

## Pentecost Reflections

*Former Moderators of the General Assembly over the past decade were invited to share a word with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in anticipation of Pentecost on May 27, 2007. Where do they see the Spirit stirring in our midst? What is the Spirit saying to us in these present days? Here are the reflections of those who had time to respond—in their own words—in alphabetical order.*

### I. Take a Deep Breath

*From Susan Andrews, Moderator of the 215th General Assembly (2003) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*

My favorite Pentecost story is not in the Book of Acts, but tucked into John's appearance stories of Jesus. There in the 20th chapter we find the disciples cowering in a locked room—afraid. They are afraid of death. They are afraid of violence. They are afraid of responsibility. In a word, they are afraid of life. Without Jesus leading them, comforting them, healing them—without Jesus living life for them—they simply cannot imagine a future of meaning and purpose.

And then, of course, Jesus suddenly appears, ignoring locked doors and locked hearts. He simply appears—breathing into them, onto them, among them. Re-creation—a new beginning—the Word becoming flesh, this time in the brand new birth of an infant community. It is a community that will call itself church—a community that now has in them, on them, and among them the resurrected power of Jesus. And so, they—we—become the resurrected body of Christ in the world. Amazing!

I now live in one of the most beautiful places in this country—the lovely, lively world of the Hudson River Valley. As I write this, spring has finally come. The birds are singing their morning praise as a cool breeze dances across the river right below my condo balcony. So much history, diversity, and possibility are in these seven counties north of New York City—this Presbyterian community of ninety-two congregations known as Hudson River Presbytery. But like so many Presbyterian places across our nation, we sidelined-mainliners are locked up in our anxious faith—gloomy about our life without a visible Jesus, worried that the glory days of preaching and healing and witnessing are over.

A 17-percent decline in membership within the past ten years. Shrinking resources, shrinking staff, and shrinking visibility—while our elegant buildings sag with needed repair and our tired spirits sag with wistful nostalgia. Yes, we want those former days with Jesus to come back—those days when faith was vivid, God was present, and hope was alive. And many of us seem to be waiting for someone else to do and be who God is calling *us* to do and be.

And yet, in quiet, unexpected, faithful places Jesus is showing up again—not to do ministry for us, but to breathe ministry through us—a re-creation of passion and purpose for our living:

- Good Shepherd Presbyterian Church in a crowded Latino neighborhood of Yonkers, where a quiet commissioned lay pastor named Ezequiel—who left a lawyer’s life in the Dominican Republic—is now breathing multicultural life into a resilient congregation.
- Five small churches in the rolling foothills of the Catskills, rising up out of the ashes of rivalry and past divisions—imagining and embodying a new vision of cooperative ministry—the For Faith Parish. And as designated pastor Nancy begins her ministry among them, they are pinching themselves with possibility.
- Mt. Kisco Presbyterian Church, with its towering beauty in affluent Westchester County, rediscovering its voice and reopening its arms after painful years of sexual abuse and sexual misconduct, now bravely speaking the truth so others might heal—breathing in Holy Spirit breath and breathing out resurrection power.

I am less optimistic about the future of our beloved PC(USA) than I was when I served as your Moderator. But I am much more hopeful. You see, hope is completely dependent upon the grace and power of God—unlike optimism, which is a human creation. I am discovering that whenever we choose to lock ourselves up in our human frailties, our utterly dependable God will not leave us alone. God comes to stand in our midst and breathe upon us—passing on resurrection possibility to us and sending resurrection power through us to resurrect the world.

This is the good news of the gospel. This is the Pentecost promise. Thanks be to God!

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## II. Little Pentecosts

*From Freda Gardner, Moderator of the 211th General Assembly (1999) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*

Would we recognize Pentecost if it happened today?

Noise, fear, babbling, not being able at first to know what was going on? Thanks to multimedia and instant knowledge of natural and human-made disasters and mayhem, personal knowledge of people stricken by waves of physical and mental catastrophes, disorders, and calamities, we are hard pressed to remember or to see for the first time the work of the Spirit in our midst.

That’s when I think about little Pentecosts—when I remember the scores of people who went to Louisiana and also to the wreckage of the tsunami, of those known and unnamed

who have gone to Darfur, to Guatemala, to lower Manhattan to the World Trade Center; when people gather with no previous notice to pray for trapped miners and for children killed without warning, and those who write checks to stop easy purchase of guns and to fill food pantries, to correct birth defects, and to look with awe at those whose children were killed who forgave their killers, and those who vote as if their life and faith demand it.

