

EDITOR'S OUTLOOK

The Presbyterian Challenge

"You never change things by fighting the existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete."

— Buckminster Fuller

Have you heard of the Fuller Challenge? The Buckminster Fuller Institute calls for applications to compete for a \$100,000 prize given to an individual or organization that comes up with a holistic solution to one of the world's most pressing problems. The emphasis is on systems thinking that makes an impact beyond an immediate context. Collaboration, community, sustainability and ecological impact are all qualities sought and used as judging criterion. The list of winners is impressive. The range of projects — in terms of geography, scope and issue — is vast. The creativity exhibited in the finalists' work is mind blowing, and when this year's winner was announced I began to wonder if we don't need a Fuller-type challenge in the Presbyterian Church.

We won't change things by fighting the existing reality, an existing reality that includes fewer members and less resources. We cannot maintain our current structure given our present reality. Our existing reality is global, digital, characterized by a hermeneutic of suspicion and more inclined to instant gratification than to a sense of duty. If we insist on fighting these things, we will expend a lot of energy with minimal positive impact. We will be inwardly focused, thus legitimizing outsiders' criticism of the church.

How then do we build a new model and create a holistic solution to the problem of our growing irrelevance? First, we must honestly admit that our existing model is not working. This has nothing to do with the skills or dedication or faithfulness of the people serving in our current system. This has everything to do with the reality that we have tried to deny for far too long. We have too much structure, too little coordination, an unclear vision and pervasive anxiety. We are reactive. We are distrustful. We have circled the wagons instead of flinging open our doors. We have tried to protect our territory — whatever that territory is — at the expense of life-giving change. We have operated out of fear rather than hope. Let's confess, repent and ask (like so many in the New Testament aware of their need for God's grace): What should we do?

Indeed, this is the question being asked by Moderator Heath Rada in his "Call to the Church." Gaining wisdom from many is the beginning of discerning the movement of the Holy Spirit. However, there needs to be multiple, explicit next steps. Otherwise, I fear that we will simply tweak the old model and that is not going to be enough. We need a Fuller Challenge-type solution: holistic, systemic, innovative, collaborative, sustainable, creative, one that makes our current model obsolete — because, really, I think it already is.

I would propose a broad sharing of the information gleaned from the moderator's Call and subsequent survey, as well as careful reading of reports from the committees that reviewed OGA and PMA. Then, a challenge to the 222nd General Assembly: Come up with a clear, compelling vision of who the Presby-

terian Church is called to be in our current context. This should be the primary work of the commissioners in Portland: SET THE VISION. Then issue the Presbyterian Challenge and commission a Presbyterian Challenge review team. That team will call for proposals, inviting Presbyterians across the denomination to put forth a holistic solution to this pressing problem of how to structure our denomination in a way that facilitates the vision. Make sure the review team is made up of some unusual suspects and some familiar faces as well. Qualifications to serve? A love for Jesus Christ and his church and a radical, unflinching openness to the movement of the Holy Spirit.

Make sure the commission includes a mandate to bring the "winning" proposal (sans the \$100,000 prize money) to the 223rd GA for approval and implementation. Such a plan allows time for discernment with neither undue haste nor undue delay. It invites participation from a wide range of people. It provides flexibility within our existing polity. It puts the vision God has placed before us first while upholding our theology of the priesthood of all believers.

What do you say? Are you willing to accept the Presbyterian Challenge?

Grace and peace,
Jill

