

Report of the Presbyters Presbytery of the James June 20, 2023

Our report has three parts:

1. Vision and Landscape : “State of the POJ”
2. Opportunities for Equipping and Engaging
3. Connections

Report by Dr. Flo Barbee-Watkins, Lead Presbyter for Vision and Collaboration

The State of the Presbytery

On this journey, or shall I say climb, my charge is to survey the landscape of the Church (big C) and help us see what’s possible... what’s on the horizon as a presbytery.

The three presbyters have been hard at work listening to pastors, elders, and congregants. We have had conversations with folks who serve in validated ministries and we are looking forward to continuing this.

The equation behind this plan is quite simple: What is the quickest most expeditious way to meet ministers, clerks of session, and other church leaders in the POJ within one year?

The answer is exactly what we are doing. We are gathering in congregations in 12 areas of the Presbytery to listen and learn from you. This does not preclude invitations and individual meetings (and we certainly have a lot of those).

But what this type of visitation has done is gather people together in their communities so that we can listen to you. The added value is elders and pastors get to listen to each other to discover commonalities, common struggles, and celebrate joys.

From the top of the mountain, these are some of the things we’ve seen which will come as no surprise.

Limited Resources

Small and rural congregations often have limited financial resources, making it challenging to maintain and repair their facilities, support outreach initiatives, and provide adequate compensation for clergy or staff members.

Declining Population

Many rural areas in the Presbytery bounds are experiencing a decline in population, as younger generations move to urban areas for employment opportunities. This

demographic shift results in smaller congregations and a decrease in available volunteers to be the hands and feet of Christ. This dramatically impacts the sustainability of the church's ministries.

Overall Clergy Shortage

Finding trained and available clergy can be difficult in rural areas. The limited number of ministers and pastors willing to serve in remote locations can leave congregations without consistent pastoral leadership, relying on part-time or covenant pastors to fill the gap.

Cultural Shifts

Rural communities are experiencing cultural shifts and changes over time. These changes include shifts in demographics, socioeconomic conditions, or values and beliefs. Small and rural congregations are facing the challenge of adapting their ministry to address these evolving cultural dynamics while staying true to the core values and traditions of our Reformed tradition.

Scarcity of Presbyterian Pulpit Supply Ministers in Certain Areas

The scarcity of PC(USA) ministers, active or retired who did NOT previously serve that particular congregation, available to provide pulpit supply in certain areas of our Presbytery is a real thing. There are literally congregations who have not offered the Lord's Supper for a whole year. Regrettably, this has led to a prevailing sentiment among some congregations that "the Presbytery doesn't care about us."

We acknowledge the pain and frustration this has caused, and it is with deep empathy that we are looking at creating a way forward. We are also noticing trends of membership decline, financial insecurities, and the continued discomfort surrounding the impact of Covid-19.

Multiple surveys have indicated that at the minimum congregations have lost 20 percent of attendees, not related to death or joining other faith communities.

The question that arises for us is what do we do now?

According to Dr. Diana Butler Bass, who studies the changing religious landscape, "reengaging with people who have loose ties to churches will not be easy. Some people may prefer to attend services or engage spiritual practices online. Others have family challenges and aren't able to attend."

Bass further states, "Even before the pandemic, Americans were experiencing a loneliness crisis, with fewer spending time with friends or participating in social and civic activities. Many have lost the habits and skills of making friends and creating community."

She further states, “Churches haven’t really figured that out,” she said. “They often say they are friendly but aren’t really — and lack ways of speaking about friendship theologically and developing friendship as a genuine practice of community.”

According to Dr. Scott Thumma, professor of Sociology of Religion and director of the Hartford Institute for Religion Research, “during the early days of the pandemic, churches innovated because they had to in order to survive. Now that the crisis of the pandemic has ebbed, they (we) need to make long-term adaptations.”

“What happened in the pandemic is that all of us were huddling in the basement, while a tornado was going over our heads,” he said. “Now everyone has come out of the basement and everything is completely different. Now we have to be intentionally creative.”

And that is the good news! We not only HAVE to be intentionally creative, we GET TO BE intentionally creative.

Based on Thumma’s words, we want to passionately encourage congregations to celebrate the power of unity and warmly extend an invitation to everyone to actively participate in community outreach and various service acts. Some of these enriching experiences include volunteering at the food pantry or engaging in another uplifting ministry. We are already hearing these stories in our visitations.

Despite our challenges, I believe, we believe, that a forward-looking attitude can transform the current situation into a new realm of possibilities. We must adopt a proactive mindset.

“The focus should be, how can we become a better church — rather than, how do we re-create what we used to have,” said Thumma.

Because beloved, that church, from the past is dead, and it’s not coming back.

