**THE WORD FROM RICK – “Change: A Financial State of the Presbytery, Part Two”**

I want to pick up where I left off on my reflections regarding the Financial State of the Presbytery of Minnesota Valleys, talk about Unified Mission Support, and in particular, the support of our congregations for the things that we are called to do together and in support of one another through this presbytery.

While Per Capita provides a significant source of our annual resources – just under 50% in 2015 -- it does not come close to providing the support for everything that we really want to do as a presbytery. If there was no Mission Support and Per Capita was needed to cover everything that we did as a presbytery, it would need to be nearly $65 per member, with presbytery’s share being closer to $45 of that total instead of $21.63. For

some congregations, that would be really steep, and for others, probably livable; but it would also tend to limit the potential generosity of our congregations and make the support of mission an obligation, rather than expressions of thankful and generous congregations for what God is doing.

Unified Mission Support (UMS) provides our congregations with the opportunity to support for the things that we, as a presbytery, have discerned that we are called to do and want to do, and even more importantly, beyond that, it gives us opportunity to partner in the mission of the whole church.

Our Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Mission Policy Statement declares that:

*As heirs to God's grace in Jesus Christ, and joint heirs with all who confess him Lord, we affirm our place as Presbyterians in the whole Body of Christ, the Church. We give visible recognition of our belonging to one another as one denominational family. We give this recognition as Presbyterians through our connectional system of congregations, presbyteries, synods, General Assemblies and related institutions.   The one table around which we gather is God's table and the one mission to which we are called is God's mission (Missio Dei).*

*The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) declares that wherever one part is engaged in God's mission, all are engaged. Whenever and wherever one engages in that mission, one bears witness to the saving love of God in Jesus Christ. Through this love, empowered by the Holy Spirit, all are made one. This unity is a gift of God's grace that extends across cultural, linguistic, economic and other barriers that divide us within the Body of Christ and across the human family.*

Each congregation in our presbytery is a mission outpost – with a commitment to participate in ministry to the community around it, as well in a shared ministry as part of a larger body – the presbytery, the synod, and the General Assembly.

Sometimes we have a limited understanding of what mission is. For many, mission is largely represented by the money that we send to support individuals “over there” who are doing what we understand to be the real mission, and we think that is awesome. Our support establishes significant connections and gives our congregations a sense of being impactful in God’s world. Unfortunately, that is only one partial perspective on mission, but it is the one that gets the greatest attention because we come to know the mission workers personally, we know that our mission dollars are being spent in ways that we approve, and most important our church gets direct benefits from the connection.

However, mission is not always about seeing what our money is doing, and sometimes it is trusting that the recipients are doing those things that honor God. Mission is not always about “what does our congregation get out of it or how many dollars of our Per Capita or Mission Support come back to us?” Mission is about “what does this mean to the Kingdom of God?” and it does not always come back to your church in the form of a mission worker’s visit, pictures from a thousand miles away, or dollars and cents.

In the Presbytery of Minnesota Valleys, we ask our congregations to make a pledge to Unified Mission Support. This is beyond the Per Capita apportionment and is a voluntary offering of a congregation’s resources and treasures in support of the mission of the whole church. This year, when a church makes its pledge, unless it is otherwise specified, 10% supports the mission of our Synod, 10% supports our National Church, and 80% stays here to do the mission that the presbytery affirmed in August and again in October. Congregations are free to change the percentages to reflect their passions and interests.

The presbytery’s share of this UMS will be used to live out the commitments that we have made to equip, empower, and encourage our congregations in their ministries, beginning with the support and encouragement of those who are our congregations’ leaders – our pastors, commissioned ruling elders, elders and deacons, candidates for ministry. When the presbytery voted to affirm the new Ministry Plan and Mission Design, it also declared that the presbytery’s share of Unified Mission Support would be used to “equip the saints” in the pews through scholarships to conferences and Synod School, as well as through the creation of events that would provide training in response to the needs of our churches. It was declared that presbytery mission support would help send our youth to the Youth Triennium and summer camps; and that it would be used to continue the development of our partnership in Guatemala and our networks with Ethiopian and South Sudanese immigrants in places like Mankato, Saint Cloud, and Worthington. Presbytery’s portion of UMS would also support our partnerships with Clearwater Forest and Okoboji, and permit us to secure creative and committed staff people to enable ministry.

