a perfect tool to achieve its purpose, namely, to get people from dry land on one side to dry land on the other. After the storm, however, the tool itself didn't change. It was so properly built, so

perfect for its purpose, that not even the monstrous shifting sands around it could put even a dent in it.

But those very shifting sands did something else. They rendered the bridge purposeless. In fact, you can't even call it "a bridge" anymore, since by definition a bridge connects two pieces of land separated by an obstacle.

Actually, more than that. If you look closely at the picture, you'll see that it now connects safe, dry land on one side to a raging river on the other. If you were to utilize the bridge now, not only would it not serve a purpose, it would literally lead you smack in the middle of danger.

The church we all love and serve is the perfect tool for its purpose. It was built to last. Jesus said, "Upon this rock I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." (Matthew 16:18) For over 2,000 years, the church has been a witness to the transforming power of Jesus Christ. It has endured in spite of schisms, controversies and countless attacks. It has been the closest and clearest visible presence of Jesus Christ in the world proclaiming the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Yet for decades, our church has been confronted with unprecedented change, and in many instances, the church itself has been slow to change. We live in a time of major transition. The cultural landscape in North America has gone through some very dramatic changes in the last fifty years. We live in a very different world than most of us grew up in. Religious diversity is well established and accepted in the United States; we are no longer a nation of "Catholic, Protestant, Jew." Racial, ethnic and cultural diversity continues to increase while the PC (USA) remains a predominantly Euro-American denomination. At the same time media technologies (TV, internet, social networking) have introduced new means of connecting diverse populations. The same technologies have led to privatization, social alienation and cultural balkanization that segregate groups into distinct economic, social, generational and cultural communities with various conflicting agendas and values.

We have moved from a Christendom paradigm to one where the United States is once again a mission field. In contrast to the older assumption that mainline Christianity was somehow "established" as the religious norm, sweeping changes in our country since the 1960's compel the church to interpret and engage our culture in a much different missional way.

Those of us in Newark Presbytery are keenly aware of the need for our churches to embrace change. We all struggle to remain relevant and purposeful congregations in the midst of communities that are becoming increasingly alien to us. We know intuitively that change is necessary yet we resist the pain associated with it.

Like the Choluteca Bridge, the church is a perfect tool to achieve its purpose, but it must be willing to be changed by the monstrous shifting sands around it. Unless this happens, the church will be rendered purposeless. Even more frightening and dangerous is the possibility that the church will find itself connecting safe dry land on one side to a raging river on the other.

I pray that we will allow the wind of the Holy Spirit to shape us as a Presbytery and as individual congregations in order that we might be purposeful and relevant amidst a sea of change.