Let’s channel our energy into evolving into a more vibrant and more impactful church communities, instead of just trying to recreate what once was. Our shared vision must be to grow and thrive, to be vital and dynamic communities of faith.

The Presbyterian Church USA has adopted Matthew 25 as a vision for the future and focus of our denomination. The Matthew 25 vision of the Presbyterian Church (USA) is a call to active, faith-filled response to Christ’s teachings.

It derives inspiration from the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 25, where Jesus calls on his followers to feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, care for the sick, and visit the imprisoned.

Our denomination implements this vision through three key areas:

- building congregational vitality,
- eradicating systemic poverty, and
- dismantling structural racism.

In building congregational vitality, we want to invigorate and empower congregations to make a positive impact in their communities. Eradicating systemic poverty involves addressing the root causes of poverty and working to provide opportunities and resources for the less fortunate.

Lastly, the church aims to dismantle structural racism by acknowledging and confronting the social structures and policies that perpetuate racial discrimination and inequality. We strongly encourage your congregation to become a Matthew 25 congregation.

So when you look around your communities what do you see?

I see opportunities to be the incarnational body of Christ. I see a presbytery that has intentionally designed a strategic staffing plan to do exactly what the scriptures talk about in Ephesians 4:12 to equip the saints for the work of the ministry.

For the Presbytery “to equip the saints for the work of the ministry” means to provide pastors, educators, commissioned pastors, sessions, congregations with the necessary tools, knowledge, and support to effectively serve and fulfill their roles within the context of their faith community or religious organization.

That is the vision I see for the Presbytery of the James.

To be the windshield, not the rearview mirror. To take forward steps in creating faith communities of love, grace, and hope. To enhance our mission of “supporting leaders, congregations and ministries in growing followers of Jesus Christ who joyfully live out God’s mission in the world.”

The Presbytery of the James is not called or commissioned to be a place for palliative care for the death and dying or undertakers for congregations who think that closure is the only option. We are NOT called to “settling”! Settling for death or decline when resurrection can occur at any given stage on the life-death spectrum even when we think it’s too late.

We are called to building a people of Pentecost power! We are called to be co-active participants in the kin-dom of God and we need everyone to join us in climbing this mountain together.

This extraordinary voyage isn't about division or an "Us" versus "Them" mentality, nor about an "Us" or "Them" choice. Rather, it's a resounding declaration of unity - a vibrant dance of "We" in the grand cosmic ballet!

To this end we as Presbyters are doing the hard work of discerning, navigating, adapting, and pivoting. Yes, we are putting out fires, and helping to navigate some conflict. We are holding up pastors who are hurting, and congregations who are grieving. But serving the POJ is more than maintenance; it's ministry and congregational vitality.

Grants Awarded to Presbytery of The James

I will conclude with some great news. The POJ has received two grants in the first six months of this year.

First, we received a Matthew 25 grant for \$6,964.

Two of the presbyters attended a mid-council-wide pilgrimage. Reverend Leigh Anne Ring and Dr. Flo Barbee-Watkins embarked on a pilgrimage to Montgomery, Alabama, along with 41 other mid-council leaders.

We visited the Legacy Museum: From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration and the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, which were created by Brian Stevenson and the Equity Justice Initiative. This pilgrimage to Montgomery was a powerful and transformative experience. It forced us to confront the harsh realities of America's history of racial injustice and to reflect on the ongoing legacy of that history. We left Montgomery with a renewed commitment to the fight for racial justice and a deep appreciation for the work of Brian Stevenson and the Equity Justice Initiative in shedding light on this dark chapter of our nation's past.

Second, POJ was awarded \$3,000 from the Mental Health Ministry Grant program of the PC(USA).

This grant will fund a project we are calling "For Such as Time as This". This project aims to provide clergy and educators with the skills and knowledge to recognize the signs and symptoms of mental health challenges and provide initial support to individuals who may be experiencing such challenges.

Through this project, we will equip pastors and educators in suicide prevention training by knowing and understanding the signs.

In Virginia, suicide is the second leading cause of death for people ages 10-34. For ages 35-44, suicide is the fourth leading cause of death. Overall, suicide is the 11th leading cause of death in Virginia.

We will be communicating more details later in the Summer for sign-ups and training opportunities.

Finally, I'm pleased to announce the launch of the official POJ podcast, Innovate, Ignite, and Inspire.

Innovation and leadership have long been topics of great interest to the church. Join me as we explore the many ways in which the church can use innovation and leadership to further its mission.

We'll talk to experts in the field and discuss strategies for creating lasting change in the church. From new approaches to evangelism to creating a culture of leadership within the church, we'll cover a wide range of topics to help the church become a more innovative and forward-thinking institution.

