

New Worshipping Communities (NWC) – “the best way to revitalize existing churches is to start a NWC,” Vera White, PCUSA Director for NWC

“Our future rests on our ability to do more NWC.”

“If we are making disciples we get church. If we start with structures it won’t necessarily happen.” Ray Jones, Coordinator for Evangelism, Aug. 5, 2013, Big Tent conf.

Comfort in the uncomfortable

Big Tent panel explores boundary-stretching needed to embrace new worshipping communities

AUGUST 3, 2013 Paul Seebeck PNS

“God in this place, stir us, agitate us, make us uncomfortable.” Dylan Rooke, Ruling Elder and building manager from **Hot Metal Bridge** in Pittsburgh prayed to open a jointly sponsored Big Tent on Friday afternoon (Aug. 2). “Then comfort us.”

With that the Evangelism & Church Growth, Healthy Ministries, and National Elders Conferences luncheon began.

“We wanted to get these three groups together,” said Philip Lotspeich, coordinator of Church Growth for **Presbyterian Mission Agency** (PMA), “to see if we could better understand how existing congregations, presbyteries, and committees on ministry (COMs), and preparation for ministry (CPMs) can nurture the **1001 New Worshipping Communities** (NWC) movement.”

Lotspeich moderated a new worshipping communities panel discussion with Rooke, PMA’s 1001 worshipping communities associate Vera White and Steve Yamaguchi, executive presbyter of **Los Ranchos Presbytery**.

“We face a crisis of imagination,” Yamaguchi said. “Resources could be tapped for this movement, but we’re unwilling to free them for use.”

“Yet the best way to revitalize existing churches is to start a NWC,” said White. “There is very little room for experimentation in established churches, just ask pastors who try to move the baptismal font.”

Rooke said Hot Metal bridged the gap between their new community and existing churches by inviting them to participate in a mission serving a twice-a-week meal program with them in their neighborhood. “It helped all of us see the connectional nature of our denomination,” he said.

Hot Metal Bridge began with two pastors who hadn't gone to seminary, weren't Presbyterian, had no core group of people or money, but felt God's call to start something new.

White remembers **Pittsburgh Presbytery** saying, "we will support your vision, but you have to contact 200 non churched people a week. Now there are more than 400 in worship on a weekly basis."

Her point: a NWC needs a high level of both "permission giving" and "accountability."

"CPM's job is to create space for innovators, prophets, evangelists and apostles," she said, "who want to do this incredibly difficult, relational work."

"Flexibility and freedom were key in getting us started," Rooke said. "They all walked with us, but they didn't push or control us. Yet we had healthy accountability, wisdom of experience to draw from."

In Los Ranchos Presbytery, Yamaguchi has groups of people form existing churches to prayer with and supervise NWC leaders.

He also works with the presbytery's stated clerk to help churches think theologically about polity to help determine the mission of the church.

"I want a clerk who knows our rules so well to give us freedom to do what we need to do," Yamaguchi said, using the analogy of his daughters learning how to dance. "Once they knew the rules well we never had fear that they would jump off the stage. We want our NWC's to dance on the whole stage."

Yamaguchi added: "NWC's remind us what we're about."

Recently Los Ranchos Presbytery engaged in an inspiring conversation when they examined NWC leader **Tamara John** to be an evangelist, for **RV Park ministry**.

"She stood up, told us how lost she was in the corporate world, then she met Jesus who changed her life," Yamaguchi recalled. "Now she is reaching people for Christ. People left in awe of the power of God."

From ebb to flow: Existing congregations should join in new worshipping community movement, Big Tent leader says

AUGUST 8, 2013

Paul Seebeck PNS

Remember Sheriff Woody and Buzz Lightyear of *Toy Story* fame? Turns out they can teach existing congregations a thing or two about purpose, love, belonging, meaning and sacrifice.

“Just as they were marked by Andy’s (the boy who owned them) love, so we are marked by our baptism and God’s love,” said the Presbyterian Mission Agency’s the Rev. Ann Philbrick at **Big Tent** during an Evangelism and Church Growth plenary Saturday (Aug. 3).

During her presentation, Philbrick, associate for transformation, addressed the question, “What about existing congregations?” through the lens of the **1001 new worshipping communities** (NWC) movement in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

“This is such an important question,” Philbrick said. “Without existing congregations, there can’t be any NWC. And yet NWC are the developing arm and experimentation lab for existing congregations.”

Philbrick pointed out that since the 1600s, there have been ebb and flow patterns for mainline denomination churches. During times of expansion, people figured out how to connect with the younger generation. During times of detraction, they lost touch.

“In the detraction cycle, at some point people figured out how to start new things to reach the younger generation,” Philbrick said. “The existing churches would watch, learn, listen and apply lessons — moving from detraction into a time of expansion.”

Since the 1960s, the ebb and flow cycle is deeper and longer than at any other time in history. Philbrick said radical culture shifts play into this but also pointed out that in the 1960s, congregations stopped starting new churches.

“We stopped learning the lessons new things can teach us, about what it means to connect, to reach beyond ourselves, to share our meaning of hope,” she said. “Our future rests on our ability to do more NWC.”

Which brings us back to Woody and Buzz in *Toy Story 2*. Woody is in a toy collector’s box about to go to a museum in Japan. Buzz comes to rescue him, but Woody is paralyzed with panic, fear

and grief.

"Come on," Buzz says.

"I'm not coming," says Woody.

After some incredible moments of silence, Buzz says, "He's not coming. Let's go," leaving him behind. But eventually Woody remembers that Andy (who is going off to college) loves him.

"This is the struggle for individuals and existing congregations," Philbrick said. "Do I preserve what I have and stay forever what I am? Do we seal ourselves off, or love and give again sacrificially to people in the world?"

To presbyteries and congregations that don't want to start new worshiping communities, Philbrick said we need to help them "not feel abandoned," then say, "Come along. If you don't, we're going ahead without you."

"It's a scary time, but also exciting. We're seeing stories, hearing things in our NWC that remind us who loves us, whom we belong to," Philbrick said. "For the purpose of making friendships with non Christians to share our lives sacrificially with people we don't know."

Big Tent, Aug. 1-3, was a celebration of Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) mission and ministry organized around the theme "Putting God's First Things First."