

Report of the Pastor to the Presbytery

“Therefore we will not fear though the earth should change,
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea” Psalm 46:2

”And they went and woke Jesus saying, ‘Master, Master, we are perishing!’ He awoke and rebuked the wind and the raging waves; and they ceased, and there was a calm. And he said to them, ‘Where is your faith?’ and they were afraid, and they marveled, saying to one another, ‘Who then is this, that he commands even wind and water, and they obey him?’” Luke 8:24f

Grace and peace to you in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Fall-time in Southeast is the season for preparing for harder weather, for putting up the harvest and bounty of the land. Better to have it done now than to wait for the snow to fall. Much like battening down the hatches on a boat and making all ship-shape, it’s best done before the storm. We are in such a season in the Presbytery of Alaska.

God has provided. With the ministry of Rev Joey Chang in Kake, the installation of Rev. Claudia Rowe in Craig/Klawock and the Rev. Diane Wonnenberg in Sitka, the call of Tom Sutherland to Metlakatla and Matt Royston to Chapel by the Lake, and the recommissioning of Lay Pastors Crystal Badgley and Nettie Covalt we have been blessed beyond our imaginings. Sheryl Dennis has completed her training in the Leadership Equipping Center’s CLP program, and we have four active students in the newest cohort. We are indeed blessed with pastoral leadership.

On the Sunday which concludes our meeting, the congregation in Hoonah will meet to elect a Pastor Nominating Committee, and we join in prayer for their work of discernment.

After years of research and sleuthing, only to discover more loose ends and unfinished business than any would have expected, we are finally transferring title of local church properties to congregations. For this the former trustees of the presbytery, and Fred Baxter in particular, deserve our thanks.

For the third year the financial records of the presbytery received an unqualified review by our Certified Public Accountant. Treasurer Christina Maddox and then Finance Committee continue to do a great service to the presbytery in managing our funds and in accounting for them accurately and understandably. 2011 is the year in which we receive the last of the Mission Partnership Funds that long sustained our operations.

Our 2011 budget projected a significant drawdown of reserves, and it appears that we will need only about half as much as we thought. Reducing the presbytery staff from its former size to today's Pastor to the Presbytery and the Treasurer has reduced expenses and, more importantly, has been a streamlining and simplification of administrative functions. For everyone's support and understanding as we have gone from 'central planning and control' to field staff, I thank you.

The 2012 budget proposed by the General Council again plans to draw on our mission reserves. These reserve funds are monies given to the presbytery in earlier years, intended for mission but not spent. As we have deliberately moved towards a model of 'being presbytery' that is appropriate to our mission and context, now we must address stewardship and how we will sustain the ministries that God has entrusted to us. Stewardship, as trusting ourselves into the mission that God has given us, is a major theme for this coming year.

And there is a storm brewing, and some structures that seemed a firm as mountains are shaking and falling.

The revision of the Manual of Administrative Operations is one part of getting our house in order. Many of the revisions are either in response to, or newly permitted by, the new Form of Government (the 'Book of Order') that the presbyteries approved last spring. A goal of the General Council in preparing this revision is to focus our presbytery on serving our churches and for it to be a structure we can happily sustain ourselves.

A task before us is to revisit the presbytery's Sexual Misconduct Policy. First, might we rename it as Policy for the Prevention of Sexual Misconduct? More critically, our policy assumes the sexual ethic formerly expressed in the G-6 passage that was removed from the Book of Order, that ordained persons are to be faithful in marriage and celibate in singleness. As of now, the only behavior prohibited by our presbytery policy is intimate behavior with a person in a counseling relationship. The Stated Clerk of the General Assembly has opined that the removal of 'G-6' from the ordination standards does not prohibit a presbytery from having behavioral standards of conduct.

The last General Assembly appointed an administrative commission to review the role and function of presbyteries and synods, to act on some matters, and to bring recommendations to the next General Assembly. The administrative commission has just voted to recommend that synods be eliminated as councils and that five regional entities be formed to do what remains of 'synod' ecclesiastical functions. Within our Synod of Alaska Northwest, the general councils of four presbyteries, including ours, have already requested the synod or the presbytery councils together to begin discussion of how to minimize the function, size, and expense of the synod.