Find it at <https://www.presbyteryofthejames.com/innovate-ignite-and-inspire/>.

Report by Rev. Leigh Anne Ring, Presbyter for Relational Care

As your Presbyter for Relational Care, I continue to work in this belay relationship with you as you are climbing. The key to the success of a belay is unceasing communication. Don't be afraid to ask for what you need. Don't expect me to know what you need unless you let me know.

Here's a snapshot of pastoral leadership in our Presbytery right now:

- 98 congregations and 3 new worshipping communities
- 262 ministers
 - 77 validated (in congregations)
 - 39 validated (specialized)
 - 35 members at large
 - 111 honorably retired
- Of our 98 congregations:
 - 32 congregations have an installed pastor (5 of which have more than 1 pastor)
 - 37 congregations have covenant pastors (
 - 16 have CP1 who serve up to 6 months
 - 21 have CP2 who serve up to 12 months
 - 5 congregations have commissioned pastors
 - 7 congregations have interim and/or bridge pastors
 - 1 congregation has a certified Christian educator
 - 19 congregations do not have pastoral leadership and seek regular pulpit supply
- We have 27 names on our pulpit supply list

There is a great need to help connect our 19 congregations without identified pastoral leadership with session moderators, preachers, and administration of the sacraments. The three presbyters are traveling around the Presbytery this year in small, regional gatherings to meet with pastors and clerks of session face to face, to introduce ourselves, to listen, to connect.

So far we have had nine of these gatherings. We have invited 58 congregations and we have seen folks from 30 congregations. We also hosted validated (specialized) ministers and met 13 of them for dinner one night. For our members at large, we are planning a gathering in September. We are showing up to meet you...and we need you to show up also.

Presbyter of Contact

We have heard the concern raised that you do not know which of us to call to get an answer to a question. So, we got together and divided the congregations and new worshiping communities among the three of us and now each worshiping community has a presbyter of contact (POC). Those are listed in the meeting packet on page 26. If you are a validated (specialized) minister, a member-at-large, or honorably retired, I am your POC.

The presbyter of contact is your first call when you have a question. We will either answer your question or point you in the right direction. These groups are not regional so don't waste too much time trying to figure out how each congregation got placed in one group or another. Moving forward, we may do some connection work within these groups to give another opportunity for you to get to know other folks in the Presbytery.

The Presbytery's mission is "to support leaders, congregations, and ministries in growing followers of Jesus Christ who joyfully live out God's mission in the world." This is important work, growing followers of Jesus Christ, and we are learning, adapting, responding, leading, and sometimes chasing after you... together... in partnership. Empowered by the Spirit to stay connected to one another as you climb...

Report by Barbara Chalfant, Presbyter for Congregational Life

As we have traveled the presbytery meeting pastors, clerks of session, and other volunteers, it has been clear. Our congregations are of good heart. You are passionate about your faith in Jesus and want to do your best for God and for the church.

You have engaged in considerable community service and mission and are interested in learning just how you can engage in more and more vibrant ministry. You don't want to let go of your history but you are interested in the future and what new things it might hold. It is clearly a struggle to stay up to date and in many ways you are starving to be heard, to be understood and to be cared for.

You need support in terms of regular contact, training, and pastoral care. Flo has been doing a great job parsing out what things mean and where we may be able to change the systems that are not working and Leigh Anne has been listening well to the hearts of our pastors with her passionate faith and strong character.

As your training person, meeting you at the mountain and preparing you for the climb. I have been listening for the needs of our congregations. They have been asking for more information, for more support and training.

To that end we have started a new team called the “Nurture Team” to plan and execute training programs and classes that can support and encourage our congregational leadership.

The goal is to make sure that our congregations get the education and support they need to be able to do creative Christ-centered ministry that is relevant and forward thinking. The team has been hard at work and we are excited to ask you to save the date for a special all presbytery training event.

On September 16, we will present Equipping the Saints, an officer training event for deacons, elders, and other leadership. The event will begin at 10:00 with officer training led by Dr. Flo and will continue with lunch and workshops. Planned workshops are:

- Selecting curriculum led by Barbara Flynt
- Child and youth protection policies led by Nicole Ball
- A church volunteer course led by Hannah Garrity
- A class for church treasurers led by Kenna Payne
- A class on being a session clerk by Marilyn Johns

We will announce all the exciting details in the next few weeks. Please be alert and prepare your officers to attend.

Also, Josh Andrzejewski is gathering youth workers and volunteers for a time of fellowship, sharing ideas, and support. They will be meeting on August 29 from noon to 1:00 p.m. via Zoom. It promises to be a good start to a strong fellowship and support network.