

April 24, 2010 General Presbyter Report to Presbytery of Eastern Virginia (revised and expanded)

This is an edited and expanded copy of my report to the Presbytery last Saturday. If you are a clerk or a moderator of your session, I would request that you forward this to each of your elders, and spend some time at your session meeting discussing it. *Be sure and read it to the end, because I have added a fourth option.* All four options have huge obstacles to overcome. All four will have passionate objectors. The question is, which gives us the best chance to turn this Presbytery around so that we are in the business of making and growing disciples rather than arguing over scant resources?

Blessings on your work for Jesus,

Richard

Report to the Presbytery of Eastern Virginia  
J. Richard Short, General Presbyter  
April 24, 2010

### **CONFRONTING BRUTAL REALITY**

Ronald Heifetz in his book Leadership on the Line says that leaders used to be problem solvers and offer technical solutions to technical problems. But in today's turbulent environment, leaders should not offer solutions to problems as much as confront their organizations with the problems that need to be solved. A similar bit of advice comes from Jim Collins in his book Good to Great, when he says that leaders need to have their organizations confront brutal reality. Even Michael Cervantes in his novel has Don Quixote come to terms with reality by the Knight who fought with mirrors instead of swords. A fourth author, a man by the name of Thom Rainer, wrote a book entitled Breakout Churches. He used Jim Collins' methodology and applied it to churches. In his study, he discovered a curious fact over and over again. He discovered many fairly educated and knowledgeable church members were not able to see reality when it came to their churches. Over and over again, he would hear members say, "What I like about our church is all of the new people joining our church," when in actuality, the number of new members joining was 50% of what it had been.

All of that points to what I want to do this morning. As your spiritual leader, I would like to practice a learned leadership behavior that does not come naturally to me. I want to confront the Presbytery with a brutal look at reality.

### **LAST DECADE**

The defined boundary of Hampton Roads is exactly the defined boundary of the Presbytery of Eastern Virginia. Over the last 20 years, the population of Hampton Roads has increased by almost 14%. Yet, over the last ten years PEVA churches have lost over 1700 members, a loss of almost 9%. Over the past ten years, only 14 out of our 62 churches have increased their membership.

### **LAST YEAR**

#### *WORSHIP ATTENDANCE*

In 2009, our combined worship attendance dropped by 430 people, a decrease of more than 5%. Only 13 of our churches showed an increase.

(By the way, I want you to notice that of the top 6 in percentage of worship attendance increase, 5 of them have female pastors. Let's give a hand to Cindy Higgins, Helen Byrd, Jan Davis, Julie Thro, and Martha Goodman. If you are on a Pastor Nominating Committee, I hope that you will seriously consider all candidates, including females and people of color.)

### *NEW DISCIPLES*

Perhaps even more important than worship attendance, is the number and percentage of new disciples being made by your congregation.

We can rejoice that God blessed our 62 congregations with 500 new disciples in 2009. We define a new disciple as someone who joined your church either by profession of faith or by reaffirmation of faith. If you are a growing church but most of your growth is coming by transfer of letter, you are experiencing church growth but not kingdom growth.

We can rejoice in God's gift of 500 new or newly reactivated disciples in 2009. That's the good news.

The bad news is that 354 came from only 15 of our churches. Then notice this sobering fact: Those 15 churches are either large or medium size churches. If we are going to come anyway close to accomplishing our goal of making and growing disciples to a level that will make an impact on Hampton Roads, we have got to address the issue of helping our small churches become medium size churches, and medium size churches become large churches.

Kudos to those small churches that are showing such huge percentages of making new disciples relative to your worship attendance. That's a wonderful sign of health. You are on your way to becoming a medium size church.

But the brutal reality is that 70% of our new disciples came from 24% of our churches. If we are serious about introducing more people to Jesus Christ, inviting them into a personal relationship with Christ, and helping them to grow toward becoming a fully devoted disciple of Jesus Christ, to the end that we will impact Hampton Roads, we have got to have our small churches become medium size churches, and our medium size churches become large. Small congregations are defined as having less than 100 in your average weekly worship attendance, and large churches have more than 300.

The ray of hope is that we think the unveiling of the Healthy Growing Congregations Initiative to begin in September is going to give our pastors and our sessions some tools and skills to make that happen.

### *GIVING TO PRESBYTERY, SYNOD, AND GENERAL ASSEMBLY*

Another metric of congregational health is the percentage of your income you are giving to the Presbytery, Synod, and General Assembly. Even though we have been asking our churches to prayerfully consider giving a tithe of your offerings to the three higher governing bodies, only 3 did this past year: Suffolk, Calvin, and King's Grant. That's two small churches, and one medium size church. If these churches, with average weekly worship attendance at 51, 100, and 223, can tithe, then all of our churches can. It is only a matter of will and making a decision to do so.

