

General Presbyter's Report January 30, 2010

2010 is the beginning of a new decade! Jesus promised us the power of the Holy Spirit and said, "You are to be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth." We are called by God to be witnesses to Christ and to God's love.

In light of that commandment, a question that is challenging to me is, "What are you asking God to do?" As I have shared with some of you, sometimes my prayers are "too little." I challenge our congregations, sessions, church leaders and members to think about what are God's hopes for our Presbytery and our churches, and to be bold in asking God to do great things in our midst.

These are my prayers: I am praying God will renew and transform all of our churches to be more powerful and faithful witnesses to Christ. I am praying God will use the presbytery and our congregations to bring new people to Christ, to help people grow in faith and to empower us to be a strong witness to God's love for a hurting and broken world. I am also praying that God will guide me, and help me grow in faith, witness, grace, joy and love.

As we go into the new year called to witness, we need to realize that some of us and some of our churches are energized, but others of us are dragging. For some, the new year has started with grace and renewal. Christmas with family and church has relaxed us, filled us with joy and energy, ready to tackle the most difficult problems. We are energized to do the work of the Kingdom, strengthened by a new Session and people excited about God's work. I have heard of wonderful Christmas Eve services. Even in places where snow reaped havoc, Christmas pageants and children's choirs, and even lessons and carols after Christmas, were awe inspiring and exciting. Some churches also are looking forward to reaching out in new ways and have shared of the exciting things they feel the Lord is leading them to do. For some, Advent, Christmas and the New Year have been times of renewal.

But for others of us, the year is starting with tiredness. I am also hearing from pastors and church leaders about exhaustion, burnout and discouragement. The huge amount of sickness and death over the holidays; falls and breaks on ice; the extreme cold, dark days, days without electricity; cancellations; the economic worries and hardships, the resulting anxiety and in some cases anger, are wearing pastors and others down. I am hearing quotes like, "I am exhausted." "I have five people in four hospitals, I have a sermon to write and there is another major crisis." "I had two funerals this week. Several people are critical. I am drained." Seeing pictures of the devastation in Haiti has been another factor. This is the reality of the start of 2010 for many of us. It may make us feel better to know we are not by ourselves, but we need prayers and strength that has to come from God and the people God sends, because we don't have it at the moment. In that situation, we need to be kind to ourselves and let others be the encouragers and pray-ers.

Because of God's promises and call, I am excited about the coming year for this Presbytery ~ although I will admit to be dragging a bit myself right now! Using the work of the Strategic Goals Committee, the Council and Presbytery staff are committed to being a positive factor in supporting and strengthening congregations to witness to Christ. We are wanting to work together to build partnerships and community. Another of my prayers is that our Presbytery will become a spiritual community, working together in witness and mission.

In the new Mission Statement, some of the items outlined are things that we have already begun implementing. In 2009, we started a new program, “The Acts Initiative,” to strengthen churches, and have over 30 churches involved. Some churches have told me of the fruits that are already being born as a result, and other congregations are just beginning the work. Still other churches are working to reach out and grow in different ways. I am excited about hearing how for some, the seven “Acts Initiative” pastor cohort groups have been energizing, providing good ideas, options and support. For pastors not involved, we may want to explore other opportunities for this kind of fellowship and accountability for you.

In other areas of the Mission Statement, we have not been doing some of the things that were requested from the churches. One example would be officer training. Another would be providing information about worship, both new and traditional. Yet another challenge is to look at how our Presbytery meetings and events such as “Let’s Celebrate” are supporting the mission of strengthening churches (by equipping churches for ministry; witnessing to God’s love, making disciples or strengthening people for ministry). We will be exploring these things and more.

To support our witness to Christ and God’s love, we have to be willing to try new things. Some efforts are going to work well. Other efforts will not; but from those that do not “succeed,” we will learn and grow and must not be discouraged from trying again. If we are going to reach out to the many people who do not know Christ or have a Christian community, we cannot continue to keep doing only those things we have done in the past. It may even be that something which failed ten years ago will now work. Phrases like, “we have never done it that way before” and “we tried that once before” may not be the most helpful words these days.

As we listen to God’s call to witness, it can’t just mean adding another thing to our plate. The work of the Kingdom has to have time for joy, renewal, and fun, plus, most importantly, we need time to just be in God’s presence. Jesus said, “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.” We were promised the gift of the Holy Spirit. Beloved in God, we have our work cut out for us. Let’s look into 2010 with hope, praying that God will do powerful things in our midst, and open our eyes to see God at work!