

**A personal word of thanks and reflection on our 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary here:** August 20<sup>th</sup> marked not only our 42<sup>nd</sup> anniversary but 15 years we have lived in Montana as we began our ministry in September 2004, as your Co-General Presbyters. Thank you all for your trust and partnership on this adventure and journey with Jesus. All these years we have focused the presbytery for the strengthening of our Christ-centered community and pastors and churches to be equipped, devoted, fruitful disciples of Jesus Christ and *disciple makers*, equipped and sent to join Christ *in his mission*, for God's glory and good in our churches, communities, Montana and wherever he sends us. In times of disunity and confusion, we have called the presbytery to prayer, to the Word and to "keep the main thing the main thing, and the main thing is Jesus" because IN Christ alone is life and our unity and peace. God has faithfully answered, provided, transformed lives and abundantly blessed – us and the presbytery in the midst of challenges and great joys. Our great thanks for the privilege of serving Christ by serving Yellowstone Presbytery.

**Understanding our shifting cultures and contexts and the accompanying trends is important for us as leaders to get the "balcony", 30,000' perspective in order to properly discern the times** in which we are called to be God's contrast community, sharing & embodying the Good News of Jesus Christ, salt and light.

- WSJ recent poll last week revealed a significant drop in millennials and Gen. Z of prioritizing religion, commitment to marriage, having children or to Fascinating analysis in the Atlantic - "Elite Failure has brought Americans to the Edge of an existential crisis" –by D. Thompson

- secularism and workism have become new religions; economic and racial challenges continue

- Trust in and joining of institutions –marriage, church, groups/clubs,...- is at an all time low, -> further alienation, individualism, community problems and impoverishment, increase in gangs & following authoritarian or more extreme leaders & movements

- Trustworthiness of pastors has plummeted (See recent *Christian Century* editorial by Marty)

- Loss of hope, manifesting itself in anxieties, fears and a variety of physical, emotional and mental health maladies and tragedies

**Yet** in the post-Christian, post rationalism era, spiritual curiosity and hungers abound.

In the midst of these forces is an amazing opportunity for God's mission and God's people, those to whom God has entrusted the Good News, commanded and empowered to embody incarnate and proclaim Jesus, with authenticity and integrity, and join together with Christ as *contrast communities* in Christ's mission as individuals, marriages & families, disciple communities, and presbytery.

**Multiple research points to the essential need for the local congregation in our lonely, divided, technologically distracted times such as the article - [Where is the Church in North America Heading and What are the Implications?](https://freshexpressionsus.org/2019/09/06/heading/)**

Or the book, *Alienated in America: Why Some Places Thrive While Others Collapse*. By Timothy Carney describes the role the church has played and needs to reclaim with vitality, love and integrity, ESPECIALLY in small and rural areas. Take heart!

\*\*Note the need for hope, faith, trust, identity, meaning and purpose, community and connection, roots

**We believe the Presbytery faces four main challenges which are also God's opportunities, now:**

**First: Increase the focus on an adaptive disciple-making, disciples-sending leaders and church cultures for the 21<sup>st</sup> century:**

- A. We know many pastors are lost, frustrated, discouraged, at times threatened as they were not equipped for ministry in these times. Churches in these difficult cultural days are losing focus and purpose as well as spiritual power... Christ gave the church the timeless command to “make disciples of all nations,” Matthew 18-20. And has commanded us not to lose heart ) see Paul’s exhortations.

Are we focusing on spiritual formation and life-on-life disciple-making vs maintaining or administrating programs and caring for building? Is each church, in a way that is authentic to pastor and congregation and call, doing this?

**Possible avenues, strategies:**

- A. The regional equipping retreats gather this month and in clusters for equipping for discipleship ministry and mission.
- B. Bring in those gifted, passionate with a track record in equipping our folks – i.e Stan Ott, Nov 1-2.
- C. *Since change can be painful and unsettling, this requires cultivate deeper spiritual roots, love for Christ and the **spiritual practices** which transform us to be and live more like Christ, in transformative community*
- D. **A Focus on Practices including:** *discernment, prayer, paying attention consolation/desolation, prayer, repentance, lament, among many others*
- E. Ask sessions to consider one theological, practical ministry question at each meeting: “What is God’s call for Christ’s church, in this time and context? What are we trying to accomplish as a church?” If people are growing in their faith, how does it mean they will likely change, internally and in their life patterns?” “What practices are we seeking to model and teach to our communities of disciples?” “What kind of disciples are we trying to create and send out into the world, and what do they need to love, experience and see, know, what practices characterize world-impacting disciples?” ETC...
- F. Dwelling in the Word/ Word, Share, Prayer in all presbytery meetings, Ministry Teams, and session meetings across the presbytery.
- G. Read and apply Growing Young – Invitation to take a group to training with one of the authors/researchers coming to Jackson Hole church Oct. 18 – 20 See separate flyer.
- H. Waiting on and pray for the Holy Spirit to move. Admit we are basically powerless and in need of God’s refining of the Church as in Acts 1-2. Pray for this. Expect this. Remove the hindrances to the Spirit’s work and create an environment in which it is more likely to happen – spiritual disciplines, especially lament and repentance, as we need to be refined and transformed to be more like Christ.
- I. Other?

**Second: The Crisis of Congregational Leadership clergy, leaders:** Across Montana and much of the United States the skepticism about the church is real, the shortage of ordained pastors is deepening. Church leaders and members, pastors trained for a different world and church which is no longer our reality, often have more of an institutional, consumer understanding rather than having been equipped as equippers, Jesus and people loving *disciples* – loved and called, gifted and equipped and sent Why?

