

CELEBRATION OF SMALL CHURCH MINISTRY
July 18, 2010

Dear Friends,

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is a denomination of smaller membership churches. On July 18, 2010 we are called to celebrate the ministry and mission of these congregations, many of whom are discerning God's call and finding new and renewed ways to be in ministry for this time in their history.

In early June, in Clinton, South Carolina, close to 100 people participated in an event called, "Linking For Ministry." This gathering focused on smaller membership churches that are working cooperatively with other churches in order to enhance their potential for ministry and mission. The Greater Laurens County Cluster, that includes Clinton, SC, is a vital and enduring model of cooperation among churches. Together they are doing far more than any one congregation might do individually.

One of the presentations at that event addressed the question, "Why Cooperative Ministry?" The Rev. Lawrence Peebles, pastor of the Little River Dominick Presbyterian Church in Kinards, SC, and a participant in the Greater Laurens County Cluster, spoke about the Biblical and theological underpinnings of cooperative ventures. His message now has become the message for this year's Celebration of Small Church Ministry. In choosing to share this message with you, we have also chosen not to follow the lectionary readings for this particular Sunday. We hope that this year's exception will not create problems for anyone. Rather we hope that this year's message will inspire a renewed interest and openness among churches to work with one another as together we witness to the Good News of Jesus Christ.

As part of this resource, we have listed three new resources produced by our office. We hope you will find them of interest to you.

As your General Assembly staff, we are here for you. Let us hear from you so that we can be of service to you. Also share with us the stories of your exciting and vital ministry and mission endeavors. We are eager to offer them across the church so that all may be enriched and transformed.

Grace and Peace to each of you,

Small Church and Community Ministry Office
Evangelism and Church Growth, PC(USA)
100 Witherspoon Street
Louisville, KY 40207
(888) 728-7228, ext. 5244
eva.slayton@pcusa.org

SERVICE FOR THE LORD'S DAY

CELEBRATION OF SMALL CHURCH MINISTRY JULY 18, 2010

ASSEMBLE IN GOD'S NAME

CALL TO WORSHIP

One: Behold, how good it is when sisters and brothers live together in unity!

All: Let us worship God, expressing our unity and praising God's name for bringing light to the world.

SUGGESTED HYMNS OF PRAISE

O For A Thousand Tongues to Sing (466 The Presbyterian Hymnal)

O Day of Radiant Gladness (470 The Presbyterian Hymnal)

Praise the Lord, God's Glories Show (481 The Presbyterian Hymnal)

PRAYER OF CONFESSION AND ASSURANCE OF PARDON

Call to Confession:

One: If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sin, God who is faithful and just will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. In humility and faith, let us confess our sins before God and one another.

All: With new life all about us, O God, we still cling to old ways. In spite of your promises, we seek self-assurance. You send the Holy Spirit to enliven our existence, yet the darkness of doubt dispels the new light the Spirit brings. We are afraid to admit what it might mean if we surrendered ourselves, so we continue to pursue our flights of fancy, and pretend that we can go it alone.

Assurance of Pardon:

One: God has mercy upon us and hears our confession. In Christ we have the assurance that we dwell not alone. Be refreshed in your quest to do what is faithful, and be alive with the promise of God's guidance and care, 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

Psalm 133
Matthew 18:15-20

MESSAGE - REFLECTIONS ON THE READINGS

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

Listen once again to the word of God as found in Psalm 133: A Song of Ascents (NRSV)

How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!
It is like the precious oil on the head, running down upon the beard,
on the beard of Aaron, running down over the collar of his robes.
It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion.
For there the Lord ordained his blessing, life forevermore.

In its original form, this psalm celebrated family life as brothers lived together on family lands and managed them together. However, the Bible itself shifted its meaning by listing it as one of the fifteen Psalms of Ascents. As such, it became a song of pilgrims on their way to a festival in Jerusalem, pilgrims who became family along the way. Or given the nature to human sin, it became a counterbalance to the bickering that could break out among people on such a trip. As a Psalm of Ascent, this hymn upholds the need for people to work together for a common goal. It supports the concept of people joining to fulfill mutual needs.