It seems clear to me that in the very near future the presbytery will be the only expression of 'connectionalism' that most Presbyterians know or experience. In this major change of what it means to be 'Presbyterian' we are fortunate to have two partner presbyteries—Central Washington and North Puget Sound—to jointly negotiate the passage. We welcome Corey Schlosser-Hall, executive presbytery of North Puget Sound, to our meeting and fellowship.

Less clear is the future of the Presbyterian Church (USA). The removal of "G-6" as a common standard for those ordained to ministry, and the ordination last Saturday in Wisconsin of an openly gay man as a teaching elder has brought to a head theological divisions and differences within the PC(USA) that have been simmering—or covered over—for decades. I attended the Minneapolis gathering of the Fellowship of Presbyterians that brought 2000 people together to find a way to either stay with integrity or leave the PC(USA) graciously and without rancor.

Next January in Orlando a second gathering will initiate a 'new reformed body', holding to the 'G-6' standards but even more flexible than the new Form of Government in its structure. Much is in flux and yet to be decided, but one intention of the Fellowship is to offer 'affiliate' membership to congregations who chose not to withdraw entirely from the PC(USA). Further, the concept of union presbyteries, participating in both denominations but under the traditional ordination standards of the new reformed body, is widely discussed and will be a feature of the new entity.

For many Presbyterians of integrity and faith, both traditional and progressive, this is not a matter of disagreement on which compromise or 'mutual forbearance' is possible. On foundational matters—how we know and the source of truth, the authority of Scripture, and the nature and destiny of the human person, on the mission of Christ himself—the Presbyterian community is foundering and coming apart.

It would be challenge enough if our only task were to navigate the institutional dismantling of the PC(USA) denominational structure and programs. But the challenges are two. Much as the psalmist spoke of the very earth changing, and of mountains shaking in the heart of the sea, so we faced with a double loss, or a dual challenge. Please, by the mercy of God, may we be gentle with one another, lest understandable anxiety and real uncertainty burst forth in anger at the brother or sister who happens to be closest.

The purpose of the Presbytery of Alaska is to nurture healthy congregations—that has been my conviction and I'm sticking to it. Our meeting at Chapel by the Lake is a great example of that mission and service—worship and fellowship, encouraging and supporting music ministry, celebrating ministries, examining and ordaining persons to gospel ministry—that is us at our finest. For the call and opportunity to serve among you in this time and season I am grateful to you and to God.

Jesus spent much of His life and ministry along and on the Sea of Galilee. The Stilling of the Storm—so powerful to those who live by the sea, and to his disciples in the boat—reminds us that the world changes but Christ does not, that where we begin our journey with Him is not the destination, and that fear is real and friends are precious, that faith is life and Christ will not lose us. Or loose us. We are His, after all, bought with a price.

The storms on the Sea of Galilee are sudden and severe, with winds whipped by the deep valley in which the Sea lies, 700 feet below sea level. So much of the gospel story is tied to the land that Jerome--who translated the Hebrew and Greek Biblical texts into Latin in 300AD—called the Holy Land the Fifth Gospel. In January a group from our presbytery will make a pilgrimage and study tour to Israel and Palestine. Some are students in our CLP program, some are pastors, some village preachers, some are violinists. You come, too. The dates have shifted 6 days to January 23 – Feb 9, 2012. Cost in country will be just under \$2000. Travel costs vary; some want to use mileage tickets, some will leave from Juneau, some from Orlando, and we'll see if a group deal is possible. Juneau-Tel Aviv on Travelocity today is \$1900.

The Leadership Equipping Center is planning to write a grant application for scholarship funds, and some who would but cannot go have offered to help others.

My understanding of the Bible—intellectually, historically, emotionally—was transformed when first I made the kind of pilgrimage we plan. Do come—and encourage the uncertain--so that as a community of scholars and company of pilgrims we can see where the storm was stilled.

God bless you all,

David