

**Celebration
of
Small Church Ministry**

July 19, 2009



CELEBRATION OF SMALL CHURCH MINISTRY

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Dear Friends,

Once again, it is our pleasure to offer this resource for the Celebration of Small Church Ministry Sunday. We continue to discover smaller membership churches who in faith are taking big steps that are enhancing their ministry and mission. Of course, change is always involved. For some, the thought of change raises concerns; for others, leaders realize that they must change if the ministry of their congregation is to move forward.

Identity is one of the themes of the lectionary readings for this Sunday. This theme is especially meaningful for the celebration of small church ministry. Where do our congregations and members find their identity? While some find it in buildings and possessions, many find their identity through their profession of faith as Christians. As Paul exhorted the people in Ephesus, we, too, are called to break down the walls that divide us so that we become one community of faith. Today many walls exist for the purpose of dividing people. As Christians we have a responsibility to share God's love and justice with others and through our words and deeds help break down these walls. What better place could we find to meet others who are different from ourselves than through our congregations! Perhaps we can welcome new immigrants who have moved into our town or neighborhood. Perhaps young and older people can get together to learn more about each other and enjoy each other. Perhaps a particular issue facing our community can bring people together. Such ventures allow congregations to affirm their identity by sharing God's love and justice with all. Congregations also discover that their faith has deepened and the reality of the times in which they live is filled with new opportunities.

We, as your General Assembly staff, are here for you. Let us hear from you so that we can be of service to you. Also let us hear the stories of your ministry and mission endeavors. We are eager to share stories of vital small churches so that we may all be enriched and transformed.

Grace and Peace to each of you,

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Small Church and Community Ministry
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**SERVICE FOR THE LORD'S DAY
CELEBRATION OF SMALL CHURCH MINISTRY
JULY 19, 2009**

ASSEMBLE IN GOD'S NAME

CALL TO WORSHIP

- One: I will sing of your steadfast love, O God, forever;
with my mouth I will proclaim thy faithfulness to all generations.
- All: For your steadfast love was established forever,
they faithfulness is as firm as the heavens.**
- One: Let us worship our great and loving God.

SUGGESTED HYMNS OF PRAISE

Sing Praise to God, Who Reigns Above (483 Presbyterian Hymnal)
Holy God, We Praise Your Name (460 Presbyterian Hymnal)
When Morning Gilds the Skies (487 Presbyterian Hymnal)

PRAYER OF CONFESSION AND ASSURANCE OF PARDON

Call to Confession:

- One: We are not always faithful to our call to be Christ's Body in the world, but God is always faithful toward us. With confidence and hope, together, let us confess our sins to God.

Prayer of Confession:

- One: Shining, surprising, grace-full God,
for avoiding the light of your love for us
and for running away from your grace:
- All: Forgive us;**
- One: For preferring the safe, familiar and certain
to the risky, unknown and mysterious:
- All: Forgive us;**
- One: For failing to believe in the vulnerability of power
and the power of vulnerability:
- All: Forgive us;**
- One: For taking no delight in variety
and insisting on sameness and conformity:
- All: Forgive us;**
- One: For fearing those different from ourselves,
and projecting onto them
what we cannot accept within our own depths:
- All: Forgive us.**

Assurance of Pardon:

One: God forgives us and redeems us so that we might have new life. Take hold of God's forgiveness and life live abundantly, knowing that:

All: In Jesus Christ we are forgiven. Thanks be to God!

THE PEACE (Follow your congregation's tradition in the passing of the peace)

One: Since God has forgiven us in Christ, let us forgive one another. The peace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.

All: And also with you.

PROCLAIM GOD'S WORD

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

One: Silence in us every voice but your own, O God, so that, hearing your Word, we may obey your will, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

SCRIPTURE READINGS FROM THE LECTIONARY

2 Samuel 7:1-14a

Psalms 89:20-37

Ephesians 2:11-22

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

MESSAGE - REFLECTIONS ON THE READINGS

(Following are reflections on the lectionary readings for the day. We encourage you to adapt this message to make it relevant for your particular congregation/presbytery. Include illustrations that are specific to your locale.)

Many people are interested in genealogy. What is the history of your family? As a child, I attended public school in New York City—a very diverse community. In elementary school, one of our main interests was in knowing where we came from—not in a biological sense—but knowing if classmates were born in another country, or our parents, or our grandparents. We didn't need to go back further than that. Our country of origin or that of our parents or grandparents was an important part of our identity in our neighborhood of immigrants. This awareness increased our curiosity and interest in learning about different countries and cultures.