Presbytery is all of us together, growing as a partnership and committing ourselves to come alongside one another to do ministry that starts with our congregations. Our presbytery’s portion of the Unified Mission Support is intended to help us to do things together that we might not be able to do alone.

We have been called to support one another – with our prayers, with our presence, and with our treasures. A congregation’s financial commitment to the mission of our presbytery is about more than providing dollars to support our common ministry. It is a statement of what we believe about who we are. It says that our congregation believes in what God is calling this presbytery to do and that it values being a part of this presbytery family; that it believes in its sister congregations and wants to be of support and encouragement to these partners across the presbytery; that it believes in the leaders of our congregations and wants to be a part of “equipping the saints” and building strong congregations in our presbytery; and, it believes that we are all called to share a bold witness to Jesus Christ in every corner of this region and beyond.

On October 31, our presbytery commissioners gathered in Spicer approved a $437,000 presbytery budget for 2016. This budget was $68,000 less than the 2015 budget and is, in reality, a deficit budget, meaning that if we do all the things we say we will do in support of our congregations, leaders, and partners, we will draw down our presbytery reserves by another $25,000 by the end of this year. Approving this budget meant that we had to decrease our support for our camps, and that we could not grow mission support for either our Guatemala Partnership or the Ethiopia-South Sudan network. It also meant that we could not increase the amount of support and encouragement that we could offer in support of our pastoral, congregational leaders, and yes, even our summer campers. It also has severely hampered conversations about what kind of staffing possibilities we might create to help us live out the vision that was approved last year.

It may seem fiscally irresponsible to adopt a budget using $25,000 in reserves – but it would be morally and ethically irresponsible not to fulfill our mission commitments.

As we have moved into 2016 and started to live with the financial realities of the New Year and of the presbytery, our Budget and Finance Committee have raised concerns about our mission support for this year. As they reviewed the mission pledges that have come from our congregations, our hopes of meeting our budget through congregational mission support, and not using our reserves, are being challenged greatly. Pledges will not reach the level of $114,000 that we have sought, and not all of our congregations will be supporting our presbytery’s mission at all. We are committed to fulfill our commitments, and pray that we will not use reserves to do that.

In order to live out the intentions of this presbytery that were endorsed in August, and affirmed in October, and to live out our mission to assist and support the ministry and mission of our congregations, we need every congregation play a significant role in our shared ministry. It is never too late for our congregations to consider, or re-consider what it will commit to the mission of this presbytery. If every congregation was able to match the amount of its Per Capita apportionment with an equal (or greater) pledge to the mission and ministry of this presbytery, we would oversubscribe our budget by $37,000.00 and have an extra $12,000 to strengthen our mission to equip the saints of this presbytery, strengthen our existing mission partnerships, and perhaps even make some new connections. I know that this would be difficult for some congregations to do, and for me to even suggest it may be silly. It is but one way that we might be able to offer a challenge – you may have other ideas! I do believe that each of our congregations has the potential to make a significant investment in our common ministry, and there is a way that every congregation could still do something significant for 2016!

I have been told that one of my predecessors used to call every congregation that did not pledge mission support and that he did not let them off the phone until a pledge was made – a pledge that was paid in full by the end of every year. I don’t know what he said or did, but it got results and the presbytery had the resources to do its ministry. Friends, that’s not my personality or style, but that does not mean that I and the Budget and Finance Committee are not serious in our desire to challenge you all.

I believe that many of congregations know what this presbytery means to them and the positive ways it has been there for them and for the congregations around them. We may not have always done things right or well, but even the best of families don’t always get it right. We are a family, a community of faith communities that need each other, and we do keep trying to be responsive to what God has called us to be.

I end by simply asking all of our congregations and their leaders to prayerfully and seriously consider what being a part of this presbytery means, and can mean as we go forward, and what it is that we all can do to be generous in the support of our shared ministry.

See you at the presbytery meeting in Willmar this Saturday!

Grace and Peace to you all,

**Rick**