

Who Knows What God Might Do?

Laura S. Mendenhall

The diminishing number of members and the number of congregations that were dissolved in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in 2006 are discouraging statistics. The concern is deepened because this is now a continuing trend. Is this beloved denomination disappearing, this part of the body of Christ that for so many of us opened Scripture and witnessed to the salvation and lordship of Jesus Christ and taught us who we are as children of God? If the PC(USA) disappeared, where would we belong? Would there be a place for our children and grandchildren? What about those who need a place like the PC(USA) in order to hear and believe the good news of the gospel?

As a seminary president I am attentive to the statistics. While I do not want to dismiss real and legitimate concerns that must be heeded, neither do I want to dismiss the longer view. Looking to Scripture and to church history, we are reminded that the church has always been in crisis. The Acts of the Apostles tells how the church began in turmoil, yet the Holy Spirit continued to work through the church to extend God's grace for all creation.

The diminishing numbers in the PC(USA) are not the biggest challenge God has faced. To imagine so betrays our narcissism, exposes our unwillingness to trust God's faithfulness, and allows our energy and imagination to be diverted from God's mission. Most often, those congregations that focus their attention on Christ's mission are places of vitality that invite active participation. At Columbia Theological Seminary we seek not to be held captive to fear, but rather to keep focused on what God is doing and where the Spirit is moving. It is our privilege to be active participants in the proclamation of Christ's reign even now.

As a seminary president I am also attentive to the statistics that show a growing number of pastors for a smaller number of congregations. I am grateful that there are more new pastors because so many of us are nearing retirement. We will need more pastors to take up the slack. And, we need more pastors who are willing and able to go to underserved areas to build and rebuild churches. We are all working diligently to keep the cost of theological education manageable so that graduates will not leave with such debt that they cannot consider serving congregations able to pay presbytery minimum, but not enough to repay debt. We also seek to open the hearts of students to consider serving these congregations.

Who knows what God might do, even in these smaller congregations, if we do not think of needing chaplains for dying congregations, but needing pastors who will lead congregations into sharing in Christ's mission for the world?

In my seminary context I see the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit ensuring the coming of God's kingdom and continuing to send us leaders who are bold to hold forth the invitation to join Christ's mission in this world.

With our eyes focused, not so much on ourselves, but on the large crowd of witnesses around the world, let us rid ourselves of every fear that holds us so tightly and let us run with perseverance the race that lies before us. Let us keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith (from Heb. 12:1-2).

The Reverend Laura S. Mendenhall is president of Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia.