

**Bridge-building in the  
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)**

Moderator's Dinner, held in conjunction with the  
Festival of Theology, Alum Reunion, and Black Church Studies Consultation  
Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary

May 3, 2011

Elder Cynthia Bolbach  
Moderator of the 219<sup>th</sup> General Assembly of the  
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

As you know, my graduate degree is not from a seminary, but from Georgetown Law School. And here's a true confession: before becoming Moderator, I'd never, ever, set foot on a seminary campus. So you might be thinking, O Good Lord, a lawyer as Moderator of the PC (USA)? Worse yet, a lawyer with no knowledge of seminaries!

And it gets worse: not only am I a Georgetown Law School graduate, the Executive Director of the General Assembly Mission Council, Linda Valentine, who is here tonight – is also a Georgetown Law alum.

What does this mean – two Georgetown Law graduates in high positions in the denomination? Is there some sort of Dan Brown-like plot, whereby, lawyers and/or Jesuits are planning to infiltrate and take over the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)?

The answer is simple: yes. Resistance is futile!

I'm joking, of course. Although you'll never know for sure.

Seriously, what can a lawyer possibly say to the seminary community?

I can say this: although I may be a lawyer, I had the good sense to choose Louisville Seminary alum Landon Whitsitt (MDiv '05) to be Vice Moderator. And if all your graduates are as faithful, committed, talented, and funny as Landon, then, Louisville, you're doing everything right.

I suspect that every Moderator has felt that he or she is leading the church during a critical time. I do think, however, that right now we as the PC (USA) are living through a particularly interesting time. Just consider what's going on:

It seems certain that before this month is out, enough presbyteries will have voted in favor of Amendment 10-A to mean that G-6.0106b – the so-called "fidelity and chastity" amendment – will be removed from the *Book of Order* in favor of the language contained in 10-A. When 10-A is approved, the church will be in a new place on an issue we have been debating, discussing, and voting on, for what seems like a lifetime. In fact, for some of our younger members and pastors, it HAS been a lifetime.

Presbyteries are also voting on whether to approve a new Form of Government – a new Form of Government that would provide the church, in my opinion at least, with greater flexibility, but would also take away, for many, the comfortable knowledge and familiarity they have with the existing Form of Government.

Several denominational task forces are looking at basic, fundamental issues:

- how we can best structure and organize presbyteries and synods
- what is the nature of the church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?
- how can we as a church meet our goals for racial ethnic and new immigrant membership?
- how can we do General Assembly in a different, hopefully better, way.

In addition to these denominationally-sponsored efforts, conversations and discussions are going on in almost every nook and cranny of the church about how we as the PC (USA) can most effectively do ministry in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

I believe that we are living in what is a hinge time for the life of the church.

What do I mean by hinge time? It's a time when we are attempting to build a bridge while we are ON that bridge.

Here's the bridge that the PC (USA) is on: on our near shore, we are trying to carry on ministry and mission as we've done it for the past 50 years or so – ministry and mission that worked effectively during much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but doesn't work quite so well now. At the same time, we're trying to build a bridge to the far shore, the shore where, once we reach it, we will have transformed ourselves, and our structures, into an agile, flexible church that can proclaim the Gospel to a 21<sup>st</sup> century culture and time.

Here we are on that bridge, teetering and swaying back and forth, trying to squelch the impulse to give up the whole idea of getting to the far side and instead simply scurry back to the near side, while at the same time scrambling to ensure that we're not all pitched headfirst into the river below.

That's what I mean by hinge time.

I've just started reading a book about the start of the Civil War, which was of course a hinge time for our nation. The author, Adam Goodhart, writes about reading letters written by persons who were deciding in those early months of 1861 whether to stay with the Union or join the Confederacy.

One sentence that he wrote jumped out at me: "Reading those letters, across the distance of almost a century and a half, gave me a new appreciation of how history is decided not just on battlefields and cabinet meetings, but in individual hearts and minds." (Adam Goodhart, *1861: The Civil War Awakening*, Knopf, 2011)

History is decided not just on battlefields or in cabinet meetings but in individual hearts and minds.

It goes without saying that we Presbyterians have seen our share of denominational battlefields – most recently, of course, over ordination standards. And as for meetings – well, some would say that “meeting” is simply a synonym for “Presbyterian.”

But our history – the recounting of how we respond to God’s call in this time and in this place – our history will be made not just on our denominational battlefields, and not just in our meetings. Our history, our response to God’s call, will be decided by what is in the hearts and minds of all of us, all of us who call ourselves Presbyterians.

And the hearts and minds of all of us who call ourselves Presbyterians are nurtured and shaped by those who are trained by seminaries such as this one.

And I can give personal testimony to that.

I am a leader of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). As a local newspaper reported when I visited a presbytery in northeastern Pennsylvania, “the Moderator is just one step below Jesus.”

