**Remarks to the Mid Council Financial Network Conference, November 2018
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*What do you value about being Presbyterian?*  This is not a rhetorical question, I invite you to respond ……..

In a non-scientific poll, I posed this question to the Facebook group “Happy to be a Presbyterian.” People there wrote that they value “Reformed and always to be reformed,” emphasis on the sovereignty and grace of God and our response of gratitude, “God alone is Lord of the conscience,” love of God and neighbor. But the most common response there was connected-ness and support of one another.

The first section of the *Book of Order*’s chapter on Councils, G-3.0101, affirms that

The mutual interconnection of the church *through its councils* is a sign of the unity of the church. *Congregations* of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), while possessing all the gifts necessary to be the church, are nonetheless not sufficient *in themselves* to be the church. Rather, they are called to share with others both within and beyond the congregation the task of bearing witness to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in the world. This call to bear witness is the work of all believers. The particular responsibility of the *councils of the church* is to nurture, guide, and govern those who witness as part of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), to the end that such witness strengthens the whole church and gives glory to God. … All councils of the church are united by the nature of the church and share with one another responsibilities, rights, and powers as provided in this Constitution. … Councils of the church exist to help *congregations and the church as a whole* to be more faithful participants in the mission of Christ.

We know that our Lord longed that God’s people be connected and united: in John 17 Jesus prayed fervently, “The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.”

In the Book of Acts, the growing pains of the early church are on display. Surely there were charismatic individual leaders – Peter, Paul, and others; but we see that when differences arose – think of the account in Acts 15 of the Jerusalem Council – groups of “apostles and elders” gathered to listen to one another and to the Holy Spirit in order to discern God’s direction for the community of faith. The apostles encouraged the community to choose deacons who could attend to communal material needs.

That *we need one another* in order to maintain the faith and pass it along to a new generation, to order our common life, to be faithful witnesses to the world of the love of Jesus Christ, is not a novel idea of the *Book of Order* – it is demonstrated over and over in Scripture. God does sometimes speak to individuals, but even when that happens, the purpose is always for the sake of the whole community. Moses was alone for the revelation through the Burning Bush, but eventually he had to persuade a whole people to follow, and if they were to remain together and survive over the long haul, he had to find other leaders to share the burden. And of course even Moses didn’t live forever; the community must have ongoing leadership, corporate memory, some fundamental shared identity in order to live faithfully.

Contributions to per capita and shared mission are how we fund the practical costs of being Presbyterian Christians, one in Christ as Jesus willed, together making faithful witness to the world of the love of God in Jesus Christ.

In the conversations around funding the work of the church – especially if congregations are feeling strapped – sometimes we fall into “what’s in it for me” or “what have you done for me lately” thinking. Obviously paying the pastor and making sure the building is warm when we show up to it are more immediately evident priorities to members of churches than are the computers at the presbytery office or anything at all at the national level, sometimes lumped together under the term “Louisville.” But the health and vitality of our congregations are affected by the capacity of all aspects of our connectional system to do their own parts.

Much of the work of the Office of the General Assembly or OGA – which is almost entirely funded by *per capita* giving – is in the nature of infrastructure. Roads and sewers, electricity and Wi-Fi are not fun to pay for, but if they aren’t functional nothing else much will be either. Ecclesiastical functions are the type of services that we take for granted and often don’t notice unless they’re absent or dysfunctional: publishing the updated *Book of Order* every 2 years, partnering with seminaries and presbyteries to ensure that new ministers are qualified, assisting congregations in finding the pastors God is calling, enabling healthy process when the community needs healing because someone has stepped out of bounds, meetings of national committees and the General Assembly itself.

Other colleagues will be speaking in more detail later about the variety of ministries supported by the $8.95 per member that is the annual GA per capita for 2019 and 2020. Just 75 cents per member per month for the cost of being Presbyterian: our theological identity, our system of mid councils that allows elders and ministers together to discern the mind of Christ, our ecumenical connections that make us one with the church universal, our core structures that keep us together as a church, our support of one another in crisis, our call to work for full participation in decision making, the equal participation of persons from large and small churches from all areas of the country, thus making our representative form of government possible.

75 cents a month enables almost all the work of the OGA, as well as the percentage of the Presbyterian Mission Agency budget that is considered administration of mission, without which no other mission can happen at the national level. There’s no responsible way to send mission co-workers if a structure’s not around to train them, match them to needs, get them there and back and care for them and their families as they serve. Without phones and flights and expertise hard-earned over the years, there’s no effective disaster response. You get the picture.

The Book of Order G-3.0106 puts it this way:

*Mission* determines the forms and structures needed for the church to do its work. *Administration* is the process by which a council implements its decisions. Administration enables the church to give effective witness in the world to God’s new creation in Jesus Christ and strengthens the church’s witness to the mission of the triune God.

… The *administration of mission* demonstrates the unity and interdependence of the church, in that councils share with one another responsibilities, rights, and powers (F3.0203)… The failure of any part of the church to participate in the stewardship of the mission of the whole church diminishes that unity and interdependence.

As you know, the largest percentage of total per capita goes to the presbytery, which often sees its primary purpose as nurturing and connecting congregations to thrive in mission and ministry. There are many things we do better together than on our own, including training and ongoing support of pastors and other congregational leaders. You gotta pay for legal services, insurance, in most cases rent, telephone, postage, printing and copying, equipment repairs and maintenance, etc. etc. – not to mention salaries.

Skimping on basic infrastructure at any level hurts in the long run. Ignore the leak, eventually you have to repair the wall or floor or ceiling or all three plus the furniture. Fail to pay per capita to the presbytery or synod or GA, cuts are forced and services diminish or disappear. For example, when one person in Louisville is responding to inquiries that three people used to handle, response times suffer. Then the questioner is frustrated and gripes about supporting the national church at all, and the problem is compounded. Vicious cycle.

I daresay you already know all this. Even congregations that imagine themselves self-sufficient quickly learn otherwise when a crisis occurs, or even just a normal transition. Councils embody our connectionalism. Giving makes ministry possible for all councils.

The real question is how we partner – presbytery, synod, General Assembly – to interpret these realities to the people in the pews whose gifts make all our work possible. Together, how do we communicate the value of being Presbyterian, especially to those who are tempted to think they can go it alone? We in OGA and PMA are beginning to rethink the resources we make available to you to assist with that, and we welcome your ideas in that process.

Obviously this is a group effort. But here’s my personal pledge: I am the Associate Director for Mid Council Relations. My job is to support you and your colleagues in presbytery and synod leadership. So if you or others from your synod or presbytery have a question or concern that the national church can address, and you don’t know whom to call, I invite you to call me. If I don’t know the answer, I will find out who does. If you have an idea you’d like to see implemented, I can’t promise I can make it happen, but I can promise to communicate it.

All of us who work at the national level are here to serve you and the people in your pews, that together we might honor Jesus’s will that, united as one, we witness to God’s love for the world.

And isn’t that why we’re in church in the first place? We have experienced the grace of God – often through the community of faith. We find our strength and meaning in Christ, and when we engage in mission it is because our gratitude overflows into action. When we reflect on “what’s in it for us” to be a part of the church, it’s primarily the opportunity to express our gratitude to God, to exercise not just the duty but the joy of sharing in Christ’s work in the world. That’s how we bring glory to God, which as our Confessions teach (Westminster Shorter Catechism, Question 1) is what it’s all about.