

“State of the Presbytery”

During “Council Report 2” to the Presbytery of Charlotte
Saturday, February 11, 2012 – 1pm
By the Rev. Dr. Robert Austell, Moderator of Council

At our February 11 stated Presbytery meeting, as Moderator of Council, I shared my perspective on the “State of the Presbytery.” Due to the extraordinary nature of this season in the life of the Presbytery, I am sharing that with you so that we can continue the conversation together, along with those unable to attend Saturday's meeting.

Friends, I want to be as honest and transparent as I know how to be regarding the health of our presbytery. I do not believe it an over-exaggeration to say we are in the midst of a **financial crisis**. I will also tell you that I believe we are in a **relational crisis** between one another and that we are in a **missional crisis**.

Financially, mission giving to the operating budget of the presbytery is critically down [[Link](#)]. 4th quarter giving went from \$520,000 in 2010 to \$392,000 in 2011. And, by action of the presbytery last September, that 4th quarter of 2011 is now the first quarter of our new fiscal year. Because it's year-end giving for the churches, that is potentially the best quarter we are going to have.... down \$128,000! And on top of that, we are nearly insolvent – we do not have working capital - cash on hand to pay our bills. Please note the list in the supplemental packet of mission giving by church [[2011 Link](#) and [History Link](#)]. That information is not included for you to compare yourself with your neighboring church, but so you can be reminded of your giving in 2011 and previously. Don't let the shift of our fiscal year cause you to skip a year of presbytery mission support. We'd ask that after prayerfully considering all I have to say today, you look in the “Total 2011” column and give *at least* that much in 2012, if not consider an increase. I share our financial realities and this level of detail because finances are critical!

Finances are critical, but I don't believe they are our biggest challenge. I believe we are in **relational** crisis. We have six congregations in the process of seeking dismissal from the denomination and our presbytery. There is a significant tension and break between our entire Latino ministry group (representing multiple congregations and leaders) and presbytery staff, committees, and leadership. Almost every grouping within presbytery – staff, leadership, committees, and congregations – have struggled in relating to each other. And in ways I have come to see far more clearly than when I came ten years ago, we are still broken along racial lines. We are segmented and separate and broken.

And all that has **ministry** and **mission** implications. We struggle to do the very work of the church precisely because we aren't functioning in community and relationship with each other. The finances are not our problem; they are a symptom of our problem.

Yet friends if that were all I had to tell you, then that would be bad news indeed. I think our remaining time would be short-lived. But I will also tell you that I am **HOPEFUL** for our future – *missionally* and *relationally*. I also believe we can reach *financial* stability, though very likely at a lower overall level than in our previous history.

That's the heart of the vision we have had before us this past year or more... that we renew our focus on ministry and mission **WITH** each other, learning how to be in community and in relationship with each other. I appeal to you to have hope, to hang on, to reach out, to listen to each other, to ask for and offer forgiveness where we have fallen short with each other. What I offer to you is the commitment to be as forthright, transparent, and faithful as possible about the health and direction of our presbytery, both now and in the days to come.

God IS at work in our congregations. Look at the feedback we got in October at the table discussions: congregations doing exciting, faithful ministry; congregations connecting with each other; real needs being communicated to us. Here are just a very few [there are many more in the linked [“October 11 Table Discussion” handout in the packet](#)]:

- ❖ **Williams Memorial** folks described their clothes closet for men and woman, and uniforms for children. Want to know how to do it?... give them a call!
- ❖ **CN Jenkins** shared a number of ministries, including Bible study at the Rebound Men’s Shelter. I know that my congregation and a number of others also do that. Why have I not called CN Jenkins up – how great would it be to go together and share in that outreach?!
- ❖ **Good Shepherd** has a number of exciting music outreach ministries and lately we’ve been looking for ways to combine with other congregations, including “Jazz in the Park” with Carmel and an upcoming outdoor bluegrass worship on a Sunday morning in May with Matthews Pres. Want to do some music together?.... let’s talk!
- ❖ A number of churches, like **Macedonia** and **Albemarle Road** asked for help in reaching out to Latinos and other immigrants in their nearby community. I know many others are asking for similar help.
- ❖ A group of congregations described working together to sponsor service projects. Want to know how that worked? Talk to **H.O. Graham, Clanton, McClintock, Woodland, or Mt. Olive.**
- ❖ **St. Paul** shared a great idea of connecting churches not just for financial needs, but for other opportunities to share: building space, ministry needs, ministry resources. Have a church van that sits around? There may be another church in desperate need. Could they borrow it periodically for their youth? Or older adults? What about a ball field? Or gymnasium? Or Fellowship Hall.

There are many more great ministry and connectional reports and ideas in that “Table Discussion” document. Check it out! We also heard some needed critique. Some congregations and leaders are frustrated, haven’t felt listened to, and have even given up on presbytery. I want you to know I hear you; the Council hears you. They have read these comments. And I want all of you to read and know about them. We need to re-connect for the sake of the Body of Christ!

Look for ways to connect with the church down the street or across town, *especially* if it’s a church of a predominantly different race. I just heard two elder brothers talking over lunch about how we don’t know each others’ families or needs or dreams. But I want to! I want to look for opportunities to connect in these ways. *I believe we have a future and God is still working among us.*

And finally, listen to the next several reports coming up. You’ll hear about the Multicultural Conference coming to Charlotte this year and how a number of congregations and presbytery folks are working to help that happen. You’ll hear about the “Order of the Day” event last Fall among the predominantly African-American congregations of our presbytery and Providence presbytery. These are examples of what God is doing in our midst, and of congregations coming together as families in Christ, and in shared ministry.

We do have significant challenges ahead of us, but I am hopeful and encouraged that we can rise together, and in the power of God’s Holy Spirit, to meet them.

But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body’s growth in building itself up in love.

~Ephesians 4:15-16, NRSV