

It's hard for me to believe some days that I have gotten to be as old as I am. When did it happen? In many ways, it feels like I was just beginning in ministry a short time ago, but I have racked up thirty-seven years in parish ministry and can see the end just over the horizon. I'm not in any hurry to hang it up, but it's a reality that I am beginning to face.

As I look back, I remember with deep gratitude five of the six churches I have served. One was a mistake. We simply were not suited to one another and the experience was painful for me from beginning to end. Let's just say that it wasn't in Florida, Oregon, Georgia, or central or upstate South Carolina. I rejoice in the grace that has been mine to share the good news of God's love in Jesus in proclamation, administration of the sacraments, teaching, pastoral care, and administration of the church's program. There was a time or two when I thought about moving out of parish ministry and one time when I pursued possibilities of leaving ministry altogether, but I am grateful to God that by his Spirit I was prevented from doing so.

Where I feel regret is what I have seen happen in the Presbyterian Church (USA). I grew up in the old Presbyterian Church in the United States (the southern Presbyterian Church). I was a commissioner to the 1982 General Assembly of the PCUSA, our last, and was the final person to speak on the question of reunion with the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (the northern church). It was assumed that because I was from Congaree Presbytery that I would be opposed. Consequently, when I supported the reunion of the two denominations, the Moderator called me out of order because it was an anti-reunion spokesman's turn to speak, but the vote was called and the matter was passed.

I continued an ardent supporter for a number of years, but as time passed I became more and more disenchanted with *my* church.

- As the denomination grew increasingly bureaucratized, honesty and integrity were supplanted by expediency and political correctness; impartial justice was cast upon the heap of irrelevance and justice became a question of "what will be best for the church" (as defined by the bureaucrats) and your sexual identity (and I don't mean one's orientation).
- As our numbers continued to dwindle; as contributions continued to decline, we reorganized our denominational offices and then we reorganized them again, and finally it was decided that we should celebrate our gradual demise as a sign of success in faithfulness to the Gospel, rather than confess our failure in obedience to the Gospel. No one ever thought to point out that the emperor was buck-naked. We continued to do the same thing, while expecting a different result.
- We pride ourselves in being sure that each of our Presbytery committees and commissions have the right representation—male/female, Teaching

Elder/Ruling elder, racial ethnic/geographic—but fail to take into account gifts and abilities for the particular tasks of the committee or commission. So, very often we look “right” on paper, but nothing really is accomplished.

- We continue to launch *new initiatives* which most people, if they know about them at all, know they aren’t worth the paper they are written on.
- We continue to pass position papers and pronouncements that we consider *prophetic*, but no one really gives a damn. No one is listening.
- We fragment ourselves in special interest groups and believe that winning at any cost is the goal that must be pursued.
- We are burdened by an unsustainable bureaucracy which has forgotten, if it ever knew it, that the denominational offices share the work of ministry *with* congregations. It is not *our* role to support *them* in *their* ministry, but they exist to resource us in *our* ministries and to help make possible that which congregations are not able to do alone.
- I continue to be amazed that no one ever thinks to visit with our congregations who are healthy, growing, and not merely financially stable but generous in their giving beyond their own needs and to inquire about what they are doing right.
- Worst of all, though, in my opinion we have lost our focus on the Gospel of Jesus Christ who commissioned us: “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.”

Our denomination is not quite gasping for breath, but we are not far from needing life-support. If you are looking for signs of life, look neither to Louisville nor the presbytery office, but look at our congregations who continue Sunday after Sunday to gather for corporate worship; who come together for Bible Study and fellowship, sharing one another’s joys and sorrows; who invest themselves in ministry to their communities, and whose members daily reflect the Gospel of Jesus Christ in their lives and relationships as they witness to the transformative love of God in who they are and how they live. There you will find the church’s vitality and its future.

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