

PRESBYTERY REFLECTION

By Sheppards and Lapsley Moderator, Ed Hurley

AUGUST 2023

HOST: IMMANUEL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, MONTGOMERY

Highlights of the August Presbytery meeting



Dear Presbytery Friends,

On a hot day in August the Presbytery of Sheppards and Lapsley gathered at Immanuel Presbyterian Church in Montgomery for our quarterly meeting. In my opening greetings, I shared a few historical events that took place in the month of August, a month often seen as the last of the lazy hazy days of summer, but also a month in which the face of Europe changed, wars began, atomic bombs exploded, and many cataclysmic events occurred and still occur. In such a month we met to do Christ's work.

Way back in January 2020 a friend at South Highland shared with me the meaningful verse, Romans 15:13, "may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit". Little did I know then that by March our world would've changed as everything shut down with the pandemic. That verse became my linchpin of hope through those difficult few years as our Presbytery and our Churches were separated physically, and how grateful now we are once again to be able to gather mostly in person.

Being together in Montgomery is something we all needed. The congregation welcomed us warmly with great hospitality, refreshment, and the noon meal. Rev. Elizabeth O'Neill, in her sermon, "Call to Community – Call to Reconciliation" proclaimed to us the reconciling mandate of our Lord out of the moving story of Joseph's reconciliation with his brothers, who had abandoned and betrayed him. Yet out of that tragedy, God was at work, "God sent me before you to preserve for you, a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So, it was not you who sent me here, but God." Genesis 45:7-8.



Elizabeth reminded us, "while Joseph has the power to destroy his brothers, there is yet another power at work. Joseph is overwhelmed by the power of love and compassion. Forgiveness is the unraveling of cords of pain that had kept Joseph's soul bound. To choose love and compassion over hatred is for the purpose of transformation. As prelude to the journey toward reconciliation put on your royal robes and partner with God in a new vision. "

Ministry Within our Presbytery

We participated in a meaningful hour of presentation and discussion led by the Anti-Racism committee. They began by reminding us of our amazing history and the legacy of the first interracial mission team coming from Alabama churches to work in Africa, William and Lucy Sheppard, and James Lapsley, and the transformative work they undertook. Three Pastors, Joe Genau, Elizabeth O'Neill, and Joe Scrivner shared their insights on the preaching about race and racism from the pulpit. We anticipated the upcoming special conference at Mountain Brook Presbyterian church on racism. It seems to me like we are making some significant progress.

Our day of meeting involved both times of sadness and times of joy. We were saddened to take steps to close one congregation in our Presbytery, Springville Presbyterian Church.

Nevertheless, we remember Isaiah's word to us, "remember, not the former things behold I am doing a new thing. Do you not perceive it?" (Isaiah 43:18,19). Indeed, we are experiencing this new thing as well.

It was a joy to welcome Dr. Yolanda page as the new president of Stillman College, a wonderful institution which has deepened education and faith among mostly minority students since the 19th century. Doug Marshall from the Presbyterian home for children in Talladega shared work about new things God is doing in Talladega. Presbyterian Home is reaching out to care for needy children, including opening of new cottages and new avenues of service. Rachel Vankirk Mathews shared with us the exciting new summer ministries that recently took place at Living River conference center. God is working in wonderful new ways!

We also have had the joy of welcoming new ministers into our churches. In my role as moderator, I have been privileged to share in the recent installation services for the Reverend In Chan Bae at the Korean Presbyterian Church of Birmingham! My goodness what fabulous music hospitality, and a feast we shared together. The service flowed beautifully between Korean and English with translations of each available on the screens.

I was so happy as well to participate in Rev. Nicole Newton's installation as associate pastor of the historic First Presbyterian Church in downtown Birmingham. We heard a strong challenge to put our faith in the action and not be overwhelmed by oppressive institutions.

More recently, I was honored to participate in the installation of Rev. Rachel Winter, as the pastor of Oakmont Chapel Presbyterian Church. Rachel truly was installed as a "wounded healer," taking her vows from her wheelchair, having had a bad fall a few days before. But she would not be deterred. Nor shall the church!

I think that is a good image of our Presbytery and our congregations. Like the apostle Paul, we press on. "Not that we have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but we press on to make it our own, because Christ Jesus has made us his own." Philippians 3:12

Let me close by sharing with you the prayer with which I opened our meeting in Montgomery.

"Ever good and gracious God, here in your house this day, we praise and exalt you, we love and adore you, we worship you, Father, Son, Holy Spirit.

We gather this day in Immanuel church to be the church and grow the church as your body, for you are Jesus Immanuel, God with us, lifting our spirits, enlightening our minds, warming our hearts, calling us- in a world marred by selfishness and sin, division and disappointment, to be a people of Hope, A People United in you who make us one. For there is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God, and father of all, who is above all and through all, and in all.

Come, mighty and merciful God, come with your spirit as we are gathered as a Presbytery. Beyond all our differences, give us a unity of spirit, a renewal of hope, a vision of the fresh new work you are doing in, with, and through us.

Ministry Within our Presbytery

Some of the business before us will be hard and heartbreaking; the closing of churches, the departing of a church, the loss of points of witness. Some of the business will be joyful and uplifting, the recent installation of new pastors, the expansion of new programs. We are here amid sorrows and joys. Through it all O Lord, will you lift us, will you lead us, will you stretch us, will you strengthen us – will you guide us to renew old friendships, to meet and make new friends today. May we experience and may we offer real authentic koinonia - fellowship that embraces one another. Now, Lord bless this day of worship and work before us. For we pray in the name that is above all names, Jesus Christ, our Savior and our Lord, who, together in unity with you Father and the Holy Spirit, ever lives, and ever loves. Amen.”

With gratitude to you all and a truly thankful heart,

Ed Hurley

Moderator