

## **Report of the Executive Presbyter**

I received an interesting email recently suggesting that the image of our presbytery and denomination are not the same as the reality of our denomination and presbytery. The suggestion was that while the congregations of Heartland Presbytery project a particular image of faith and practice, the reality is quite different. At this writing I have not yet had time to draft an adequate response to the email. This report is not a response to that email, nor will it address the specific issues raised. But I do want to take up the premise that our presbytery, denomination and individual congregations are present in the world with both their reality and their image. These two are not always the same and we do not benefit equally from both.

I was getting a hair cut one afternoon when I was pastor at First Church, Union, Missouri. The barber asked if the ministerial alliance was planning some big event. We weren't and I asked why he thought we might be. He said that Methodist minister and the priest had come for haircuts that morning and the E&R minister had been in earlier in the afternoon. He said he couldn't remember four of us ever getting haircuts the same day before. A man waiting for a haircut asked which church I served. I proudly said First Presbyterian. The man said, "I know that church. They don't like children. They threw our scout troop out of their building 25 years ago and I haven't been back since." What was image and what was reality, when and for whom? The gentleman had certainly experienced something, real for him 25 years earlier. I fear he shared that experience and created an image for First Church in the community. It was not the reality I was experiencing. I experienced a congregation that had used a reverse directory to call every home in the community to invite children to Sunday school. I experienced a congregation that put a used fifteen passenger van on the road to help build the youth group. As the youth group grew they purchased a newer van so the children would have more comfortable reliable transportation. I won't take the space to create an exhaustive list of the things we did to invite, welcome, nurture and make disciples of the children of the community, but there was no sense in which the reality I experienced matched the image the gentleman shared.

Some images impact our congregations broadly. I often hear, mostly from within the Presbyterian family, humor about us as God's frozen chosen. We do not serve ourselves well to perpetuate such stereotypes. Especially when I believe the image does not meet reality. In my work with the many churches of two presbyteries and a few churches in fifteen of our sixteen synods, I have not experienced any congregation so cold as to deserve the label frozen. Our worship is more reserved than some traditions. I've seen no snake handling. But, I have encountered countless warm, caring, compassionate, committed followers of Jesus Christ, who pray for each other, nurture each other's children toward discipleship, laugh and cry with each other around fellowship tables and in Sunday school rooms. I have observed congregations give of themselves in Christian service to feed and clothe and shelter people in their communities and do the same for people around the globe whom they will never even meet. There is nothing about such mission and ministry that is cold or frozen. Our reality, though hotter than our image, isn't perfect. We could do more to cultivate an image of Christian warmth and hospitality. Our signage could be improved to welcome the passerby. Our greeters and ushers could be better

trained to warm the welcome experienced by the visitor. There is always room for us to grow more Christ like in our efforts, but we need not accept or embrace an image that does not fit who we are, whose we are and the great mission and ministry we accomplish in Christ's name.

It is clear from the email that I received that some, even within our own household of faith, hold images of us that are harmful to peace and unity of our small piece of Christ's great church. The images held do not serve us well and they do not match the reality I experience in my visits to the 104 congregations of Heartland Presbytery. The images held distress and distance our own members from us. We need to counter these images not by challenging each individual who holds or passes them along, but by proclaiming loudly and clearly the reality of faith and practice. We need to make sure those in our community know who we are, whose we are, what we believe and mission and ministry that grows from that faith in Jesus Christ. We need to establish new images, by making sure the truth and reality of our faith and practices are known. I am blessed that my ministry gives me a view of your ministries that allows me to be appropriately proud and inspired by the sound faith and practices of our congregations. I would encourage you to begin to tell your stories loudly and clearly enough that you can be for each other that a source of that same pride and inspiration. I would encourage you to tell your stories to your communities, so that reality overcomes whatever images may exist and God will be glorified by your presence, your proclamation and your practices.

Charles Spencer