When is all that a result of sons and daughters prophesying, young men and women seeing visions, and old ones dreaming dreams? Or God's Spirit pouring out?

Wait for another Pentecost?

Maybe we need to recognize it when it happens in our midst?

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### III. The Language of Pentecost

*From Jack Rogers, Moderator of the 213th General Assembly (2001) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*

I dream of a Pentecost when all people could tell their own stories of who they fully are.

I imagine a Pentecost when every gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender Presbyterian could come out in freedom, praising God and giving thanks for Christ as their Sovereign and Savior, and the Bible as their trusted friend. I imagine Pentecost as a miracle of hearing when every straight, uptight, worried Presbyterian could hear their gay sisters and brothers as devoted, Christian believers, and that all of the false stereotypes of lustful, idolatrous, theologically radical people who are homosexuals would fall away from our ears.

I can imagine that kind of Pentecost because I have experienced it. I traveled around the country for about six months since Pentecost 2006, and I met people that I described. Many of them were far more theologically conservative than I am. I met people who had trained in Jerry Falwell's seminary, at Pat Robertson's university, and in fundamentalist Bible colleges. I met people who so much wanted to do what they thought they had to as good Christians that they took cold showers and hot shock therapy; they prayed endlessly and read their Bibles until the pages were dog-eared; they went through "reparative therapy" and endless counseling. And finally, they realized that they could not deny the fact that they could love God and also love another person of the same sex. They realized that God had made them and loved them as they were.

I met loving couples and exemplary families. I know wonderful, bright, healthy children—some with two fathers, and some with two mothers. I know gay and lesbian parents who love and care sacrificially for children with special needs whom no one else would adopt. I know churches that have refused to baptize these babies, and I know

churches that have grown in God's love by not only baptizing, but embracing these children and their parents.

I know that we straight Presbyterians are missing big opportunities for evangelism—it sometimes only takes telling a person that God loves them to change their heart. I know we are failing in pastoral care when we don't extend the same comfort and concern to people who do not fit our heterosexual nuclear family model. I know that we could be growing and bursting at the seams with families in our congregations if we would just reach out to the nearly one million same-sex couples who are raising over a half-million children.

I could tell you story after story that would warm any Presbyterian heart. But these are not my stories. They are the stories of God's people whom we cannot yet hear. I dream of a Pentecost that is a miracle of freedom for people to tell their own stories of who they are as loving, gay Christians. And I long for a miracle of hearing when we straight, fearful, people, who have heard so much false witness against our gay neighbors, could suddenly hear them in their own voices praising God and telling of the love in their lives.

That would be a new day for the Presbyterian Church. We could once again have our basic values in common. We could share what we have and receive the surprising gifts of a previously suppressed people in our midst. Praise God!

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#### IV. Beautiful and Dangerous

*From Rick Ufford-Chase, Moderator of the 216th General Assembly (2004) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*

Pentecost is a story of daring, of resistance, of a band of crazy people who thought they could defy the conventions of their time. It is the story of a radical vision of community, the likes of which could only have been inspired by the Holy Spirit. Today, we are in need of a similarly radical notion of community and daring band of followers of Jesus.

For me, the Christian Peace Witness for Iraq on March 16, 2007, was a sign of the Pentecost spirit of our time. In spite of the bitter ice storm that overtook the east coast, there were close to four thousand of us who filled the National Cathedral and New York Avenue Presbyterian Church that evening.

I held my wife Kitty's hand as we walked three and a half miles down Massachusetts Avenue to encircle the White House in candlelight and prayer. Kitty and I strained to keep our eyes on the red hat worn by our eleven-year-old, who ran with other children his age along the edge of the crowd. I could feel my soul lifted up with the opportunity to be a part of a witness that so clearly reflected our deepest longings as lifelong, faith-based peacemakers. When we rounded Dupont Circle, I was able to look back at thousands of Christians like me who dream of a new, Pentecost moment for God's people—stretched

out for four or five city blocks with their candles bobbing and their songs floating quietly on the crisp, cold air.

Nothing could be more beautiful—or more dangerous—than that.