

Report of the Lead Presbyter
Rev. Ann Schwartz
August 26, 2023

Thank you for your warm welcome to the Presbytery of Great Rivers. As I have participated in committee meetings, worked with staff, visited with pastors, and worshiped with congregations, you all have received me with a most gracious spirit.

Nearly three months into my tenure as Lead Presbyter, I am focused on making connections, strengthening communication, and building trusting relationships. My goal is to initiate contact with each of our 85 congregations by the end of the year. Obviously, in-person visits will take longer. It has been a privilege to step into the role of being a pastor to pastors, providing support and care to church leaders, both active and retired. And I appreciate the overtures you all have made—the invitations to preach, attend special events, and speak to church groups.

I have been struck by a few consistent themes that have arisen during conversations with leaders and members. Folks are genuinely eager to talk about their church's mission—and with good reason. Through food pantries and health clinics, backpacks filled with food and school supplies for students and meals for hungry neighbors, BBQs and ice cream socials, opportunities for youth to explore their creativity and partnerships with local agencies and organizations, the churches of PGR are impacting their communities in big ways. Most say they would like to be able to do more.

At the same time, folks are discouraged by the declining number of members in their congregations and churches in the presbytery. They are concerned about the health, strength, vitality, and future of the PC(USA) and what that means for us and our communities. They worry that they have not “bounced back” from the worst of the pandemic, observing that pews, bank accounts, and energy levels not nearly as robust as they once were.

There also is a keen awareness of the urgent need for transformation, not once-and-done but continual change, not simply in our structures and policies, not only with the embrace of bigger and better technology. We need to reassess what the church is and what the church's purpose and mission are today. We need to broaden our understanding of how to *be* and *do* church. Unfortunately, the answers to all the questions are not immediately evident.

And so, we have work to do—the work of listening, discerning, connecting, partnering, and building community, within and beyond the confines of PGR. Colleagues and friends, we were called to such a time as this. May we move forward in faith, hope, and love, trusting in God's presence and transformative power.

Rev. Ann Schwartz, Lead Presbyter