It wasn't until I entered the working world that I began to meet people whose families lived in the United States for many generations. Some had stories of crossing the Appalachian Mountains. Others told of homesteading in the mid-west. One could even trace his family history back to the Pilgrims! Living throughout our nation's history seemed amazing to me!

Identity is a vital topic in today's world, especially as our nation and communities become increasingly diverse.

Today's scripture readings address the issue of identity. In Second Samuel, we heard about David ensconced in his new house, turning his thoughts to building a house for the Ark of the Covenant. The Ark was constructed to house the tablets of the law. It was carried by the priests as the people moved from one location to another. Through Nathan, God lets King David know that this wasn't an acceptable idea. Instead God is interested in continuing David's family line. God plans for David's kin to live on long after David has passed on from his earthly life. His will be an important family line. Remember the reading of the Christmas story, "Joseph also went from Nazareth...to the City of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David." (Luke 2:4)

The portions of Psalm 89, which we heard, speak of David's legacy as well. If we look at the contemporary translation of this reading found in *The Message* by Eugene Peterson, we are profoundly touched by the Psalmist's words of God's promise to "preserve him [David] eternally in my love; I'll faithfully do all I so solemnly promised." God will act as a parent to David's heirs, disciplining them when necessary. But God promises that "I'll never throw them out, never abandon or disown them."

In Paul's letter to the Ephesians, the people's new Christian identity is the focus. Paul is clear that the Christian community is diverse. There were the Jews and there were the Gentiles. Through Christ, however, barriers between those communities needed to be torn down in order to live into the reality that now there was one Christian community. Those who have accepted Jesus Christ were no longer strangers but part of the one faith community. As disciples of Christ, we, too, need to heed Paul's words.

In the Gospel According to Mark, we come upon Jesus totally immersed in his ministry. In the early part of the 6th chapter of Mark, the disciples had been sent out in pairs to preach and to heal. In today's reading, the disciples have returned and are reporting on their encounters. Recognizing the intensity of their outreach, Jesus tells them to take a break and get some rest. They all set out in a boat sailing to a remote area, but word had leaked out and crowds were on the shore awaiting their arrival. Jesus didn't take a break but attended to the people who seemed like sheep without a shepherd. The second part of the Gospel reading tells of another attempt to get away. Again, word had gotten out and people were gathered, seeking Jesus' healing touch.

We don't know if time was ever available for rest and relaxation but it is clear that Jesus' identity was known among the people. They stayed informed as to his whereabouts so that they might encounter him.

Identity is an interesting theme on this day when we celebrate the ministry of smaller membership churches throughout the denomination—and, indeed, we are a denomination of smaller congregations. We might ask ourselves, what is the basis of our identity? In what ways might we be recognized as faithful disciples of Jesus Christ?

Just as many of us are intrigued by our family history, so congregations need to celebrate their history. Who were the leaders of the congregation? What did our town or neighborhood look like in the past? What were the highlights of the past? What were the challenges of the past? We learn from our history. The trick is not to remain in our history. We need to move into the present and envision a hope-filled future. We need to look to the future by discerning what God is calling our congregation to be and to do. We need to look at our community and really see what its challenges and opportunities are for today and tomorrow. After all, we'd like our congregation to be a vital partner in the life of our community.

Keep in mind the reading from Second Samuel. God did not want to be confined to a building. God's desire was to be out and about with the people. We rarely hear of Jesus, the disciples, or the apostles staying inside. They, as God's agents, were always out and about. People knew who they were and knew about the gifts of ministry that they offered.

Are we out and about in our ministry? Do we know what is happening in our community and how the congregation might play a significant role with the community?

A number of smaller membership congregations are discerning God's will for them for today and tomorrow. Discernment, itself, can be frightening because the word "C-H-A-N-G-E" is always part of the conversation, and we really do not enjoy change, but it is inevitable if we are to grow in our faith and in our mission outreach. Do we remember God's word through the Psalmist? God will not leave us nor will God forget the covenant made with the human family. It is our responsibility to know that God has expectations for us and that we, as Christians, are party to God's covenant and need to keep our side of the bargain!

In eastern Long Island, New York, communities in Suffolk County are experiencing change as people of Hispanic origin move into established communities. Identity issues may incite debate. In such changing circumstances, people and congregations have choices to make. They can choose to "dig in" their heels and confine themselves to their "own kind." Or they can delight in the opportunity to become acquainted with new neighbors, learning about them and learning from them about their culture. This is not so different from the debates that were going on during the years of the early church. Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians, exhorts the people to break down the walls of separation and realize that they have a new identity—they are now Christian. In our communities, we, too, have choices to make: we can build walls to exclude people or we can learn to live together as residents in a transformed community.