None of us is likely to take up a pilgrimage and walk to Jerusalem, but we are on a spiritual journey. The church has long made use of this Psalm as the basis for our common life in the church. St. Augustine said it was the basis of the monastic movement. Kindred living together in unity needs to be the basis of the modern experience of the church.

In our own spiritual journey, we each travel at our own pace. We do not always see eye to eye on what needs to be done; or even when we agree, we do not always have the resources to carry out the mission.

There are solutions, but they may require some redefinitions and that leads us to Matthew 18:20 (NRSV): "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

Interestingly enough, this familiar quotation comes at the end of a Jesus saying about reproving a member of sin. We do not quote the rest of the paragraph very much in the modern church, but we do like the last verse! It is often used as a proof text for keeping things going even when they are not effective.

I want us to consider that verse in connection with the question of what is church anyway? The theology of the *Book of Order* recognizes the universal church and the particular church. Allow me to read two paragraphs:

“Since this whole company cannot meet together in one place to worship and serve, it is reasonable that it should be divided into particular congregations. The particular church is, therefore, understood as a local expression of the universal Church.

“A particular church consists of those persons in a particular place, along with their children, who profess faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and who have been gathered for the service of God as set forth in Scripture, subject to a particular form of church government.”
(*Book of Order*, G-4.0102 and G-4.0103)

Our constitution gives us a nice definition of a particular church. It serves well in an administrative function. The problem with that definition is that it keeps our focus on a particular building and a particular place. What if church is simply any gathering of people who have come to worship or to serve the Lord?

Working together with other congregations has the power to expand our notion of what church is. At the same time, it has the power to expand and enhance the mission and worship of a particular congregation.

In the Apostles’ Creed we profess to believe in the holy catholic church and the communion of the saints. Together these theological phrases profess a belief in the oneness of the church and the union of Christians in all times and in all places. While these notions may make us slow down when we want to bash the faith of other Christians, these concepts are so big and broad that they tend not to impact the life of a typical congregation.

Clustering, working and worshipping with other congregations, gives some meaning and power to these concepts. Across denominational lines, we may disagree on what baptism means or what it means to be filled with the Spirit, but we can come together in worship to testify that Jesus is Lord or to give thanks for the blessings of God. And, we may be able to come together and build someone a house. These things happen, and they can happen more often.

For example, within the Greater Laurens County Cluster, churches come together to put on a Christian International House program. None of our congregations has the resources to do this alone, but together it is a very do-able project.

The Psalmist declares the goodness of kindred living together in unity. Jesus promised that a gathering of only two or three would be accompanied by his presence. He didn’t add that they would have to have a plot of ground and a dedicated building. It is my contention that if we could expand our concept of church, we will enhance the mission of our particular congregation.

It’s tempting to say that clustering is cutting edge theology. It’s not. The origins of the Presbyterian Church lie in the needs of churches to link together for support. For years we’ve linked together for community thanksgiving services and community Easter sunrise services. We have built houses together and gone on mission trips together. The only thing possibly new is the need to do more and be more intentional.

Some churches come to clustering out of necessity. Some come kicking and screaming. Others come with great fears of losing identity. Necessity may only be our perception of where the Holy Spirit is leading us where we do not want to go. Fear of losing identity may mean that our identity is misplaced. Our identity is that of being a child of God and a servant of Jesus Christ. Our calling is to go where the Spirit leads.

Acts 16 tells us of Paul's plans to preach the gospel in the Roman province of Asia. By means unstated, the Holy Spirit blocked their work and after some wandering through Phrygia and Galatia, they went to Macedonia. If our congregations are wandering without direction or focused only on survival, perhaps we need to stop. We need to sit down and pray that the Holy Spirit will send a vision that will tell us what to do.

