

Report of the Transitional Executive Presbyter

to the Presbytery of the Twin Cities Area July 14, 2015

By Jeff Japinga

Back on May 12, when I stood before you as the candidate for transitional executive presbyter, someone asked me: So what do you intend to do? What's your plan? I told you that I didn't have a plan, or at least a set of answers to give you, save for this one item to which I was firmly committed: that I would begin by listening. Because out of listening, I said, to God and to each other; and out of the relationships that develop when people truly do that listening, the ways forward will emerge.

It's been six weeks since my official on-board date of June 1; six shared weeks, with as much time devoted to winding down commitments to McCormick Seminary as ramping up commitments to the Presbytery of the Twin Cities Area. That's barely enough time even to learn names, let alone all the abbreviations. And yet, I think I've learned enough to begin to frame some of my thinking going forward. Let me try a few of those thoughts with you tonight, in a slightly longer form than you'll usually hear from me. Your response and feedback--whether tonight or in the weeks to come--will not only be welcomed, but valued.

First, thank you. Thank you for a warm welcome and good questions; for the graciousness to let me honor the commitments I'd made at McCormick Seminary long before I imagined myself in the Presbytery of the Twin Cities Area; and most of all, thank you for an attitude that says you're ready to look to the future and dig in on our work together. I keep telling people elsewhere how impressed I am with you all: with your love for the church, and with your desire to live out the gospel in ways that are making a difference for the communities which you serve. What a great foundation on which to build.

My final McCormick commitment is a full week of teaching next week. Between the end of that and Thanksgiving, there are just under 120 days. Here's how I think about that time, emphasizing four areas in which I believe an investment of my energy can benefit the presbytery in real and significant ways. I encourage you to hear these as big-picture agendas, and not the management of specifics:

1. First, I intend to work to EARN YOUR TRUST. Two weeks ago at a meeting, Meg Newswanger said to me, Early in the fall, I'd like you to come out to Maple Plain. I'll invite the pastors in my area, and we can start to get to know each other, and you especially can get to know what we're doing. I'm eager to do that, with Meg and with others of you. Holding the position of transitional executive presbyter gives me this singular opportunity: to sit in your offices and walk your neighborhoods with you and genuinely build the kind of bridges on which effective change can travel.

Robert Quinn is one of my mentors in this. A Roman Catholic layman, Quinn remains one of the pre-eminent leadership experts today. His writing can be complex and dense, but his message is really quite simple: transformational change will come only when systems move from narrow thinking to wide; from strategies of telling and forcing toward strategies of long-term trust and moral courage; from structure and control toward equality and the common good.

To be sure, we will not discover God's call to transformation in this presbytery simply because the EP goes around having coffee with people; but it's a foundation we must secure, and we must do so beyond the floor of presbytery or strictly within committee structures. Doing that will be a priority for me in these next 120 days. Fostering healthy relationships will help us do that.

2. You build a base; then you work on the core. That's why a focus on CONGREGATIONAL VITALITY and CHURCH LEADERSHIP comes next. In the end, no system can function effectively and extend its influence if it has a weak core. That means a presbytery is finally only as strong as its congregations and the leadership which guides them. That's why, for example, I've committed myself to actively participate in the restructured CCV--the Committee on Congregational Vitality, and in the congregational communication and resourcing function that's been assigned to them. They--we--are already at work on that, and I'm excited to be a part of it. It's why I'm similarly committed to COM and the work they do, especially focused on teaching elders. It's why I want

to worship with you, and study with you. It's building up the core, so that the whole body can flourish.

3. God's call on OUR COMMON FUTURE will be built on the foundations of trust and a strong core. But it must be built, and that leads to my third priority: how we begin to envision that future, and where God might be calling us in ministry in our communities and beyond.

Part of looking to the future is the development of clear parameters around the use of the funds the presbytery has received in gracious separation agreements. You've already invested time and energy in that process; and specific proposals for funds have already surfaced (one from self-proclaimed "schemers and dreamers"). Good. There ought to be scheming and dreaming going on. We have a unique opportunity right now, as a presbytery, to invest in our future; to live out the kind of common values and mission that reflect who we are and what we want to be about; to be grateful, gracious, intentional stewards of these dollars. That demands careful thinking, but not dawdling. I'm impressed with the way in which the Presbytery Leadership Team has taken responsibility for this task. Come fall, I anticipate some important guidelines to come before the presbytery. How we handle this crucial responsibility--both in content and in tone--will be crucial to our future.

It's also budget time as we look to 2016. Matching pent-up hopes and dreams with a commitment to hold the line on spending and per-capita can make for some tricky math. The figuring is already underway.

4. Finally, the fourth area in which I think I want to give some intentional energy and thinking is COMMUNICATION. I was a journalist before I was a teaching elder. And this may have been the most important thing I learned in my journalism days: that all too often, as humans, when we have a narrative in our minds, a story we deem correct, we look only for anecdotes that confirm our story or deny an alternative story. It's not that we're intentionally trying to deceive or mislead; it's how our brains are wired, to make our experiences fit what we think we already know. And so when we're told that the mainline church is doomed, or that people who genuinely hold different theological views cannot get along, we're tempted to focus only on stories to confirm the narrative. I don't say that to scold but to encourage: we can do better. I love that this

presbytery has a weekly newsletter. I hope you're reading it; and with the communications task force, I hope it is but a step to deeper, more effective two-way communication--so that it's not about confirming what we already know, but about building up the body of Christ.

That's not all I'll do in the next 120 days, of course; far from it. But if you want to know the big things that will keep me thinking day and night, well, you can be sure these four will be on the list. You can be equally sure that your wisdom and insight will be crucial in each of these areas going forward. We all hold a piece of the complete puzzle; I believe with all my heart that God will lead us in putting that puzzle together in the coming months and years.

I close by borrowing some words from Pope Francis last Saturday, spoken in South America but no less applicable to Presbyterians in Minnesota:

- “We must not respond with nonchalance, or complain we do not have the resources to do the job, or that the problems are too big. Instead, we must respond by taking up the cry of Jesus and accepting the grace and challenge of being builders of unity. When we give of ourselves, we discover our true identity as children of God in the image of the Father and, like him, givers of life; we discover that we are brothers and sisters of Jesus, to whom we bear witness. This is what it means to evangelize. This is the new revolution—for our faith is always revolutionary. This is our deepest and most enduring cry.”

Thank you for the privilege of working alongside each of you, as we bear witness to the good news of the gospel.

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