I am aware that many of our churches are tithing to mission work beyond their four walls, but they just don't see the point of giving the full tithe to the work of the GA, Synod, and Presbytery. I admit that is partially our fault in that we have not done a very good job of mission interpretation. I promise you we will start doing a better job at that.

Whoever is at fault, you need to know that your Presbytery is on the verge of a crisis. Several years ago, I was shocked when one of our churches informed the Presbytery that it was terminating its giving to the Presbytery, Synod, and GA because they needed to repair their roof. Did they even consider having a roof repair fund built up over the years? If not, did they consider doing what you and I do when we need a roof on our houses – we borrow money to fix the roof. But do you stop giving to your church to repair your roof?

My only guess is that that session and pastor thought that the Presbytery had plenty of money. That was probably true 20 years ago. But since I have been here, not counting Makemie Woods or the Congo Partnership, your presbytery staff has been cut from 9.5 Full Time Equivalents, to 5. Almost 50 % reduction in almost less than 10 years. I have removed Makemie Woods and the Congo partnership from those figures because we have not cut staff at Makemie Woods. In fact we have added a Program Director to that staff. And the Congo Partnership is funded by over and above special offerings from about half of our churches.

### **DEALING WITH SOBERING NEWS**

So what do we do about this sobering reality? Someone suggested that we have another series of hearings so that we can talk through the crisis. The problem with that idea is that those hearings are not the Presbytery. This is the Presbytery. This is where we need to have a conversation with each other. This is the equivalent of a session in your local church. We need to talk about this here, not in smaller groups outside of this time and place.

So I have asked for some more time that I usually ask for, not to talk more but to have you talk and listen more.

At your table you will find one green sheet of paper, which has only three options listed. We want you to see if your table can reach a consensus on those three options for us to get out of this crisis. To get us unstuck and to be able to move to doing God's will in this region.

### **THREE UNPLEASANT OPTIONS**

The three options are

1. No change
2. Decrease Presbytery ministries in favor of networks
3. Reduce the number of churches

Let me briefly mention some pros and cons of all three.

1. *Make no changes.* Einstein said that the definition of insanity was doing the same things and expect a different result. I'm an incurable optimist, and I am old fashioned enough to believe that sometimes you can keep doing the same old things but do them better, and God might show up and knock your socks off. But even I, incurable optimist than I am, am about to admit, if we choose to keep on keeping on but try to do it better, if the past nine years is an indication of the next 9 years, we will have to close Makemie Woods, get out of the campus ministry business, and not have a General Presbyter.

2. *Decrease Presbytery ministries in favor of networks.* That was basically the option you voted down 6 months ago at the October presbytery meeting. Sure it got 62% of the vote, but we had decided that it had to have 67% to pass. At first, I was wondering if we should come back to you in January, but I found out that when the Presbytery of the James proposed a radical new structure several years ago, they proposed that it would have to have 85% concurrence, and it did. Even if we had stayed with the 60% vote to pass, and

only got 62%, I don't think that would have left us in a very healthy place. That proposal was to cut the support of Makemie Woods from 20% of our budget to 10%, to cut the Resource Center hours from 30 to 20 (which we have done), to cut Campus Ministry loose to be picked up by new network of churches who be interested in picking it up, to the tune of about \$70,000 a year, to eliminate the HAE, but to add two new positions: a communications person or service, and a Mission Partnership Networker. The theme was to return the ministry back to the congregations. Presbytery would hold on to its camping and conference program, and Resource Center, but at reduced levels. The fear expressed at the October meeting was that cutting MW from \$200,000 a year to \$100,000 would cripple it, and that the ODU campus ministry program, staffed right now by Linda Rainey as a half time campus minister, would more than likely be devastated. The problem with cutting those programs is that those are two programs that disciples are being made and grown. I would say that our camping program ranks at the top of all Presbytery camps in the denomination. I don't know if you know this but Linda Rainey has more ODU students coming to weekly Bible study that 1/3 of our churches have in worship.

*3. Reduce the number of churches.* Several months ago, one of our small church ministers thought outside the box and wondered if we could more effectively be making and growing disciples if our 18,000 members were in 18 large churches instead of spread out in 62 churches. 18 large churches would also accomplish the number two objective of having a presbytery wide youth ministry, because all 18 of those churches would be spread out and each one would have a vibrant youth ministry.

I know that sound cruel and callous to some of you, but think about this:

1. Some of the locations of our churches were decided before the invention of the automobile. I keep thinking that with the high cost of gas, we might all be moving back to the city and walk to church again. But I am beginning to realize that the automobile is probably here to stay. At least they are not going away in any time soon.

2. Think also about this: If we are facing declining revenues, where is all of that money going? 18 churches is not going to happen. But what if we went down to 48? What if we had only 48 churches which had to pay electricity and gas and telephone bills? That money could be devoted to supporting a new church development or in helping a church about to break the 100 barrier in worship attendance to cruise toward 150, or a church that is struggling to break the 200 barrier in worship attendance.