Congregations, too, have similar choices to make. They may try to ignore or reject the change and dig in their heels and see themselves diminishing because of their isolation. Or they can acknowledge the new reality of their community and reach out to welcome and become acquainted with their new neighbors.

Several years ago, the pastor serving the congregation in Brentwood, Long Island—one of the changing communities in Suffolk County—together with people from the Presbytery, understood that this community was changing. The congregation was nurtured by the pastor to not fear the change but to reach out to the people new in the community. At the same time, a small Spanish-speaking congregation was evolving. What better place for people to get to know one another than through the church! People from each congregation met one another and began to take small steps to learn about each other—and they soon began to respect and enjoy one another. After a period of getting acquainted, a much larger step was taken. The sessions of both congregations agreed to share the church facility. What was the greatest fear among the members of each congregation? That of losing their identity!

Each phase of joining together was taken with care. They respected and supported each other through prayer and were committed to insure that the identity and involvement of each congregation would be shared equally. They were no longer strangers but vital Christian communities of faith.

Soon, we will listen to a Minute for Mission that tells the story of a parish in South Carolina. The pastors and members have discovered during the past years that working together enables them to reach out further than they could ever do individually. A college, located in their area, has been there for many years. In recent years, the parish has made a choice to invite the students into their lives. Students now help with the maintenance of the church property to fulfill their required community service. They also participate in mission trips sponsored by the congregations. Through these efforts, the walls of generational differences that often divide us have been broken down, and the churches' identity has been enhanced as word of their mission outreach is spread throughout the community.

Identity is important but we need to be aware of the basis of our identity. Our words and deeds need to show that we live in the knowledge that through the Risen Christ no one is a stranger. We need to reach out to others knowing that the Holy Spirit is alive and at work within us and among us, so that the world might know that we are Christians by the love and justice that we extend to others in our communities and beyond?

SUGGESTED HYMNS:

We Are One In the Spirit (They'll Know We Are Christians By Our Love)
In Christ There Is No East or West (either 439 or 440 Presbyterian Hymnal)
Blest Be The Tie That Binds (438 Presbyterian Hymnal)

AFFIRMATION OF FAITH: (from the Brief Statement of Faith)

One: Please stand, if you are able, and let us, together, affirm our faith

All:

**In life and in death we belong to God.
Through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit,
we trust in the one triune God, the Holy One of Israel,
whom alone we worship and serve...**

**In a broken and fearful world the Spirit gives us courage
to pray without ceasing,
to witness among all peoples to Christ as Lord and Savior,
to unmask idolatries in Church and culture,
to hear the voices of people long silenced,
and to work with others for justice, freedom, and peace.**

**In gratitude to God, empowered by the Spirit,
we strive to serve Christ in our daily tasks
and to live holy and joyful lives, even as we watch for God's new heaven
and new earth, praying, "Come, Lord Jesus!"**

**With believers in every time and place,
we rejoice that nothing in life or in death
can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.**

Glory be to God, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. Amen.

MINUTE FOR MISSION

For July 19, 2009, from the *Mission Yearbook of Prayer and Study 2009*, by Herb Codington, Ann Felton, Sadie Hunter Goldsmith, Hampton Hunter, Lawrence Peebles, and Lucie Eggleston of the Greater Laurens County Cluster of Smaller Membership Churches.

“In the early 1990s, a group of pastors of smaller membership churches in one South Carolina county got together for prayer, study, discussion, and fellowship. Out of that grew the Greater Laurens County Cluster of Smaller Membership Churches, an exciting model for ministry that is responding creatively to the call to ‘do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with your God.’

“Working together, these congregations have sent 17 tons of relief goods to the hurricane ravaged Dominican Republic. Moreover, members go to Haiti and the Dominican Republic on mission trips each year. Closer to home, the cluster has partnered with students at Presbyterian College in Clinton in mission trips and service projects in the community. The cluster also hosts international students each Christmas through Christmas International House, a hospitality and peacemaking program of the denomination.

“Every summer the cluster sponsors a week-long residential camp for youth. This program of Bible study, puppetry, mime, mission education, journalism, and recreation offers youth ways to live out their faith in the larger community. Activities range from cleaning up cemeteries and repairing homes to visiting in nursing homes and centers for the disabled.

“Cluster churches have come together in worship and musical programs as well as meals and special prayer events. Currently, the cluster is developing an older adult ministry.

“From worship to outreach, from youth to older adults, this cooperative parish model is a practical working out of Presbyterian connectedness. Not only are these smaller churches surviving, but they are reaching out beyond themselves, responding to Christ’s mandates to go and make disciples and to minister in his name.”

