

What presbyteries are for – thoughts in response to “Rebuilding”

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Editor's note: *"What presbyteries are for — thoughts in response to 'Rebuilding'" by Rev. Dr. Paul Hooker, Executive Presbyter, Presbytery of St. Augustine. Rev. Hooker notes that there has been significant debate about whether a presbytery should limit its function to ecclesiastical matters (pastors and congregations) or should be a mission agency. Hooker suggests we ask "what role does the presbytery play in the missio Dei, the ongoing engagement of God with the world?" In these reflections he sketches an answer to that question. Paul Hooker offers extended reflections on these matters in Re-Forming Ministry Occasional Paper 2: "Identity - Polity - Praxis: Ecclesiology and the Presbytery", available at <http://www.pcusa.org/re-formingministry/papers/identitypolitypraxis.pdf>.*

July 24, 2008

Barry-

Thanks for the invitation to write about the role of presbyteries. I've thought a good bit about the role of the presbytery in the last few years. I'm influenced by both classical Reformed ecclesiology and the missional thinking of the last thirty years.

Historically, presbyteries had two central functions: to prepare, examine, and place ministers in congregations, and to see to matters of discontent or conflict among or within churches. That remained the primary role of the presbytery until the post-WWII era, and especially since the early 1970s, when presbyteries began to see themselves as mission agencies rather than as merely ecclesiastical bodies. Whether that change is a good idea or not remains under debate. Some say no, we must return to a more strictly ecclesiastical role; others say that you cannot unring the bell, and that presbytery will always have some mission role to play.

Seems to me that this may be a misplaced debate. I think the question is not "does presbytery have a mission?" but "what role does the presbytery play in the missio Dei, the ongoing engagement of God with the world?"

I think that bearing witness to the missio Dei in the world is a congregational task, and that it is shaped by the three core theological tasks laid out in the classical "notes of the true Church": (1) the proclamation of the Word of God; (2) the right administration of the Sacraments; and (3) the nurture of the covenant community through discipline. However, I want to see these roles not as "in-house" tasks but as ways of being "sent" into the world to follow the mission of Christ. I think the role of all higher governing bodies, and especially that of the presbytery, is to nurture, guide, and govern the witness of congregations in light of these core tasks and with these tasks as a template or guide.

(1) Proclamation - the heart of Christian witness is the invitation of God through the proclamation of the Church to people to see their own personal narratives as shaped,

normed, and included in the metanarrative of God's grace. This is not just the task of the preacher in worship - although it certainly is that - but the task of the whole congregation. Presbyteries need to hold that vision high. We need to find ways to educate both ministers and congregations in the media that connect the culture of their context to the culture of Scripture and the faith community. And we need to encourage mutual accountability among ministers and sessions around the question of their effectiveness in making that connection.

(2) Sacraments - the Sacraments serve as the nexus between our quotidian reality and the new reality God makes available in Christ. Baptism is the word of gracious inclusion in the people of God - an inclusion that binds us in solidarity with those outside the faith community precisely because it is an inclusion based on grace and not on merit. Perhaps even more important, in Baptism every believer is called to ministry, a ministry of witness to God's grace. Presbyteries could model this vision of Baptismal calling by taking with greater seriousness the participation and contribution of elders and members of congregations in roles of intercongregational leadership (we are, after all, the only Christian tradition that at least theoretically places the leadership of elders on a par with that of ministers). The Eucharist is the joyful feast of the kingdom to which all the world is invited, and it makes us one with all those cannot provide food for themselves precisely because we ourselves cannot afford the meal we share at Table. At Table, God's people are drawn together in reconciliation through the death of Christ and in anticipation of the new reality of the Kingdom. Presbyteries could model the vision of the heavenly banquet by explicitly casting such tasks as conflict resolution in terms of the reconciliation and unity with Christ offered at Table.

(3) Discipline - Discipline in the life of the church has been confined to the application of the Book of Order through the medium of judicial process to force compliance upon those who disobey or disagree. While the restraint of sinfulness is an important part of discipline, it is a secondary part at best. The first task of discipline is to develop discipleship. It is to nurture the development of a covenanted community of believers through encouragement and participation in the life of the congregation. At the presbytery level (and higher) it is to nurture those activities and structures that make connections between congregations, so that the presbytery becomes a network of congregations connected in mission. Presbyteries also connect individual ministers and elders with service at synod and General Assembly levels, making possible an ever-widening view of the church's witness in the world. And presbyteries might begin to think about their role to assist congregations in strategic planning as principally a theological endeavor, instead of one defined by "best practices" of the business or non-profit corporate world.

In the end, I'm not sure there is a single set of responsibilities that can adequately describe the role of a presbytery - regardless of its size. But I think any presbytery, small or large, can take stock of its ministry and that of its constituent congregations in light of these core theological tasks. It seems to me that might be a very good place to start "rebuilding the presbytery."

—Paul