



The Rest of the Story

When I was growing up in Ohio and Indiana, I used to listen to a radio broadcast by Paul Harvey out of Chicago called “And Now You Know ... the Rest of the Story.” He would describe a person’s life, giving lots of details, background, and accomplishments. He would keep you hanging throughout the whole description as you tried to guess who he was talking about. Finally at the end of the broadcast, he would tell you who the person was, and conclude by saying, “And now you know ... the rest of the story.” So, you’ve heard some of the descriptions of General Assembly. Let me share with you some more, so that you can know ... the rest of the story.

There were some really good parts to the Assembly this year. The Assembly approved a new evangelism emphasis entitled Growing God’s Church Deep and Wide. The budget plans to pay for the first increase in mission workers being sent out in fifty years. The Assembly approved a new statement of collaboration and cooperation among the various mission groups of the denomination. The Assembly approved an overture from San Joaquin to call the denomination to hold Solemn Assemblies, which is a service of confession of sin, repentance, and reconciliation. A request to increase per capita next year to raise \$2 million for a legal defense fund to fight churches who want to leave the denomination was changed to simply ask for churches to give voluntarily to this fund (I’ll be watching to see if anybody actually gives to this). And I continue to be impressed with the new General Assembly Council staff that has been hired in the last two years. They have a new attitude, and are faithful and competent. They are working very hard to turn this aircraft carrier around. They are well grounded theologically, and are the best national staff I have seen since I have been ordained.

There is also a new culture developing among Executive Presbyters. Many of them approached me this year and asked me what we are doing in San Diego to become a missional presbytery. They genuinely wanted to know. Some of them are beginning efforts in their presbyteries. This doesn’t get any publicity, but it sounds to me like God is up to something at the ground level of our church. And after Friday’s difficult votes on the ordination and sexuality issues, about 60-70 Executive Presbyters gathered to pray for our church. To my knowledge, this has never happened before. It is another quiet shift.

Rev. Bruce Reyes-Chow from San Francisco was elected the moderator. While I have some theological disagreements with him, he did a good job of moderating during the week, and has some gifts that can help the church. Rev. Gradye Parsons was elected to be the new stated clerk. I believe there are many changes that are needed in the Office of the General Assembly, and I hope he will take this opportunity to make these.

Friday, the final day, was a very emotional day. The Assembly elected a new stated clerk, made major changes in our ordination and sexuality positions, voted against same sex marriage, voted on social justice issues, Israel/Palestine and Iraq issues, and health issues. It was an exhausting day. So, what turned the tide this year? It's hard to know for sure. Out of 2.2 million members, we had 750 voting commissioners, which is .04% of our membership. This is a very small sampling. Some years the commissioners lean to the right, and some years they lean to the left. This year, they leaned to the left. Do they truly represent where the denomination is at or were they an aberration? We don't know yet. However, I had a hard time believing that this group was our best and brightest. The General Assembly is a very rough and challenging environment, and until a complete overhaul happens, we need all presbyteries to send their very best, and not just send people because it "their turn" to go.

One of my Executive Presbyter friends said to me, "I can respond to this Assembly in one of two ways. I can say 'this church is in a mess – I'm leaving.' Or, I can say 'this church is in a mess – no wonder God put me here!' He believes that God purposely planted him in our denomination to help address the mess. Another one of my friends told me that he was raised a Catholic, and made a conscious choice to become a Presbyterian. He said when he was ordained 30 years ago, he knew full well that he was coming into the Presbyterian Church as a missionary to the church. He was not coming in because our denomination was in such good shape. He was coming in to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ to a church that needed to be evangelized and disciplined.

Here in San Diego, we have over 16,000 members. We may have over 16,000 different ideas of how to respond to some of the General Assembly decisions. Emotions are running high, but I believe we can work together in these challenging times.

I told you my position at our presbytery meeting in March. I told you that our decision to become a missional presbytery is more important than any decision that will be made in June at the General Assembly meeting. I told you that we should not give the General Assembly the power to distract us from our missional church process. It is that important. I meant it then and I mean it even more today. I was serious then and I am even more serious today. The actions of this Assembly have convinced me even more, that we need to focus our best time and energy on making the missional paradigm shift here in San Diego. Of course, we will decide how to respond to the General Assembly decisions, but those decisions will be made based on what will help us become more missional here. I learned this past week that a lot of people around our denomination are watching us in our missional experiments. They are eager to learn what we are learning and want us to share what we discover as we move forward.

So, please join me in prayer as we deal with multiple big issues at the same time. It's called Surfing the Edge of Chaos. At first, it's very scary, but after awhile, you learn to maintain your balance, even when there are forces beyond your control trying to knock you off. This is a team effort, and we hope you will be a part of the team. There is a lot of work to do and a lot of prayer that is needed. But, God keeps turning up in the most God-forsaken places, so let's see where we'll find Him next. And now you know... the rest of the story.



P.S. Our missional leadership gatherings this month are:

Tuesday, July 8, 7-8:30 pm, Rancho Bernardo

Wednesday, July 16, noon – 1:30 pm, Solana Beach (check the website to RSVP & pay)

I hope to see you there!

Respond to: ClarkCowden@PresbyterySD.org