

Summary of The Gathering

Biblical motif: Luke 17, the parable of the 'Prodigal Son' – turning anger into redemptive love

The big picture: denominations in America are sinking ships taking down both the port side (evangelicals) and the starboard side (progressives) together. Yet we are hopeful (not to be confused with 'optimistic')

The Vision: to respond to a changing context with a changed church.

- **Missional** – asking essentially two questions:
 - 1) what are we doing to bring people into the Kingdom of God; and
 - 2) what are we doing to expand the borders of our church (or 'local outpost of God's Kingdom) in service to the communities where we live.

- **As Presbyterians** –
 - 1) we are 'deathly ill' – is this a 'kairos' moment?
 - 2) 10A a signal in the erosion of how we understand biblical authority – evangelicals and progressives use the same words but mean different things by them.
 - 3) time for 'adaptive' change – instead of asking whether to add a new room to the existing structure we ask whether the house is in the right place ...
 - 4) what does it all mean?
 - External problems – things have changed
 - Internal problems – 'God hath a controversy with us ...'
 - 5) What next?
 - a. a new set of values: we are not mad; we are right to exercise humility; renewed focus on congregations; *connect where possible, differentiate where necessary*
 - b. Theological clarity: to be, under Scripture, orthodox, Reformed, evangelical, morally sound
 - c. Missional passion – plant 250 new congregations in 5 years
 - d. Covenantal vs. regulatory relationships
 - e. Connect globally
 - f. Train up a new generation of leaders for a new, changed context

6) What next in practice?

- a. The Fellowship – this will be an umbrella organization to connect ‘like-minded’ Presbyterians whether they stay in the PC (USA) or are dismissed to another reformed body ... and might, it is hoped, include like-minded Presbyterians already in other reformed bodies (EPC, Reformed Church of America, PCA, ARP ...)
- b. Four Tiers (possible configurations that would work for Presbyterians in crisis because of 10A)

Tier One – stay put! Some churches are in Presbyteries so congenial to evangelicals that there is no reason for them to move or want to move (e.g. San Diego Presbytery)

Tier Two – overlapping Presbyteries. Separate Presbyteries covering the same geographical areas, one for progressives and one for evangelicals (Mission Presbytery is attempting this in Texas)

Tier Three – parallel councils within Presbyteries. Progressives would have a Committee on Ministry or Committee on Preparation for Ministry and evangelicals would have a separate one for their churches and seminarians preparing for ordination. (Presbytery of the Pacific, which covers Los Angeles, was close to passing something like this last year)

Tier Four – a New Reformed Body. If recognised by the 2012 General Assembly, this new ‘denomination’ would be a place where:

- 1) a church could be dismissed to this new reformed body. **Positives:** a clean break; **Negatives:** church would have to negotiate for their property on a Presbytery by Presbytery basis, pastors would have to start over with medical and pension plans, would lack some agencies, e.g. foreign missions board.
- 2) a church could be a union church. **Positives:** a differentiated identity with all local publications pointing to this body as the congregation’s denominational home, would not have to negotiate for property, would not have to leave the current major medical/pension plan, free to support those parts of the PC (USA) that are healthy – e.g. Greg and Chris Callison or Tim and Marta Cariker; **Negatives:** not separation, a congregation is still part of the PC (USA) and would report half of its statistics to the PC (USA)

NOTE: the legal papers have all been drawn up for this New Reformed Body and people are currently writing confessional and polity documents in anticipation of an organizing meeting for this new body on January 12, 13, and 14 in Orlando, Florida.

Task Force on the Future of the Church

Mandate: to gather together the best information available regarding any and all options open to us as a congregation that will enable Westminster's Session to come to a 'God-honoring' decision regarding this congregation's future.

This task force will be asked to look at the state of the church globally, nationally, and locally – its strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and challenges. This information will then be passed on to the Session for it to determine how Westminster might best respond in order to:

- 1) effectively bring people into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ (Matthew 9:35-37 ³⁵ *Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness.* ³⁶ *When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.* ³⁷ *Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few; John 3.16 "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life;)* and
- 2) extend the reach of Westminster's ministries of justice and mercy deeper into the community where God has placed us (James 2:14-18 ¹⁴ *What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?* ¹⁵ *If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food,* ¹⁶ *and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that?* ¹⁷ *So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.* ¹⁸ *But someone will say, "You have faith and I have works." Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works.)*

1798 Pastoral Letter from General Assembly –

“Dear Friends and Brethren: The aspect of divine providence, and the extraordinary situation of the world, at the present moment, indicate, that a solemn admonition by the ministers of religion and other church officers in General Assembly convened, has become our indispensable duty . . . A solemn crisis has arrived, in which we are called to the most serious contemplation of the moral causes which have produced it, and the measures which it becomes us to pursue . . . Formality and deadness, not to say hypocrisy; a contempt of vital godliness, and the spirit of fervent piety; a desertion of the ordinances, or a cold and unprofitable attendance upon them, visibly pervade every part of the Church, and certain men have crept in amongst us, who have denied, or attempt to explain away the pure doctrines of the gospel; to introduce pernicious errors which were either not named, or named with abhorrence, but which have, within a few years since, been embraced by deluded multitudes . . . God hath a controversy with us – Let us prostrate ourselves before him! Let the deepest humiliation and sincerest repentance mark our sense of national sins; and let us not forget, at the same time, the personal sins of each individual, that have contributed to increase the mighty mass of corruption.” (in Keith Hardman, *Seasons of Refreshing*, 108)