Clustering is simply a means for Christians to accomplish what a particular church cannot accomplish on its own. The theological basis of clustering comes down to a simple question: What is God calling Christians to do at a particular time and in a particular place? Any time God gives the church a mission, the resources are available. Sometimes we have to be creative in finding them. Sometimes we have to go beyond the usual suspects and find other kindred for the calling God has given to us.

SUGGESTED HYMNS:

Arise Your Light Is Come (411 The Presbyterian Hymnal)
Christ Is Made the Sure Foundation (417 Presbyterian Hymnal)
We All Are One In Mission (435 Presbyterian Hymnal)

AFFIRMATION OF FAITH: The Apostles' Creed (ecumenical)

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

All: I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; he descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again; he ascended into heaven, he is seated at the right hand of the Father, and he will come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.

MINUTE FOR MISSION

From the *Mission Yearbook of Prayer and Study 2010*, for July 18, 2010, by the Rev. Steve Whitney, pastor, Trinity Presbyterian Church, West Sacramento, California; based on the Daily Lectionary reading.

"Today's readings include Joshua 6:15-27. Many of us have known the story of the battle of Jericho since we were children. But if we didn't already know how the story ends, we might read it differently. God has asked the people of Israel—people with no trained army—to conquer a walled city. How could it be possible?

"The challenges that smaller churches face, especially these days, are daunting. In 2004 our small church in West Sacramento, learned that children enrolled at the school down the street needed socks. Socks???? We could do something about that! We collected hundreds of socks and then decided that God was calling us to partner with the school. We held an annual clean-up day for the school and started reading in classes—small acts to be sure, but they made a difference. Then the district closed that school, so we chose another school and partnered with it. That school needed food for families, so in January 2008, we packed up six food boxes. In February it was twenty. By December we were packing and distributing 120 boxes of food monthly—and not just to the school!

"I'm sure it was discouraging to march around Jericho for seven days only to have nothing happen. But God was there, and God was patient. God continues to do new and exciting things in our smaller church—slowly, but more than we could have imagined in 2004—as we continue to share the love of Jesus Christ with our community."

Prayer:

"Loving God, if our church is still open, it still has a mission. Show us how you want us to be the hands and feet of Jesus Christ in our communities. Help us to feed and love your sheep, whether they are in our church, in a school, on the street, or hidden away in a suburb. Show us the job that only we can do for you. Amen."

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 God has so graciously 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 ways of engaging in ministry and mission that strengthen our ability to witness to the Good News of Jesus Christ. We offer special thanks today for the many smaller membership churches of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). May the whole church celebrate these congregations 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

Song of Hope (432 The Presbyterian Hymnal)

Come Sing, O Church, in Joy (430 The Presbyterian Hymnal)

God of Grace and God of Glory (420 The 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 discern God's call and respond with great joy, 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.

Prayer of Confession and Assurance of Pardon are adapted from *When We Gather: Year A, a book of prayers for worship* by James G. Kirk. Philadelphia, PA: The Geneva Press, 1983.

The Presbyterian Hymnal published by Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 1990.

NEW RESOURCES FOR SMALLER MEMBERSHIP CHURCHES:

Each of these resources has been produced by the GA's Small Church and Community Ministry office (see contact information on page 1 of this resource). Copies may be ordered from the office or from Presbyterian Distribution Service.

Creating Pathways for New Life in Urban Congregations: Change and Opportunities by Bert Tom (2010); PDS # 23316-10-001

Spiritual Vitality through Cooperative Ministry by Diana A. Stephen (2008); PDS #23316-08-001

Stepping Out in Faith: Small Churches Responding to God's Call by Diana A. Stephen (2009); PDS#23316-09-001.

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 ideas about an exciting future for your church.
2. Take time during a session meeting to assess the ideas 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?

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES FOR PRESBYTERIES

1. Plan a gathering of your small churches and listen to their joys and concerns. Are there opportunities for churches to work together? 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.