That’s incorrect, of course, although I have to admit I didn’t demand a retraction.

The fact is, however, that I wouldn’t BE Moderator – I wouldn’t BE a leader of the denomination – if I hadn’t had the enormous, the astounding, gift of being mentored, being nurtured, by talented, committed, and caring pastors during my entire life, starting as a child growing up in Trinity Lutheran Church in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. The widow of Trinity’s pastor during my childhood now tells everyone she knows that “it took Lutherans to raise the Moderator of the Presbyterians.” Well, it took Lutherans, but it also took quite a number of Presbyterian pastors – pastors who showed me what it means to live out the Gospel authentically and faithfully, pastors who encouraged me, pastors who challenged me, pastors who weren’t afraid or threatened when I challenged them. And pastors who continue to mentor me, nurture me, challenge me.

As Moderator, one of the main issues I am lifting up as I travel across the church is my concern that we are losing a primary touchstone of who we are as Presbyterians, and that touchstone is the parity between ruling elders and teaching elders, also known as ministers of Word and Sacrament. That parity has been especially diminished in our work beyond the session. Just look at this past General Assembly – 6 candidates for Moderator, 6 candidates for Vice Moderator, 12 in all – and only one ruling elder among all of us.

Our polity entrusts to me, as a ruling elder, the awesome, and awe-filled, responsibility of measuring my community of faith’s fidelity to the Word of God. Our polity entrusts to me, as a ruling elder, an equal share in governance and in spiritual leadership with teaching elders.

In far too many of our congregations, the role of ruling elder has been reduced to serving on a non-profit board of directors. Rather than measuring fidelity to the Word of God, ruling elders believe that their primary, perhaps even their only, task is to decide how often to repave the parking lot or whether to hire another attendant for the nursery.

The parity between ruling and teaching elders is part of who we are, who we have always been. That parity recognizes, and acknowledges, that our mission, our ministry, is in the world, not in the church,

and that to be in the world requires the perspectives, the insights, of those who are in that world, whose primary orientation is NOT the church.

Why am I talking about ruling elders in a seminary setting? Because, reclaiming the parity between ruling and teaching elders won't, CAN'T, happen only through the actions of ruling elders. The parity between ruling and teaching elders can be reclaimed only through the actions of teaching elders. Teaching elders who are self-confident enough to share leadership. Teaching elders who are self-confident enough to challenge, and motivate, those in their community of faith to become ruling elders, and, in turn, to become passionate, committed leaders. Teaching elders who understand that the phrase, "clergy and lay" doesn't exist within the Presbyterian church.

So, to you who are nurturing and instructing future teaching elders, or who are teaching elders, here is my plea:

First, make clear – again and again and again – that becoming a teaching elder does not mean that you have moved on to a higher, more excellent, form of ministry.

Second, inculcate within teaching elders the understanding that one of the most important ways to measure their success in their congregations is to evaluate how well they have motivated, and nurtured, ruling elders into leadership in the church, especially leadership in the church beyond the session.

Remember that bridge we're on? The bridge that we're trying to build as we're on it?

If we try to build that bridge with only teaching elders doing the building, we will all find ourselves falling headfirst into the river. And that's not a crack about pastors' skills with power tools. It's an acknowledgement that we as Presbyterians have survived, and thrived, through the recognition and appreciation that we all are ministers, that we all have different gifts and talents, and that we best proclaim the Gospel when we utilize all of those different gifts and talents as effectively as possible.

I don't believe that the PC (USA) is deathly ill. But I do believe that we are in a precarious position, poised as we are on the middle of this bridge, needing to use whatever is at our disposal to construct the rest of the bridge to get us to the other side – to get us to the place where we can proclaim the Gospel effectively into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Building that bridge to the far shore – while maintaining our links to the near shore – will take the best efforts of all of us. Most of all, it will take the work of seminaries like this one, to train, nurture, mentor, and send out women and men who are called to the ministry of teaching elder, who are secure and self-confident in that call, and who can help mobilize all of us to build that bridge across to the other side.

Building this bridge is not something that will happen overnight. As a matter of fact, it's almost certain that by the time we complete this bridge to what is now the far side, the far side will have become the near side, and we will need to start bridge-building all over again.

The constant thread in bridge building – the constant thread in being the church – is finding leaders who can equip us, motivate us, and organize us, so that we can get to the far side. Because if the church is to keep on being the church, we always have to get to the far side.

The process of finding and equipping leaders has always started with teaching elders nurtured here and in our other seminaries, teaching elders who will in turn work side by side with ruling elders to get us to the far side.

Thank you for doing that nurturing. Thank you for helping the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), swaying as we are on that bridge, to get to the far side, where we can preach Christ crucified and risen to new generations.