- A. Many pastors are nearing retirement. Seminaries have fewer graduates and the percentage of those graduating entering pastoral ministry is also declining. And of those graduating, many want to start new churches rather than prop up existing ones unwilling to adapt and follow the Holy Spirit in innovating and experiments of being church in these fast changing times.
- B. The last spiritual renewal movement was in the 1990’s. Awakenings and renewals are feeders, inspiring and calling pastors and empowering ALL as disciples.

- C. Due to shifts in trends, cultural, ideological, economic and social and weather forces, fewer and fewer congregations can afford a livable, full-time pastoral salary and benefits. Rural communities show a higher percentage of declining call opportunities than the suburbs.
- D. Denominational politics with less and less regard for the needs and issues before small town and rural local congregations are alienating the average member with pronouncements.
- E. The rate of Baby Boomer pastors retiring far out-strips the rate of pastors entering the church. **YET** – The need for the local church and the embodied Good News is absolutely essential. Each month more is revealed in research and written on the crucial spiritual, social/relational/communal, cultural capital tied to the catalytic role churches play in the fabric of lives, families and communities. This is even MORE important as so many other aspects of our culture are weakened.

**Possible avenues, strategies:**

- A. \*\*Pray with repentance and lament for spiritual revitalization / revival, for the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into the harvest – Luke 10
- B. Equip more CRE's and lay leaders to lead churches, and God is raising some up among us! Although there is a mindset in withering communities that if a church can no longer afford an ordained pastor, the church is evidently in decline, along with the community. So fight to keep the pastor and decline lay leadership.
- C. The above with exploring the idea of regional pastors focused on equipping and empowering, who might be in the pulpit of a congregation once a month, and present with folks, with lay preachers carrying the preaching on the other Sundays and equipping and praying for the holy experiments in ministry.
- D. To start a seminary internship program.
- E. Seek or equip tent-making and bi-vocational pastors.CRE's
- F. Work ecumenically with other mainline churches to share pastors and expenses?
- G. Start new congregations in areas with growing populations or where our church will not adapt and be transformed, thus choosing to die.
- H. Other?

**Third: The Financial Condition of Yellowstone Presbytery:**

- A. 15 years ago, when we came, we were told that the presbytery would not have the financial strength to pay us after two years, unless we figured out a way to generate income. In the last 14 years we have raised and many of you have generously given somewhere around \$630,000 to support our position and the life and ministry of the presbytery. Our God of abundance has supplied!
- B. But now, with the challenging economic and social circumstances, declining financial strength in many churches, it is a struggle to reach our budgeted \$35,000 a year. Additionally, the presbytery has been deficit-spending at about \$50-\$60,000 over the last couple years. At this rate of expenditure, the reserves available for the general administrative budget will be depleted by December, 2020, unless there is some windfall.
- C. The membership in Presbyterian churches across the country continues to decline, and this presbytery, in general, is following the national trend. Per capita is being carried by fewer and fewer people.
- D. The economy in our farming and ranching communities is especially weak right now. The trade war with China has driven down prices for product. Wheat, which takes \$7.00 a bushel to produce, is

selling for \$4.00. Beef prices are down, too. Churches are trying to make budget with adverse conditions impacting the people of the congregation.

- E. The main reason: in 2004 the presbytery received \$75,000 a year from the synod as partnership funds, which have been declining gradually over the years. In 2018, the Grant funds disappeared completely, not to return. Had those funds continued, how different the story would be. But such is not the case.

We believe God's Spirit is at work here in Montana where God has called and placed each of us to join in that mission and to seek to listen, discern, adapt and experiment with how to follow Jesus in these times, in new ways, perhaps doing some things very differently, and stepping even further out of our comfort zones.

We also do not wish to jeopardize or impoverish the presbytery.

### **Possible avenues, strategies:**

- A. Prayer for discernment, ask what God is doing and where God is leading. The Church is God's Church and God is not through with it yet. Expect God's leadings.
- B. Formulate a plan which may include:
  - I. Various reductions in expenditures
    - a. Staff reconfiguration, or reduction.
    - b. Dividing the work of the staff among trained regional leaders who might be paid a stipend.
    - c. Base the presbytery ministry in supportive regions, a la Western Colorado.(the jury is still out if this is actually "working")
    - d. Consider joining with another presbytery, or dividing and joining other presbyteries.
    - e. Discontinue per capita and work on a mission-giving model.
    - f. Consider program and budget cuts.
    - g. Be bold and spiritually innovative!
    - h. Other?
  - II. Continue to pray for and cultivate increased giving/income, including:
    - a. Planned and legacy giving
    - b. Identify those with gifts of generosity, raising funds and sharing the stories of what God is up to here
    - c. Various grants
    - d. Church plants – who knows of those who may be called to this? Pray for God to call folks.
    - e. Explore entrepreneurial non-profits linked to congregations or presbytery which can generate income – this is being done by congregations
    - f. Cultivate more giving from elsewhere among those who understand the importance of the call and role of the church in rural and small town Montana.
    - g. Other

***Believing that the agenda for Our LC meeting will reveal the wide range and specific work and efforts we have been focusing on since May with camping and youth, PMT, pastors, congregations – especially those in illness, need, transition, searches... we have presented this overview in hopes of setting the larger picture and perspective. As Christians we live in that exciting time between fear and faith; between the already and the not yet; between God's mighty acts in the past and what Good things God will be bring in the future. We love you all so much! Thanks for the privilege of serving Christ among you!***

We rejoice in God's care for, healing and guiding our mom's and our families. We are excited to welcome a granddaughter in December!