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

(Here you will want to follow your congregation’s/presbytery’s tradition in gathering joys and concerns and offering particular prayers. We encourage you to remember the ministry of your congregation, as well as the ministry of smaller membership churches in your presbytery, throughout the denomination and the world.)

OFFERING

One: Let us return to God a portion of the blessings that have been given to us.

[Note: Consider giving a portion of your offering to the General Assembly Extra Commitment Opportunity account # 051567: Small Church Ministry Network. This project supports Small Church Ministry Networks—local, regional, church-wide—by providing resources for network participants, enabling participants to attend events, advocating small church concerns to the church-at-large, sponsoring small church ministry events.]

GIVE THANKS TO GOD

PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING

One: The Lord be with you

ALL: And also with you

One: Lift up your hearts

All: We lift them to the Lord

One: Let us give thanks to the Lord our God

All: It is right to give our thanks and praise

One: Loving God, we thank you for your many blessings. We are especially thankful for new opportunities and challenges that you offer to us that allow us to grow in our understanding of mission. Today we give you thanks for the many smaller membership churches of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). May their gifts of ministry and mission be celebrated by the whole church, and may we find ways to support one another as together we witness to your love and justice through our words and deeds. Through Christ, we offer our prayers to you. And all God's people said,

All: Amen.

GO IN GOD'S NAME

SUGGESTED HYMNS

Christ Is Made the Sure Foundation (417 Presbyterian Hymnal)

We All Are One In Mission (435 Presbyterian Hymnal)

Called As Partners In Christ's Service (343 Presbyterian Hymnal)

SENDING FORTH

One: Now let us go out into the world empowered by the knowledge that we are God's children, redeemed by Jesus Christ, and sustained by the Holy Spirit. May we work to tear down the walls that divide us from one another, so that all may know God's love and justice through our words and deeds.

All: Alleluia! Amen!

RESOURCES USED IN THE ORDER OF WORSHIP

Call to Worship is adapted from *When We Gather: Year B, a book of prayers for worship* by James G. Kirk. Philadelphia, PA: The Geneva Press, 1984

The Prayer of Confession comes from *Gifts of Many Cultures: Worship Resources for the Global Community* by Maren C. Tirabassi and Kathy Wonson Eddy. Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 1995; page 14.

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES FOR THE CONGREGATION

1. Plan a summer picnic to celebrate your ministry. Talk about your community and congregation—past, present, and future. Share stories about the fun times and challenging times that you remember. Share your thoughts about an exciting future for your church.
2. Take time during a session meeting to assess the thoughts and stories shared during your summer picnic (see activity 1 above). Talk about what's happening in your community. Is it possible that you, along with other congregations, might work together to address a particular issue?
3. Organize some members of your church to read and discuss Carl Dudley's book *Effective Small Churches in the Twenty-First Century* (Abingdon, 2003).

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES FOR PRESBYTERIES

1. Plan a gathering of your small churches and listen to their joys and concerns. Discover/rediscover ways in which the presbytery might be resourceful to them.
2. Schedule a small church fair at a presbytery meeting, organized by a team from small churches. Encourage each congregation to bring a display depicting its ministry and mission. Provide information to small churches about available resources—printed, training opportunities, grant programs—that will enhance the vitality of their ministry.
3. If the way is clear, offer small grants to smaller congregations that have special mission-inspired needs—e.g. engaging in community projects, enhancing their communication systems through computer technology.

VITAL SMALL CHURCH CHARACTERISTICS

A vital small church is one that:

- Studies scripture and prays intentionally that it may be an instrument of Christ's justice and peace.
- Knows that its witness goes far beyond the four walls of the church building.
- Is engaged with its community—both local and global.
- Recognizes that its communities—local and global—are changing and that the church of Jesus Christ is always transforming to respond to these new God given opportunities.
- Is willing to step out in faith to try to new and different things.
- Reaches out to welcome new people, even when the newcomers are different from the congregation.
- Knows it cannot do everything and focuses on a couple of mission projects.
- Engages everyone in the mission and ministry of the church—from the oldest to the youngest, from the person who's been there the longest to the newest person.
- Knows that the pastor and congregation work together as a team in ministry and mission.
- Takes time out of its hectic pace to discern where God is leading. It acknowledges God's blessings and knows that God continues to sustain it every step of the way.
- Sees being small as a blessing. Resources may be scarce according to human measure, but are recognized as abundant blessings from God.
- Knows who it is and whose it is. Knows that if this faith community is to continue, it is up to the members to engage in ministry and mission.
- Knows that the vitality of its ministry and mission will insure a legacy for future generations. No one wants to be the "last person who turns out the light."

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