

Missional Urban Ministry Team

What Have We Learned?

Summary of March 23, 2010, Presbytery Meeting Table Conversations

1. What is Unique About Our Presbytery?

Members of the Presbytery gathered on March 23, 2010 took great pride in the long, rich history of the city/region. Recognition was given to the Quaker traditions of humility, service, and civil rights over the centuries but this pride was tempered with the recognition that our ethnic and racial history has not always been positive.

The region is at the heart of a greater metro-corridor blessed by geography, history, arts, and good transportation systems and surrounded by rural areas that are quickly being developed.

The Presbytery shares some of the history and tradition of the region. The place where it all began has also been the place where fights erupted and splits occurred. We have not always fought well but there was a feeling that we are learning to live with and (occasionally) value our theological and political differences as well as our ethnic and social diversity. We also recognize that we are in the midst of another great wave of immigration.

The Presbytery is blessed with numbers of members and financial resources that provide for staff and programs beyond the capacity of many other presbyteries. Our size also means that we do not have the close relationships that some have enjoyed in other places. Yet despite some measure of healing over the past few years there remains a lingering suspicion that the Presbytery is more a bureaucracy to be obeyed than an ally in mission. Some openly wondered what the focus on the Presbytery is while others pointed to the Presbytery's focus from doing mission for the churches to supporting churches in discovering and developing their own ministry. Missional developments like Broad Street Ministry or CityLights were recognized as positive steps forward in our life together.

2. How Is God Active Among Us?

Some people admitted that is hard to see/sense what God is doing now but there was a recurring sense that God is working in and through our diversity – ethnic, cultural, theological – to call us into new ministries of reconciliation.

Many people saw God's hand at work in their congregations in the changing contexts that bring forth new ministries and relationships. Unexpected growth in membership or ministry has demonstrated to some congregations that God is not done with them yet. Signs of hope were often linked to reaching out beyond themselves. Several people noted that the old buildings are a drain on ministry while others spoke of how capital campaigns have released new funds for ministry beyond the congregation.

A great number of examples were given of where God has been / is at work in our midst. Most of them drew connections between the impact of these ministries and opportunities for partnership across the Presbytery.

New visions for ministry are emerging from God's activity in our midst. Several people spoke of the paradox of the Gospel – we can only save our lives [congregations] by losing them in service to the “other” in our midst. The Partnership for Missional Church was mentioned several times as a catalyst in this process.

3. Where Is God Sending Us?

The vast number of responses to this (and the next) question makes it difficult to draw directions for where the Presbytery (as presbytery) should focus its ministry. Some even noted that ministry should be congregation-focused and not presbytery-focused.

The categories that gathered the most responses were: neighbors (including new immigrant groups), urban areas (especially the disadvantaged ones), children, youth, and young adults, those suffering from disasters, and those on the margins of life.

More attention was given to ways to respond. A few responses noted the need for prayer and fasting. Many more spoke of building communities, personal engagement in ministry, a frustration with doing things the same ole way, and a desire for releasing new leadership.

4. With Whom is God Calling Us to Build Bridges?

There was a strong support for the Presbytery's traditionally active engagement ecumenically and in Inter-Faith movements. There was also a recognition that we need better relationship among our own churches if we will be able to move forward. Some recognize that our most important partner in this effort is God in Christ.

A similar list of people/groups was mentioned as the focus for potential bridge communities: new immigrants, those on the margins of society, those in urban areas, those without faith or an active church connection, the youth and the elderly (often together!), and neighbors in general.

As in question 3, there were suggestions about how to build bridges to those whom God is putting within our sphere of ministry. Ideas included by building relationships, sharing faith stories, learning the languages/cultures of our communities, learning how to think theologically together, building teams, using technology better, creating community among members – the Presbytery as model!, and most importantly, listening to the Holy Spirit.

Some Preliminary Conclusions

1. There is great interest and energy around mission.
2. There is a growing appreciation for the diversity of our region, Presbytery, and congregations.
3. There is some frustration about how the Presbytery relates to its member congregations.
4. There is a recognition that the culture of the Presbytery is changing in positive ways.
5. That congregations want to be connected with each other but recognize that presbytery meetings is not where this happens. (The Partnership for Missional Church was often sighted as a way to help accomplish this.)
6. That God is up to something in our midst – even if it is not always easy to see just what
7. There is a deep appreciation for the outreach ministries of the Presbytery and of suburban-urban partnerships and a recognition of how difficult they are to sustain.
8. That the Gospel is shared in the relationships we build and the stories we tell about our own faith journey.
9. Children, youth, young adults and seniors capture a large part of our imagination about ministry today.