

Report of your Lead Presbyter for Transformation, 8/20/21

This report will look at my primary work as Lead Presbyter for Transformation since our last assembly.

On this phase of this pandemic: Friends, this has been blessed, holy, but challenging work. The delta variant is rampant throughout our presbytery and its membership now, taking the heaviest toll on the unvaccinated but still threatening those who have been vaccinated. As for managing the impacts of the different stages of this pandemic, there is a sense that we are already running a second marathon, even after feeling we completed a first one! We are tired, but we are enduring. Consistent with predictions from 2020, I am assisting more pastoral changes than I personally have ever seen at one time before. Across the country, pastors long considering retirement are now committing to it, and ministers doing work they did not sign up for in a pandemic are reconsidering their calls. The pandemic has been going on long enough that I am doing background checks for pastors who never once met their previous congregation in person.

This work is vital: I notice that because we have not been able to meet in person, virtual gatherings have become the norm. Because it is so much more accessible to schedule and gather, meetings have been shorter, more focused, and more regular. I am continually blown away by the momentum of this presbytery to continue to get its work done, in spite of the pandemic. The Committee on Ministry is no longer the only body in this presbytery that meets monthly, and the amount of collective volunteer work holding up this institution so congregations can get the support they need is inspiring. At the same time, because of how much we are each carrying in this moment, I have been leaning most into the troubleshooting and institutional maintenance role that comes with being your presbytery leader, especially as we navigate a particular chapter of our life that includes higher committee member/leader turnover than we may be accustomed to. This means most of my work by necessity has been providing continuity and coordination across the different bodies of the presbytery. In that, there are three targeted areas in particular that I want to name where the institutional maintenance work has been focused.

Targeted Impact Area #1. Pastoral Transitions: Perhaps unsurprisingly, there have been more pastoral transitions as changes are affecting every sphere of our lives. Fortunately, a few years ago, we changed our approach to connecting congregations with transitional pastors by beginning to use the CLC system, and now have a “Frequently Asked Questions for Transitional Pastor Searches” document on the technical details of doing a national search (previously we were mostly doing word of mouth local connections). This remains a challenge, but the approach has been WORKING. The search pool has widened, and congregations have been connecting with viable transitional pastor candidates and are establishing contracts. At the moment, there are more congregations seeking pastors than at any time I have served this presbytery, and the Transitions Subcommittee of the Committee on Ministry remains one of the hardest working bodies in this presbytery.

Targeted Impact Area #2. Committee Recruitment: Flowing from our theology and polity, the beating heart of the work of our presbytery is its servant leadership of volunteers. Serving on committees is vital not just for the operations of the presbytery, but is also valuable for isolated pastors (basically all of us) to make connections with peer colleagues, learn new approaches, and feed off of each other’s energy that we can bring back to our contexts. While the work of nominating has always been challenging regardless of there being a pandemic or not, we discovered how much the Nominating Committee was reliant on in-person gatherings to facilitate personal invitations into the work of the larger Church. Now that we’ve had one and a half years *without* personal gatherings, the Nominating Committee has needed to generate different tactics for identifying gifts in our presbytery. Surprisingly, this has ENERGIZED our search in new ways, connecting us to those eager for their gifts to be recognized. We discovered that the desire to work together on committees has *not* waned, and access to virtual meetings has actually opened up more access to participation. We are at the point where one of our smallest committees is bringing one of largest nominating slates in recent memory. One of the areas of most interest in service is on the new Committee

on Accessibility, Representation, and Equity (C.A.R.E.), for which the first reading of the bylaws will be brought before this assembly, as required by the Book of Order. People WANT to serve where they are making a difference, and because of all the changes going on, there is no better time to serve than now.

Targeted Impact Area #3. Congregations Exploring New Models: Another major effect of this pandemic is that it has fast-tracked many discussions that were already on course for specific congregations: sessions that have been discerning for many years before the pandemic whether to finally celebrate the completion of their mission are now ready to make that decision. Similarly, churches seeking new collaborative ministry options are being more collaborative, creative, and resourceful than ever before.

Based on some excellent work by Rev. James Benson from his time on COM, we have been sharing a resource sheet of 11 different options for collaborative ministries that serves as a kind of discussion guide for those no longer able to support a full time pastor. Some of these kinds of conversations are being prompted by the Committee on Ministry—others are simply springing up organically on their own. These are the moments when we need most our network of colleagues from the community to help facilitate these changes—a network sustained by a strong presbytery.

Resourcing the Staffing & Finance Taskforce and Staff Transitions: Finally, I have been working, alongside Stated Clerk Elissa Bailey, as Resource Staff for the Staffing & Finance Taskforce, similar to how national staff resource General Assembly Taskforces and Committees. (You can see more about the work of the taskforce in their own reports and communications). The immediate impact for me as Head of Staff has been working with the Personnel Committee on the hiring of a new temporary part time Office Manager, which will likely be in place before Patti's last week in August so we can receive her gracious offer to train the new staff person. I understand and trust the work of the taskforce that this shift from full time to part time staffing is a next step into a more financially sustainable future for the ministry of our presbytery. Along the way, I have really appreciated the great care the Staffing and Finance Taskforce has taken to tend our shared humanity in this work, their clarity about the financial unsustainability of our current model, and for how closely they are holding your charge to them expressed through the 2020 Vision Statement. I am not unaware that many of our congregations are navigating similar sustainability conversations.

CONCLUSION: When I started at your Lead Presbyter for Transformation, I had said institutional changes would come, but most change would be cultural, more felt than seen. While none of us anticipated a pandemic to change our world, I still cannot write on one page all of the changes we have achieved together to make us more connectional, more responsive, more organized, more efficient, and more relevant. I am proud to tell you that other presbyteries are following our lead, inspired by the kinds of conversations we are having, and asking about our approaches. This work has been hard, but it is evident to me how the Holy Spirit has been at work in you and in the lives of those we touch. Even as some structures need to be left behind, there are other tools that I know we can lean into as we move into the future, namely the 2020 Vision Statement (your expression of seven focus priorities for our life together), and we can build on the transformational work of Felipe Martinez on our last restructuring, and also Bob Reynolds' work on our last Committee on Ministry restructure. The new proposed Committee on Accessibility, Representation, and Equity will also serve as a designated space for needs that continue to arise but do not have a focused space for attention in our current structure, and the recommended changes to the new Personnel Committee will allow us to be more organized, especially as we anticipate new staff ahead.

Again and always, I affirm that GOD IS ALIVE amongst us. Honored to serve,

Ryan

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