3. All churches will die some day. None of the 7 churches listed in Revelation exist today. The average life cycle for a church is 60 years. The only way for a church to exist longer than 60 years is for it to start a new life cycle. But sometimes some churches are just too far down the life cycle to be resurrected. Its members are forced into an extremely difficult decision: Should we pull the plug? Because it is such a difficult and emotional decision, most of the time members hang on until the last drip, when they are down to less than 10 members. But doing that time, they have gone through their life savings and have nothing to give as a legacy to start a new church in a growing area, or a church that needs just a little help to move to the next level.

I know that I have raised the hackles of some of you. But during my week of staying at home and reading, it occurred to me that neither of the first two options was satisfactory. Why kill a thriving part of your business so that you can hang on to a non performing asset? I hate to put it so crudely, but if the church of Jesus Christ exists to make disciples, and your church is not doing that, then why are you there? What business are you in?

## **A WAY OUT**

At this point in the Presbytery meeting, I turned it over for table conversations to have each table wrestle with the three unpleasant options. The results of those table conversations will be shared with the whole Presbytery in a few days, both by a "Short Subjects," and by posting on the PEVA website.

I did not share at the Presbytery meeting a fourth option, for several reasons. I just did not have the time, and I wanted to give enough time for table conversation. Plus, sometimes, sharing proposed solutions takes the edge off of the severity of the crisis. (And I would be reverting to my preferred leadership style, of being a problem solver.)

But I really believe that not only will we meet this crisis, but that God is going to enable us to grow closer to what Christ had in mind for his church as a result of this crisis. It will not be easy. It will force most of us, clergy and lay alike, to re-examine some of our long cherished beliefs about congregational identity and leadership.

There's an old saying, "you can't teach an old dog new tricks." Listen, I am as much of an old dog as anyone here. I was fairly successful in leading two congregations to break the 200 barrier in worship attendance, considered the most difficult of the barriers to cross. But if I went back into the pastorate today, what I did in the 80's in Louisiana and in the 90's in Georgia would not work today.

I am truly excited about teaching our clergy and having them teach our elders that there is a new way of doing church in the 2010's, that this new way is not un-Presbyterian, and that it has the potential of helping the churches that want to stop their decline, turn around, become externally focused, and make and grow disciples for Jesus.

I really believe that the next round of classes that will be offered beginning in September will have an unbelievable transforming impact on our 62 churches. Yes, 62. For the principles behind this new Healthy Growing Congregations Initiative has the potential of turning even a 10 member church around.

In addition to these classes to be offered to each pastor, whether they are installed, stated supply, intentional interim, or commissioned lay pastors, or associates whose Pastor has already taken the course, we are offering two events this October which I would like for you to put on your calendars now. The first is a *Hit the Bull's Eye Conference* to be held at the First Presbyterian Church in Virginia Beach on Friday and Saturday, October 21 and 22. This conference will feature 12 different pastors who have seen God turn their churches around in a variety of different settings. Early bird registration is \$229 and enrollment is limited to 225 conferees. People will be coming from all over the country to this conference, so don't let them get your spot. These conferences have been offered annually for the past 3 or 4 years, but they are more in demand now, so they will begin to be offered every six months. So save on your travel and lodging expenses and sign up for this one right in our own backyard. You can go to our PEVA website to get registration information, or go to the following link:

<http://www.certain.com/system/profile/web/index.cfm?PKwebID=0x1915974178&varPage=home>

On Sunday morning, the Rev. Dr. Paul Borden, upon whose work our own "Healthy Growing Congregational Initiative is based, will be preaching at two services at the Great Bridge Church in Chesapeake, and Sunday afternoon and evening, he will be making a presentation on Church Life Cycles at the First Hall at First Presbyterian Church in Norfolk. That event will start around of 3:30 and conclude around 8:30 that evening with supper included.

We will probably use Paul in some way on Monday, October 24, and he will preach at our Presbytery meeting at First, Gloucester on October 25, and tell of the remarkable turnaround of his regional judicatory and allow for questions and answers.

Dr. Borden spent several days in Charlotte Presbytery in 2007. You can go to the Presbytery of Charlotte's web site to read their evaluation of the event. One of the comments I read over and over again was: "The Presbytery should have publicized this event better. If I had known it was going to be this helpful, I would have come to the early sessions."

Sigh. It's always someone else's fault, isn't it? Let this be your second notification that the *Hit the Bull's Eye Conference* is really that helpful. Don't be among those who find out about it after one of your friends goes, and say, "If I knew it was going to be that helpful, I would have signed up." This is April. It happens in October. Early bird registration is over soon. Let's claim at least 124 of those slots: One pastor and at least one elder from each of our 62 churches. Sign up now.

Please be in prayer for our 62 churches, that each one of them can relearn anew the importance of making disciples as the reason for their being. Be on the watch as additional details of the Healthy Growing Congregations Initiative are released as they become available.

God bless.

Richard