

“More for My Cup, Garçon”

Jerrod B. Lowry

It was a gorgeous spring day, one of those first warm days of the new year after a cold winter. The sun was shining bright, certainly giving my freshly shaved scalp a mystical glow, and the warm rays felt like they were passing through my entire body. But the cold wind that was blowing sent me a stern warning: Even though the hoped-for summer’s warmth was near, I still had to protect myself against winter’s cold hands. Hopeful but a bit disappointed, I returned to the safety of the house, grabbed a fresh cup of coffee, and sat down at my shabbily arranged desk to open a promised email attachment revealing the statistical report of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

As a PK (preacher’s kid) and young adult raised in the Presbyterian church, I had heard for years the fears masked in the complaints of those who convinced me that the presentation of the annual church statistics was proof that the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) was dying. However, I can honestly say I had never personally seen the full report. So I braced myself for what I expected to be as melancholy a moment as “the shot” that Michael Jordan made over Mark Price to beat the Cleveland Cavaliers in the 1988 National Basketball Association playoffs, or the fumble by Cleveland Browns’ running back Ernest Byner at the end zone, which caused them to lose the American Football Conference championship game to Denver.

I contemplated praying as I clicked the button that would open the attachment and reveal the numbers, but I didn’t know what to pray. “Lord let the church be okay!” But I thought that would be too general. “Dear God, please don’t let my struggles endured during seminary and the ordination process be in vain!” Sincere, but I thought it might be too selfish “for such a time as this.” Should I pray for favorable numbers in the statistics, or should I pray that I have a favorable response to the numbers? I even thought about praying for God to help me formulate an appropriate prayer for the reading of the material. By this time, the results had been on my screen for a few minutes, but I was determined to resolve this prayer problem before even looking at the information. So with the briefest prayer, “Lord, help me,” I focused on the computer screen and the 2006 statistics.

Honestly, I was completely and utterly shocked. Were the numbers excellent? No! On the one hand, I saw in the numbers many things that I had already heard among the unofficial grumbling of the church’s doomsday prophets. On the other hand, the numbers were absolutely not a sign of impending doom. I could spend a great deal of time discussing the results, which would be beneficial for those reading this article who will not take the time to read the statistics for themselves. However, I believe I’d rather spend this time sharing how these results make me feel as an African-American young adult, who in the past year was ordained and installed as a minister of the Word and Sacrament in a small, rural church in North Carolina.

In my opinion, it is fairly easy to manipulate numbers. Statistics are malleable and can be formed to retain mental structures already established. My fear is that many people will look at the 2006 numbers and be as excited to see minor improvements in certain categories, as others will be excited to see numbers dwindle in several categories. In other words, people who see the cup as being half full will look at the numbers, find reason to be happy, and suggest that the cup is still

half full. Those with a less optimistic view will see the cup as still half empty and will have reasons to raise the red warning flags. In each scenario, both sides can look at these statistics as proof that they know the destiny of the denomination and find solace believing that no excessive increase or decrease in numbers signifies a job well done as “defenders of the faith.” And what is truly unfortunate is that both sides have become accustomed to celebrating a cup, be it half full or half empty, that is not reaching its full potential.

Why celebrate a cup that is not at least reaching, if not breaching, its full capacity? If the cup can be full, why are we satisfied with half?

I fear that we as a denomination have become satisfied and complacent. I believe that if we keep judging the successes or the failures of this denomination according to the highs and lows of statistics, then we will always find ourselves celebrating only half of our potential. We need new systems to gauge the status or livelihood of our denomination, but I am aware that change is generally regarded as a dirty word in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

If we must have the statistics, then let us find new ways to examine old categories and even new categories to examine in the old statistical manner.

For example, calculating the number of churches or the number of members in a church does not seem to me to be the best way of gauging whether a church is vibrant or the ministry of a congregation is effective. We all know small churches that are doing exceedingly great ministry with its members and for the wider community. And I’m sure we all can name more than one church that considers the gathering of its devoted few members for Sunday worship as its only reason for existing. However, keeping count of the number of churches open or the number of members in the denomination does not tell us whether the church is even attempting to “make disciples of all nations” (Matt. 28:19), or “bring[ing] good news to the oppressed, bind[ing] up the brokenhearted, proclaim[ing] liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners...” (Isa. 61:1). And it certainly does not tell us whether we are effectively pursuing the great ends of the church (Book of Order, G-1.0200). Counting the number of churches and members is a great novelty, but it is not a clear indication of the denomination’s success.

What would celebrating the full potential of the cup mean? It would mean:

- that we must hear the testimonies of the great work being done within and by these churches with less than two hundred members;
- that we remain overjoyed with the number of candidates responding to God’s call toward vocational ministry, while addressing why only 46% of candidates enrolled since 1993 have made it to ordination;
- that we must question whether we actually have a growing number of clergy along with a growing number of vacant pulpits;
- that we break down the statistics on elders and deacons to reveal youth being groomed as leaders of today and not cast aside as simply the hope of our future.

Celebrating the full potential of the cup also means that we address the questions of race. If diversity is truly important, then why do we plant new church developments among the affluent

who can afford to retire in picturesque locations, and among the upper middle class drawn to these developing suburbs beyond the existing suburbs that surround the urban dilemma? Furthermore, if recognizing the diversity of God's human creation is truly important, then whose heritage and ethnic identity is relegated to the category of "other?"

Finally, celebrating the full potential of the cup means that we must also view the need for collecting statistical data on additional and non-traditional categories as a sign of development and progress. It would be interesting to know how many churches have Web sites and how many people have been serviced by churches with food pantries.

My brothers and sisters, I believe that the 2006 statistical report is a reason for celebration. In a very cynical manner, whether you consider the cup half empty or half full, the good news is that half of the work toward reaching our full potential is already completed. Let us look beyond staid, traditional numerical analysis as if we have already done the best that we can and the numbers indicate that our best days are behind us. For if we can testify with confidence that "this is the day that the Lord has made," then we must be assured that God has made provisions for this day to have all the opportunity to be better than the day before. And this literally means that the dawning of each new day symbolizes new opportunities to be all that God has called us to be.

So, even as I am among the "frozen chosen," I can feel the warm zephyrs indicating summer's looming presence in our future and reminding me of the great potential that lies ahead.

To God be the glory!

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